

Off-Yellow Time vs Off-White Space: Activist Asian American Dramaturgy in Higher Education

by Daphne P. Lei

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“China boys, you be legendary obeyers of the law, legendary humble, legendary passive.... I curse ya honorary white!”

—Frank Chin, *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972)[1]

“You are not White and that is what matters to some men.”

—Philip Kan Gotanda, *I Dream of Chang and Eng* (2016)[2]

The oscillation and negotiation between “honorary white” and “not white” reflect the Asian American experience on stage and in society. The first Chinese student Yung Wing graduated from Yale University in 1854; however, AAPI students continued to struggle against injustice and discrimination in the education system and finally, in 2009 President Obama signed the Executive Order 13515 to establish Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) programs on university campuses.[3] The slow recognition of AAPI students in higher education reveals a fundamental problem of negotiating a minoritarian time with the majoritarian space, which I address by interrogating similar issues in university theatre and by proposing a new dramaturgical paradigm and theatre pedagogy. I challenge contemporary diversity rhetoric, which focuses on an off-white spatial inclusivity, and I advocate for a unique minoritarian time: the off-yellow time. My brief analysis of the production of Philip Kan Gotanda’s *I Dream of Chang and Eng* (University of California, Irvine, 2017) illustrates the intervention of activist Asian American dramaturgy.

Diversity is not just a keyword in a university’s value statement; it has an intricate and intrinsic relationship with materiality, affect, and learning.[4] California, where I reside and work, is facing unique challenges: The 2020 US Census reports that about 7.2% of the US population and 17% of California’s population is AAPI. My institution, University of California, Irvine, is both an AANAPISI and HSI (Hispanic Serving Institution); 37% of the domestic student population is AAPI, and 75% of international students are from Asian countries as of 2020. The shifting majority-minority population ratio and increasing transpacific influx[5] directly confront the familiar American “racial formation,” which relies on the sociopolitical representation of “different types of human bodies.”[6]

Fortunately, Asian Americans come to the rescue with what I call *utility ethnicity* because they both fall within and exceed frames of racial diversity: Asian faculty often bear the extra burden of serving as token representatives or mentors for underrepresented groups; when necessary, Asians are included under the umbrella of BIPOC to boost a bigger diversity number for the institution; AAPI students are usually

excluded from URM (underrepresented minority) fellowships because of the misconception of universal Asian wealth. Being “utile,” AAPI are presented as minorities, people of color, or honorary whites. *Utility ethnicity*, or an ethnicity with racial value contingent on institutional need, is an empty signifier because the significance of the specific racial group can be re/determined based on the context. It is also a diversity placeholder because the degrees of colorization can be re/defined to balance the ethnic diversity of the whole. *Utility ethnicity* allows the institutionalized diversity rhetoric to stay in flux and à la mode, so a perfect diversity snapshot of the institution is available at any given moment.

Race and ethnicity are often approached in spatial terms. George Lipsitz analyzes how racism takes place through segregation, exclusion, commodification, and other means.[7] Diversity rhetoric—inclusivity, visibility, mobility, intersectionality—implies that diversity takes up *space*, concretely or metaphorically, two or three-dimensionally, in a majoritarian place. To include people who “look different” in a traditionally white space is a simple way to imagine diversity.[8] Just look at the multicolor recruitment brochures or diversity pie charts of any American university, which is often described as “a site of colonization and US imperialism”[9] where “white cultural identifiers are the default.”[10] Race and ethnicity in US history are always tied with citizenship. The process of naturalization/neutralization inevitably happens when minority students enter the colonial space of the university. They need to be off-white.

What is off-white? “Off-white” is “a yellowish or grayish white”[11]; to make off-white paint, one needs “stock white” mixed with a tint of “yellow oxide.”[12] To enter the space of higher education, many AAPI students try to maximize the “stock white”; however, unlike different kinds of whiteness with historically contingent mobility,[13] yellowness remains a tint that cannot be eliminated completely. Off-white, the subdued background color that every institution needs, is the best entry ticket for Asian Americans. Off-white is the new yellow in higher education; the most diversity-conscientious institution might best be an off-white institution.

Although there is more awareness about “conscientious” training (vs. conventional training)[14] and color “conscious” casting (vs. color-blind casting)[15] today, for Asian American actors, progress is painfully slow. In the theatre conservatory setting, the dynamics of traditional master-disciple are similar to what Homi Bhabha calls “colonial mimicry”: “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.”[16] The Asian American mimicry—*almost the same, but not quite; not quite, not white, only off-white*—also has the implication of neutralization, naturalization, and legitimization. In general, a conservatory wishes to maximize students’ marketability with the efficient machinery running on a well-tested colonial formula at the institutional tempo. Any slippage, ambivalence, curiosity, risk-taking, or experimentation would interrupt the flow and cause deviation. AAPI theatre students go with the flow, staying low in their off-white minor or ensemble roles, which are the best roles AAPIs can hope for in a conventional season. While the off-white ensemble contributes to the look of diversity without causing a ruckus, denying actors of color their cultural identifiers is doubly failing them in education, as ethnicity-specific roles are still needed in the industry.[17]

I approach Asian American dramaturgy in higher education by prioritizing temporality, which is inevitably connected to spatiality. There are different ways of considering AAPI time. Historically, vying for spatial coexistence, the East often needed to exist behind Western time. Such “temporal disjunction” deprived Asians of contemporaneity.[18] The progression/regression in immigration policies determined

the spatial inclusion/exclusion of AAPIs at any historical moment. For theatre education, my emphasis is on *tempo*—the flow, speed, rhythm, interruption, and flexibility of time. A polyphonic tune incorporated with various *tempi*—*andante*, *allegro*, *ritardando*, *staccato*, *legato*, and *rubato*—describes a successful diversity theatre pedagogy.[19] Time defines space, space alters time. It is through flexible tempi that an off-yellow time can be cultivated, and equity and humanity can be imagined.

I Dream of Chang and Eng (2017), the first mainstage production at the University of California, Irvine with AAPI actors in leading roles since the department's inception in 1956, was a temporary rupture of the well-established theatre conservatory paradigm. I first proposed the play for the season of 2015–2016, understanding my chance of success would be slim, but I also knew that without an Asian American play in the season, there would be no progress for Asian theatrical visibility. The story about the famous Siamese twins, Chang and Eng Bunker (1811-1874), depicts Asian immigrants' struggles against xenophobia and their ultimate success—a perfect story to address the changing campus demographics and climate. Practicality was on my mind: with racial anomaly as the theme, the script required only four Asian actors and one Black actor, which seemed a manageable challenge. The director ended up casting seven white actors and one Latinx actor, besides the aforementioned five. Strategically, instead of vouching for Asian actors' perfect colonial mimicry (almost white), I stressed their yellowness as a unique asset for authentically portraying immigrants. After long and sincere conversations, the department promised to reconsider the play if qualified Asian actors could be identified the next year. The extended deadline motivated me to found "Theatre Woks" in late 2015 to identify and cultivate Asian talent; if I can't find qualified Asian actors, I will make them! AAPI students responded overwhelmingly and our goal was crystal clear—to prove that *we are here and we are good enough*. I enlisted help to train actors, emphasizing diction and audition skills, dismantling the myth that Asians do not speak good (American midwestern) English.[20] After a few months' work, we presented a staged reading to showcase Asian American actors, and we received the green light from the department. The mainstage season, which usually consists of six productions, is decided collectively by faculty after a laborious, months-long process. As a non-practice faculty member crossing the practice/scholarship divide obtaining a major slot for minoritized students, I understood that the unique opportunity for *Chang and Eng* might also create some discomfort. I volunteered to be the dramaturg.

A dramaturg always needs to negotiate their inside/outside/tangential positionality. On the one hand, a faculty dramaturg in an all-student production requires even more mindfulness of the power dynamics. On the other hand, a knowledgeable Asian American dramaturg needs to take an activist role to steer the production and avoid the nightmarish embarrassment of yellowface or inauthentic Asian *mise en scène*. I needed to be there but not get in the way. I built a [website](#) to house my extensive research as a knowledge bank for the creative and production teams. I shared my collection of Chinese opera costumes with the MFA student designers to help them properly build the costumes, including the shoes for Afong Moy's bound feet. I organized a two-day scholarly symposium, approaching the theme from such disciplines as disability studies, linguistics, and anthropology. I had clear communication and great rapport with the director. However, cracking institutionalized conventions such as strict protocols for staging certain types of scenes required patience and creativity. I was simultaneously a coach of language and Chinese opera movements, a consultant for the director and designers, a peer ethnographer in the mode of "deep hanging out,"[21] and a friend listening to students' concerns (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Soon after Chang and Eng's arrival in Boston, America was busy transforming them into Oriental commodity for the white entertainment industry. In the center, Edmund Truong (left) and Kevin Lin (right) play the famous Siamese Twins. *I Dream of Chang and Eng* by Philip Kan Gotanda, directed by Ricardo Rocha, at University of California, Irvine (spring, 2017). Photo by Paul R. Kennedy.

To truly convey the hardships Chang and Eng faced as new immigrants in a hostile environment and to maximize the educational opportunity for students, the director set up an “off-yellow” laboratory: with the playwright’s approval, each actor would speak some of their lines in Mandarin Chinese. Among the thirteen actors, only two were native Mandarin speakers, whose yellowness became a resource for their peers, reversing the yellow/white hierarchy.^[22] I translated the lines and marked them with *pinyin* romanization and gave individual tutorials. The equal awkwardness that all non-Mandarin speakers—both those who were AAPI and those who were not—experienced built a surprising camaraderie. Students greeted each other with their Chinese lines, including the line by the only Black character: “You are not White (*ni bushi bairen*).” This reversed colonial mimicry made the non-Asian students understand their arduous work could best make them feel “off-yellow,” whereas their fellow AAPI students constantly needed to strive for feeling “off-white.”^[23] The similar awkwardness shared across racial lines offered a rare educational opportunity as the linguistically unfit challenged the conventional notion of racial misfits.

The play itself engages with these critical questions of racialization. On their voyage to Boston, Chang and Eng befriend Learned Jack, a free Black sailor, who warns them of their true color: “You are not

White and that is what matters to some men” (12). Thriving on displaying their freakish yellowness, Chan and Eng never understand their yellow existence in real-life horror. In a scene set in 1835, on their way to the city of Jackson, they are mistaken as “poor Indians savages” (26) (“Chocktaw. Seminoles maybe...” [43]) and nearly lynched. “Are we colored or abominations?” they ask desperately after having escaped the near-death violence. They are reminded again: “You are not white.” (45) The yellowness that spills off stage almost costs them their real lives; their color is the true abomination (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Chang and Eng are mistaken for “poor Indians savages” and nearly lynched. They ask: “Are we colored or abominations?” Learned Jack (Chris Menza, left) clarifies: “You are not white.” *I Dream of Chan and Eng* by Philip Kan Gotanda, directed by Ricardo Rocha, at University of California, Irvine (spring, 2017). Photo by Paul R. Kennedy.

My pedagogical intervention was to alter the institutional tempo. An experienced graduate student actor of color from the cast described the institutional time/space: when opening their mouths, students of color always need to be well-informed and articulate because they don’t have the privilege of making mistakes or asking questions, unlike white students whose curiosity is encouraged. Minority students need to proceed with the speed of *andante* (walking) and the attitude of *allegro* (happy), or, as he explained to me, they are made to feel that “they do not deserve to be there.” This is exactly when time means space: allowing doubts or errors means privileged time—*ritardando* (slowing down) and *staccato* (interruption)—which translates into privileged space—“deserving to be there.” A graduate designer of color noted that faculty tended to talk to her in a slow manner as if she did not have the intellectual

capacity to comprehend instructions. The change of tempo when addressing a native English speaker of color from *andante* to an uninvited *ritardando* perhaps “meant well” but backfired because of the racialized and gendered implications.

Despite my activism, the systemic racialized aura and residue were still very prevalent in the overall production structure, and most minority students (both actors and crew) felt frustrated. The MFA actor of color noticed that AAPI students were belittled, often not in public: “It is privately beating them down, breaking them, making them feel worthless and lose confidence.” All AAPI students expressed similar sentiments but made a conscious choice not to speak up for fear that the first Asian American production would be the last if Asian American students were proven to be troublemakers. They felt that they had already taken up very precious space on stage, so asking for extra time would have been too much. They were extremely proud to be involved in the historic production and saddened by the difficult experience.^[24] The sold-out performances were beautifully moving; many audience members came to me with sincere appreciation, often in tears. Unfortunately, the animosity toward minority students and the lack of enthusiasm for another AAPI production afterward beg the question: did the production aiming to celebrate AAPI lives become an institutional mechanism to deem Asian American students unfit?

Nevertheless, there was a profound, personal impact on AAPI students and audiences, and Theatre Woks continued to thrive. My hope is that students will stage their own dramaturgical interventions and little by little, show by show, eventually change the climate of theatre at the university and beyond. Here, finally, I want to introduce another concept of time: *tempo rubato*, stolen time. *Tempo rubato* offers the flexibility to alter the tempo for learning. *Tempo rubato* is responsible borrowing, not outright stealing; the time borrowed needs to be paid back. Off-white is achieved through elimination, but off-yellow through deliberate cultivation. If the institutional time would allow *tempo rubato*, students could have the luxury to learn about ethnic and cultural complexities, such as taking the time to learn a line of Chinese or a proper movement, such as letting oneself experience embarrassment and awkwardness and creating an off-yellow time and space for all. If the institution allows activist Asian American dramaturgy to implement *ritardando* in the early process to inspire deep learning, *andante* and *allegro* might happen organically in the future. Instead of celebrating AAPI’s off-whiteness, Asian American activist dramaturgy advocates an off-yellow tempo to help imagine a space for truly diverse thinking, equitable learning, and compassionate being.

Daphne P. Lei is Professor of Drama, at the University of California, Irvine. She is internationally known for her scholarship on Chinese opera, Asian American theatre, intercultural, transnational, and transpacific performance. She is the author of three monographs: *Operatic China: Staging Chinese Identity across the Pacific* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), *Alternative Chinese Opera in the Age of Globalization: Performing Zero* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), *Uncrossing the Borders: Performing Chinese in Gendered (Trans)Nationalism* (University of Michigan Press, 2019). Daphne P. Lei is also the co-editor of *The Methuen Drama Handbook of Interculturalism and Performance* (Bloomsbury, 2020, with Charlotte McIvor) and is currently co-authoring *Theatre Histories: An Introduction* (Routledge, 4th edition) with Tobin Nellhaus, Tamara Underiner, and Patricia Ybarra.

- [1] Frank Chin, *Chickencoop Chinaman/The Year of Dragon* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 37.
- [2] Philip Kan Gotanda, "I Dream of Chang and Eng" (unpublished manuscript, 28 July 2016), doc file. Subsequent quotations from the play will come from this unpublished manuscript. I wish to express my gratitude to Philip Kan Gotanda, renowned pioneer Asian American playwright, filmmaker, and educator. Gotanda first introduced me to an earlier version of the play in 2012 and was very supportive throughout the production process. He was the keynote speaker in the symposium I organized for the production and saw the performance.
- [3] For a university to qualify for AANAPISI status, the enrollment of AAPI undergraduate students has to be at least 10%.
- [4] Sara Ahmed defines diversity work (programs to promote diversity), diversity practitioners (people who design and implement diversity programs and policies), and diversity world (meetings, workshops, and conference on diversity) in her book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2012).
- [5] Loan Anh Pham, "Campus UC Irvine ranked No. 2 in diversity among colleges," *AsAmNews*, 21 September 2020, <https://asamnews.com/2020/09/21/wall-street-journal-ranks-uc-irvine-second-in-diversity-among-nations-colleges-both-an-asian-american-pacific-islander-and-hispanic-serving-institution/>.
- [6] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formations in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55-56.
- [7] George Lipsitz. *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).
- [8] Nirwar Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 1.
- [9] Claire Zhuang, "A Parting Letter to My MFA Program," *Ethos: A Digital Review of Arts, Humanities, and Public Ethics*, 6 June 2017, <https://www.ethosreview.org/intellectual-spaces/a-parting-letter-to-my-mfa-program>. Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180730052129/https://www.ethosreview.org/intellectual-spaces/a-parting-letter-to-my-mfa-program> (accessed 7 April 2021). Frustrated with the imperialistic approach and white supremacist value in theatre education, she read the letter during her portfolio review and withdrew from the program at the University of Virginia.
- [10] Nicole Brewer, "Training with a Difference." *American Theatre* (January 2018), 54-58.
- [11] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "off-white (n.)," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/off-white> (accessed 28 May 2022).
- [12] Dean Stickler, *The Keys to Color: A Decorator's Handbook for Coloring Paints, Plasters and Glazes* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010), 55. According to color theory, off-white is within the shade of white, which includes cream, ivory, eggshell, vanilla, and others.
- [13] According to Matthew Frye Jacobson, one can be "both white *and* racially distinct from other

whites.” Different kinds of whites (Celts, Slavs, Anglos) can “become” Caucasians (vs. non-white) at different historical moments. See *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1998), 6. In Southern California today, the large population of Armenian and Iranian Americans, which might be seen as socially and culturally “less white” than the Irish in early American history, is nevertheless “white” according to the US Census.

[14] Nicole Brewer writes, “Conscientious training believes that the background and knowledge each student brings must be acknowledged as relevant and pertinent to their development in theatre.” It develops a “cross-cultural collaborative curriculum.” Brewer, “Training with a Difference,” *American Theatre* (January 2018), 54-58.

[15] August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand, a Speech on Black Theatre and Performance.” *Callaloo* 20, no. 3 (1998): 493-503.

[16] Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 85-92.

[17] Brewer, 54-58.

[18] Daphne P. Lei, *Operatic China: Staging Chinese Identity across the Pacific* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 73-75.

[19] *Andante*, *allegro*, *ritardando*, *staccato*, *legato*, and *rubato* are common musical terms to mark time. *Andante* (*lit.* walking) is moderate speed; *allegro* (*lit.* happy) indicates fast and bright tempo; and *staccato* (*lit.* detached) means playing notes separately while *legato* (*lit.* tied together) means connecting the notes while playing; *ritardando* is slowing down; *rubato* (*lit.* stolen) indicates that strict tempo can be modified to allow for expressive freedom.

[20] Ricardo Rocha, a PhD student with professional acting and directing experience helped me train actors. He was later chosen to be the director of *Chang and Eng* by the department chair.

[21] Dorinne Kondo identifies Renato Rosaldo’s “deep hanging out” as an ethnographical style of dramaturgy in her *World-Making: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 7.

[22] I also recruited two community members, eleven-year-old twins who are native Chinese speakers to play the young twins. Their scenes were separately rehearsed, so I do not include them in the language learning experience.

[23] I am obviously paying homage to José Estaban Muñoz’s theorization of “feeling brown” and Donatella Galella’s “feeling yellow.” See Muñoz, “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s ‘The Sweetest Hangover (And Other STDs),’” *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 1, Latino Performance (March 2000): 67-79, and Galella, “Feeling Yellow: Responding to Contemporary Yellowface in Musical Performance,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 67-77.

[24] To avoid any faculty/student conflict, no students signed up for class credits with me. I interviewed

them only after the production was over so they could speak frankly about their experience.

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