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Asian Canadian Theatre: An Emerging Field in the 21st Century

Since its founding, Canada has been characterized by a fundamental negotiation between Anglophones and Francophones bargaining for cultural power, language rights, and access to resources. This has included a negotiation for resources to produce theatre and other cultural media, ranging from TV and radio to film and digital media. In the performing arts, another tension exists between the imported classic European or Euro-American plays and the more nationally-oriented and "home-grown" Canadian theatrical works. In the 21st century there seems to be a continued interest in providing resources to Canadian playwrights, and specifically for those citizens who have been socially excluded or historically marginalized. For example, Canadians of Asian, Latino, and African descent, and particularly Aboriginal and First Nations artists, have been offered resources from the Canada Council and the National Arts Centre as a way of supporting and promoting "diversity" within Canada's professional theatre sector.¹

Within this context, my paper asks: How is Canada moving from a predominantly Eurocentric, English-language theatre into one that is more inclusive? This paper demonstrates how Asian Canadian theatre operates within (and beyond) the Euro-Canadian theatre by dramatizing Asian Canadian stories through the "self-objective eye." I use this term to describe a two-way gaze that situates performers as both objects of audience gaze and as critically self-reflexive subjects. By presenting themselves on their own terms, theatre artists from historically marginalized groups expand and challenge misleading perceptions thrust upon them by mainstream society. Through my close observation and performance analysis of two case studies, I also notice that contemporary Asian Canadian theatre artists use a number of post-Brechtian techniques to keep their audiences alert and critically engaged; in addition to using stylized forms of "gestus," actors acknowledge themselves as subjects by stepping beyond their fictional roles and moreover integrate technology to varying degrees. At this time, it seems relevant to suggest that Canadian theatre is part of a long lineage of artistic activism that began in the 1970s, a decade of both Canadian nationalism and growing critical interest in expanding the Canadian cultural canon to include voices from groups not always associated with, or represented by, the "founding nations" of Canada.

¹ In 1991, the Equity Office was formed under the Canada Council for the Arts, and originally mandated to support the work of Canadians of Asian, Latino, and African descent, while a more recent shift has included and focused on deaf and/or disabled demographics. Since its inception the Equity Office has funded a handful of performing arts companies with Asian Canadian leaders. In 2017, Kevin Loring became the first Artistic Director of the Indigenous Theatre at the National Arts Centre, a bold new step for the national presenter based in Ottawa.
In order to understand the roots of Asian Canadian theatre, it is necessary to consider the broader context of cultural activism, the beginnings of which date back to the 1970s. As documented in *Voices Rising: Asian Canadian Cultural Activism*:

The awareness started on the campus of the University of British Columbia. In 1970 Ron Tanaka, an Asian American activist who was teaching in the English Department, introduced Asian American activism to his Chinese and Japanese Canadian students […] this event, with its assertion of a pan-Asian identity and its articulation of this socio-political identity through cultural means, marked the beginning of a radical Asian Canadian cultural production. (Li 2007, 18)

The cultural production described above continued over many decades, unfolding within various forms: literature, visual art, cinema, dance and theatre, and numerous Asian Canadian artists working throughout the 1980s are documented in the book. One of the major contributions of Asian Canadian theatre, I contend, has to do with the role it has played in generating awareness about the impacts of colonization in Canada. In the 21st century, one of the most pressing issues still affecting Canadians revolves around ‘redress.’ The term ‘redress’ has been used when Prime Ministers, on behalf of the Government of Canada, have offered compensation for past wrongs and state-sanctioned prejudices, including public apologies to Canadians of Asian descent. It is not surprising that many Asian Canadian playwrights have explored the legacy of socio-political inequity in their plays. For example, Winston Christopher Kam already addresses the impacts of the Chinese Head Tax in *Bachelor-Man* (1987) and David Yee's *lady in the red dress* (2010) explores the intergenerational impacts of racism; Mitch Miyagawa’s *The Plum Tree* (2002), interestingly enough, explores the relationship between a German-Canadian woman and two Japanese-Canadian men (an Uncle and Nephew) on a BC berry farm; and last but not least, Tetsuro Shigematsu explores how the internment of Japanese Canadians impacted a friend's family in *One Hour Photo* (2017). These are a few examples of historically oriented plays that contribute to a deeper understanding of redress and intercultural relationships in Canada.

Before I begin my performance analysis, I offer up a brief reminder of one event which took place on 7 December, 1941 when the Empire of Japan bombed Pearl Harbour, the area surrounding the island of Oahu, Hawaii. This event is understood as having precipitated the United States of America’s entry into World War II and was...
used as justification by the USA for the eventual retaliatory bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 August and 9 August 1945. The situation that followed is described by American historian Ronald Takaki:

Setting aside the Constitution of the United States, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which targeted Japanese Americans for special persecution and deprived them of their rights of due process and equal protection of the law […] Even possession of U.S. citizenship did not protect rights and liberties guaranteed by the Constitution: two thirds of the 120,000 internees were Americans by birth. (1998, 15)

In Canada, a similar wartime hysteria unfolded, as explained by Roy Miki:

In 1942 the Canadian government of Mackenzie King, following a policy of Japanese ancestry living in the "protected zone" […] It established the British Columbia Security Commission on March 4 to carry out the incarceration of some 23,000 men, women and children who had been categorized as "enemy aliens." More than 75 percent of these people were either Canadian-born or naturalized citizens. (2004, 2)

Clearly then, a play about such tragic events must take into consideration the impact on intercultural relationships, the legacy of social exclusion and how best to address historical injustice onstage. The first case study, Japanese Problem, was produced near Hastings Park, the designated wildlife and public sanctuary in Vancouver. This site is also home to the annual fair, the Pacific National Exhibition. As many are aware, the fair and nearby thoroughbred racecourse are historically aligned with the agricultural industry, having sponsored many farming exhibits, livestock competitions, and animal-related displays. The livestock buildings are most commonly associated with the agricultural component of the fair, but not necessarily the detainment of humans. Canadians of Japanese descent were placed here in unhealthy conditions before being relocated to internment camps throughout British Columbia and other parts of Canada. The highly unsanitary, unheated facilities were used as pre-interment holding cells while the government organized the mass relocation. Today, internment is seen as a shameful, dark and painful moment in Canadian history clouded by human rights abuse. When the Japanese Problem show was first produced in 2017 (some 75 years after internment) audiences were invited to journey through the very stalls and buildings which temporarily housed Japanese Canadians. Scholar Andrew Houston describes site-specific or environmental theatre as "an act of social geography: a way of being-in-the-world and bringing to bear a social, political and historical consciousness upon our navigations through and experiences of lived space" (Houston 2007, vii). Site-specific theatre, then, is not merely another label for outdoor theatre or street performance; at its most complex it can be described as dramatic performance that responds critically to the environment on the level of form, process or content by acknowledging its material, historical and socio-political surroundings. This production embeds itself into the very environment of war-time history, acting as a critical interlocutor in the process of revisiting memories of forced detainment.

Making the "Enemy Alien" Familiar

Japanese Problem is a co-authored play, meaning the actual text is not credited to one writer. As a collaborative process, the playwriting process was informed heavily by
archival materials, integrating stories and testimonials from survivors and the family members who had experienced internment. From this material, the four actors of Universal Limited and the dramaturge created composite characters and dialogue that was meant to be representational of the Japanese Canadian community. A fair amount of autobiographic material from the actors’ own personal lives was also included in the dialogue, enhancing what I refer to as the ‘self-objective eye.’ As mentioned earlier, I believe that *Japanese Problem* – through its reflexivity, chosen location and unique performance style – contributes to a post-Brechtian experience and legacy for performers and audiences alike. This legacy seems particularly important as it gestures back to the historical marginalization of Japanese Canadians, begging contemporary audiences to understand the socio-political impacts of war and, more specifically, the healing of intergenerational trauma. Conceived by Yoshié Bancroft and then further developed by a number of artists – including the current cast which includes Brent Hirose, Nicole Yukiko, and Daniel Deorkson – working with Joanna Garfinkle, who also collaborated as dramaturge and producer, *Japanese Problem*, referred to by its creators as a "site responsive play," had its premiere in Vancouver in 2017, and was subsequently performed in Burnaby, Kaslo, Victoria, Nanaimo, and Steveston, B.C. *Japanese Problem* was also remounted in September 2018 (a year after its initial run) before being presented at the Soulpepper Theatre in Toronto, from 24–28 October 2018. The live theatrical re-enactment responds to the detainment of thousands of citizens at Hastings Park, and is described on the website in the following way:

JAPANESE PROBLEM is a title derived from the nomenclature of WWII, but containing in it the understanding that the citizens affected at the time were neither Japanese – they were overwhelmingly legal residents/citizens of Canada, nor problematic – with zero verifiable connections to activities against Canada. (*Japanese Problem*, n.p.)

Two scenes in particular contribute to the play’s emotional effectiveness. In scene five, entitled “Lost property,” we see two characters: Samantha, a Japanese Canadian Teacher’s Assistant who dreams of becoming a dancer, and Johnny, a Euro-Canadian Lieutenant and former bandleader. Additionally, audiences hear the voice of an auctioneer who actively promotes the sale of lost property that once belonged to those interned. In this scene, Johnny doubles as Dan, a man also responsible for selling off the possessions and property of those evacuated from their homes. We hear Dan listing off the possessions and estimated selling values: "Gramophone, 150 dollars. 120 Records, 120 dollars. Radio (delivered to R.C.M.P.), 68 dollars. Picture Frames, 65 dollars […] Sofa bed, 20 dollars. Stove, 35 dollars. 6 Chairs, 9 dollars" (*Bancroft 2018*, 8). As Johnny speaks, the sound of a hammer hitting wood echoes as each image appears. It starts again, this time as the auctioneer chimes in: "And now we’re coming up to lot number 48 […] Mizuni personal effects and sundries. Starting with 20 dollars, do I hear $20? $30, do I see 40? 50 dollars, going once, going twice, SOLD for $50" (9). Audiences hear each household item read aloud: each is listed on an archival document which has been copied onto a transparency and projected over the actor’s head. As Dan makes his way down the list, small images of each item (imitative cut-outs) engulf the whole page which is soon swept away out of sight, in a manner that metaphorically represents the quick evacuation of internees. The moment in the play gives audiences an
opportunity to hear, see and sense what it might be like to have personal property appropriated, recreating the events that followed the evacuation of Canadian households. In *Redress*, Miki writes about the situation; in addition to having their citizenship rights revoked, Canadians of Japanese descent lost their personal properties and business assets, which were seized and sold without consent between March and October of 1942 (2004, 2). In addition to this insult to character, these people were then detained in the most unsanitary of living conditions. Near the end of the play, in scene eleven entitled "Health is worse/Musical number," the actors begin speaking as themselves – as real people, not fictional characters – and in doing so, dissolve the imaginary fourth wall that conventionally separates the artists from audiences in many theatre productions which follow the tenets of theatrical realism. The conflation of historical events with this fractured self (between the character being portrayed, and the person acting) is reminiscent of post-Brechtian techniques. In *Brecht and Method*, Frederic Jameson explains how "the reflexivity of the acting must begin well back before the text itself or its rehearsal; and what the latter must give us to see, besides its own literality, is the dramaturgy of which it is itself an example and an illustration" (Jameson 1999, 104). Indeed, the auction scene described above, and scenes where the characters break from acting-as-characters, can be understood as theatrical intervention into historical discrimination and exclusion. Enacting this past offers audiences a glimpse back in time when such behavior was probably not challenged, and even allowed and promoted under the circumstances. Seen in the 21st century, the enactment seeks to counter larger Euro-American narratives that once promoted the internment as an act of necessity or safety, when in actual fact, there has never been proof that Japanese Canadians (or their southern Japanese American counterparts) acted in collaboration with the Japanese government prior to, or during, the bombing of Pearl Harbour. Another moment where the text distances or makes the familiar strange for the audience is when the characters reveal themselves as real people enacting a "fiction" for the audience. While gesturing to herself, Yoshié and Brent, Nicole Yukiko says "This hapa culture – this mixed culture, it isn’t a coincidence […] So how better to blend in than to marry and have babies with white people?" (Bancroft 2018, 22).4 Yukiko's statement alludes to the fact that representatives of the Canadian government once sold houses and possessions and then used the money generated from such sales to finance the incarceration of the very people they detained. In response, Brent Hirose (whose own grandfather advocated against the government) provides a description of his ancestors:

My grandfather was a pillar of the community […] He and my grandmother and my great aunts and uncles, they held their heads high and suffered through and did everything in their

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4 All of the actors in *Japanese Problem* share a common mixed Eurasian Canadian heritage, and these actors self-define using the term 'hapa.' Though the term 'hapa' has been considered derogatory, in previous decades, the fact that the actors self-define in this manner makes me believe they are aware of its implication. Many people I know personally with mixed cultural backgrounds (European and Asian heritage) of a particular generation define in this manner. Yoshie Bancroft (who plays Samantha), Brent Hirose (who plays Kenji) and Nicole Yukiko (who plays the nurse) represent members of the Japanese Canadian community, while Daniel Deorksen (who plays the Lieutenant/bandleader) represents the Euro-Canadian community and government.
power so that their kids wouldn't have to go through what they did [...] He owned land in Surrey that would be worth millions of dollars today. Those that survived to get redress, 45 years after their property was stolen, got twenty thousand dollars. (Bancroft 2018, 23)

It is a powerful scene, one that allows the legacy of intergenerational trauma to be understood by modern theatre-going audiences; even if the trauma is not shared by everyone in the audience the stories of colonial mistreatment have a strong resonance. Together the verbatim text from survivors and actors elicits empathy from its spectators. In many parts of the country, Canadians live on "stolen land" or unceded Aboriginal territory. This play also draws attention to the fact that many citizens are living on property and land that was once owned by Japanese Canadians. For these reasons, any lingering hostility towards anything "foreign-owned or made" and any resistance towards social justice seems somewhat questionable.

Scene 6, entitled "A Close Encounter," takes place after the property auction. Two characters are present: Samantha, the Teacher’s Assistant, appears again, this time with Kenji, a young man from Vancouver Island. Upon their first meeting, Samantha is practicing for an upcoming talent show, dancing and singing the lyrics to the song *We’re In The Money* (from the American film *Gold Diggers*). Kenji admits that he has a pass that entitles him to move freely among the barns for one hour. I find the notion of needing a "pass" quite troubling. It conjures images of prisoners given special but limited privileges (visiting hours, for example) within the state penitentiary system. Soon, the two characters in the scene are interrupted by a foot patrolling guard, Johnny, the Lieutenant who is responsible for maintaining order in the camp. The guard questions his presence but Kenji and Samantha know what they have to do and begin

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5 In Vancouver, where this article was written, the municipal government clearly stated: "On June 25, 2018, Council formally acknowledged that the City of Vancouver is situated on the unceded traditional territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations (MST)" (Administrative Report, 1). This means that land belonging to First Nations People was never given up through war or treaty or surrender. As such the term "unceded" recognizes much of the Lower Mainland population works and resides on land that has been traditionally inhabited by First Nations (see "City of Reconciliation, Staff Report" 4 December 2017).
protecting each other by pretending to be siblings. Since interned men were separated from women (a particular kind of coercion and social control), pretending to be siblings provided Samantha and Kenji with some reason to gather without arousing suspicion. Then, an interesting turn of events completely changes the tone of the scene when the guard reveals that he used to play in a big band, at which point he reaches into his pocket and takes out a hand-sized harmonica. The characters' relationship is caught with this stage direction:

_He starts to play, and then sing the song, and gestures strongly for the other two to join him. Kenji and Sam look at each other. They assess their choices. They start to hum and sing with him. JOHNNY is very happy, he laughs, they are in a tight triangle. Kenji and Sam stop singing abruptly. A realization sets in. Johnny takes one step back. There is a silence. It is impossibly long. We are all in here together._ (Bancroft 2018, 12, emphasis in original)

In this moment, Sam steps back against the wall and freezes as if extremely frightened and shocked. This moment is also reminiscent of Brechtian "gestus," which contains a symbolic resonance for all to witness. As her body remains still, tears well up in her eyes, and the close proximity between the actor and the audience creates a palpable moment that only such a gesture could evoke. The statement "we are all in here together" suggests that internment was a time when those held captive bonded with each other and potentially with authority figures living within proximity. In this scene the shared humanity of the situation, however tense, is captured. The moment is also important because audiences see the characters bonding over a shared love of music and song. Unfortunately, the characters' strict socialization also begins blocking any mutual and potential empathy the characters would otherwise feel for each other, making the moment awkward and unsustainable. In _Postcolonial Melancholia_, Paul Gilroy offers an interpretation of an otherwise complex phenomenon:

_Ethnic absolutism is a fashionable feature of the identity politics that makes the practice of substantive politics impossible. Instead, we are all sealed up inside our frozen cultural habits, and there seems to be no workable precedent for adopting a more generous and creative view of how humans might communicate or act in concert across racial, ethnic, or civilizational divisions._ (2005, 63)

While the moment when band leader Johnny shares his love of music with Samantha and Kenji seems natural, the scene is also problematized by the characters' self-consciousness; this is not unrealistic as the play unfolds during a time when lingering fears of miscegenation were still widespread throughout the United States and parts of Canada. Keeping people separate based on nationality or heritage is known as "cultural segregation," and anti-miscegenation (or the belief that cultural groups should not intermarry) is but one expression of that prejudice. In this scene, such fear influences how the bodies, souls, and minds come together (or not) and how they are separated by function or role. The practice of anti-miscegenation has historically influenced beliefs about "proper" love interests, spousal decisions, and how individuals interacted in public and even private spheres. _Japanese Problem_ tackles complex issues ranging from intercultural relationships to intergenerational trauma faced by the characters in the show. Given the acknowledgment of characters as fictional creations, the presence of stylized "gestus" and desire to reveal the machinations of the stage design, I am...
compelled to reflect upon how *Japanese Problem* blends post-Brechtian techniques with the "self-objective eye" in order to provoke a critical stance from its audiences.

**No Foreigners: Staging the Present-Future and Past**

*No Foreigners* is a collaborative work co-produced by fu-GEN, Hong Kong Exile, and Theatre Conspiracy. Both at the level of form and content, the work differs substantially from the previous case study. *No Foreigners* takes place in the present-future, but also reflects on the past (albeit less frequently). Written by David Yee and staged by Milton Lim, the play uses digital imagery and media technology to unfold its narrative intentions. In doing so, it also eschews any reliance on what has become known as the "suspension of disbelief," a term that refers to the practice whereby audiences accept the play as reality, believing that actors are portraying the actual lives of characters onstage. While it has been argued that "suspension of disbelief" in realism often allows audiences to feel deeply and empathize with the characters onstage, another (albeit negative) consequence of realism could be the lack of critical distance or reflection promoted during fictional constructions and allied biases. By using post-Brechtian techniques *No Foreigners* addresses questions of belonging and cultural expectations – through a highly reflexive "self-objective eye" – and by doing so, encourages audiences to engage in a critical process of thinking about themselves and the roles they inhabit within the broader socio-political arena.

*No Foreigners* was performed by Derek Chan and April Leung, both of whom wore headsets and microphones, creating a mediated voice that echoes the production's futuristic design and theme. The plot is relatively straight-forward. The male character – portrayed as a doll-shaped figurine on the screen – is voiced by Derek Chan, who sits near the audience, behind a series of desks adorned by five computer screens. The female characters – there are several, ranging in terms of age, features and relationship to the protagonist – are similarly portrayed as plastic figurines; the actors' voices transpose over the action (or non-action) onscreen, while audiences are prompted to read the text in English, in a manner strikingly similar to reading subtitles in foreign films. In presenting the (non)action in this manner, *No Foreigners* addresses pressing issues such as citizenship, cultural belonging and stereotypes, which demands its audiences to engage with the fabrication and form of the work itself. The effort required to read dialogue onscreen, for example, engages the senses while drawing attention to the production's artifice. Further, the absence of a focus on the performers – who remain by-and-large in darkness throughout – begs its audience to wrestle with this abstracted reality, which at times feels incomplete. The focus on the screen seems to suggest that actors are now being placed in a secondary position, and present only to support the prominence of technology. Watching the show, I cannot help but personally experience the reconfigured theatre space on a critical level. Scholar Rey Chow explains how such a phenomenon may be understood:

> [...] staging remains an abstract operation. And it is such abstractness, which is also a quality of incompleteness and openness, that lends staging its political potential. At the same time that it signifies the mediatization of reflexivity, staging shows theoretical practice to be in process. (Chow 2012, 23)
In her observation, Chow draws a fine connection between aesthetics, ideology and the socio-political value systems embedded in art forms. Such concepts can be readily applied to No Foreigners; the production couples digital technology with a highly self-reflexive tone that brings sharp focus to Asian-heritage characters and narratives within mainstream media and Euro-American and Canadian cultural practices.

Another stark feature of the production is the framing of the action within the context of the "Chinese mall," a complex usually built in North America to serve the tastes and communal needs of a diasporic Asian clientele. The "Chinese mall" may contain super-markets such as T&T, while also boast brand-name European stores and luxury services for the most discerning shoppers. In either case, the purpose is to provide a sense of familiarity or home: where Chinese can be spoken freely with like-minded people. In No Foreigners the male protagonist is seen looking to buy an expensive Hermes bag or purse for his girlfriend. The merchant refuses to interact with the customer, calling him a "foreigner" because he cannot speak Chinese and does not seem to fit into the mall. The character says "I'm not a foreigner. I'm Canadian" (Yee 2018, n.p.), which seems doubly ironic because Asian Canadians have faced prejudices and exclusion in North America: at times people of Chinese-heritage were often (and sometimes, still are) seen as "foreigners." Clearly, the character affirms that he is not a "foreigner" to Canada (because he was born here) and yet, despite his Asian heritage, he is nonetheless seen as a "foreigner" to the merchants working in the "Chinese mall." In this sense, the protagonist is temporarily aligned, or mis-aligned, with other outsiders (i.e. Euro-Canadians) who may visit the Chinese mall on occasion but may also remain unaware of its discreet rules and codes of conduct. The framing of foreign-ness or difference cannot be extricated from the genre of the production; as such, No Foreigner creates an estrangement for its Western audiences, providing multiple layers of interpretation but always pushing gently towards critical reflection. Another description of Brecht's work reveals the socio-political concerns of the German director, as offered by Chow:

First and foremost is the rendering of a familiar situation as strange: the point of such estrangement is to allow for a rational uncovering (Entdeckung, usually translated as 'discovering') of conditions that have become automatized and thus unnoticeable, even as these conditions precipitate a crisis. (Chow 2012, 14)

It could be said that for many diasporic merchants living in the West, the Chinese mall is a space where language, food and nostalgia coalesce into a familiar, architectural community. Building upon Chow's reflections, the "Chinese mall" – at least as it is represented in No Foreigners – is an equally "strange" place for the English-speaking, Asian-heritage protagonist, who is treated with disregard and mild hostility simply because his Chinese language skills are not sufficient. The exclusion he experiences in this context provokes a discovery in himself, which results in the acquisition of multiple dialects, martial arts skills and cultural knowledge obtained through the consumption of Asian cinema. Arguably the temporary exclusion the Asian-heritage protagonist experiences is a stark

6 Thomas Fung, Chairman and C.E.O. of The Fairchild Group is quoted on his website: "My vision for the new Aberdeen Centre is to see it become Greater Vancouver's pre-eminent cosmopolitan shopping destination. The first Asian/Western centre of its kind, anywhere." This centre is just one example of many large-scale "Chinese malls" in Canada.

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reminder of the much harsher exclusionary measures promulgated by the American and Canadian governments during the time of the Chinese Exclusion and Head Tax.\footnote{For more information on the history of anti-Asian sentiment, see Yu (2007/2008).}

In *No Foreigners*, the English-speaking protagonist looks 'Asian' but asks his own mother to speak "English please." She quickly responds by telling him "You never practice your Cantonese." This humorous disagreement borders on the stereotypical, evoking the kind of intergenerational dynamics that often unfold between 'immigrant' parents and their offspring. As such it becomes clear that the protagonist is a Canadian-born citizen and this point of differentiation is important. Though visibly 'Asian' his cultural references and upbringing are clearly Western and Euro-Canadian in orientation. Obviously losing one's mother tongue is part of the sacrifice and process that many Canadian-born children of European and Asian immigrants endure, especially those from countries outside of the United Kingdom. While Canadian society affords its citizens and residents many privileges, acculturation into the social fabric has implications for immigrants and those seen to be outside Euro-Canadian culture. Thus, issues of language and belonging are explored in *No Foreigners*, an expression that alludes to the historical exclusion of Chinese, while referring more specifically to the plight of the protagonist in the show. There is a fair bit of Cantonese spoken in the play, and often characters operate between Cantonese and English, depending on their dialogue partner. Though the creators of *No Foreigners* seem hopeful that some audience members have Cantonese language skills, they cannot be certain of this fact. As such *No Foreigners* operates as the cultural mediator and translator for the 'Chinese mall' culture, and in fact, English is always projected on the screen so that the audience is encouraged to read what they are hearing. The surtitles on stage are reminiscent of those used for international films produced in countries where English is not the dominant language, but where access to the English-language market is often desired and required.

Rey Chow suggests how the legacy of Brecht informed a modernism that still exists today. There are three elements that are apparent in this mode: a familiar situation made strange; the positioning of a stranger in between the inside and outside worlds, and the presence of visuality rendered in a stillness or tableau (Chow 2012, 14). The metaphor of the stranger and related themes of inclusion and exclusion are filtered through the many layers of the production. When the protagonist appears on the scene (meaning, the 'Chinese mall'), he is first seen at the doorway of the purse shop, where he is denied access to an expensive, exclusive Hermes hand bag while simultaneously being referred to as a "foreigner." His being is given a transient quality, as he literally and figuratively floats between insider and outsider status, echoing not only Chow’s observations but the common phrase once used to describe immigrants: "living between two worlds." *No Foreigners* also presents ample "visuality," as described by Chow, and the characters – no longer represented by actors but instead replaced by plastic – can be said to embody a tableau comprised of stillness and frozen figurines. There is only one moment in the 55-minute show when actor Derek Chan is seen performing under the house lights; now as a karaoke singer and Cantonese-pop-star, the character furthers the epic quality of the show, interacting with audiences and dissolving any fourth wall that may still linger. Despite the relatively brief encounter, this moment is meant to be seductively tongue-in-cheek. In comparison to the live karaoke singer, the audiences may now see the plastic figurines as
incredibly non-human and disembodied. Once again a mild disturbance and shock reminiscent of post-Brechtian theatre can be observed. Even though the figurines signal an anti-realism sentiment, their stillness manages to provoke wildly imaginative responses, at least for the keen observer. Though seemingly unrepresentative of lived experience, the plastic figurines feed into an abstraction that transcends cultural differences while minimizing any essentialization of Asian-heritage bodies onstage. The figurines, upon closer examination, are not unlike puppets in their whimsical, plastic materiality: the latter allows otherwise heavy themes of familial loss and social exclusion to become palatable.

David Yee’s playwriting ensures that audiences know they are witnessing a culturally specific (Cantonese) story. Incorporating humour and a high level of self-reflexivity into the dialogue ensures a deliberate engagement with the “self-objective eye,” a phenomenon that was present in the Japanese Problem, but rendered differently in this case study. In Japanese Problem, little Japanese was spoken and as a result required little translation, whereas the surtitles projected throughout the performance of No Foreigners create an altogether different experience. In the latter, the audience is always and potentially aware of its ‘outsider’ status, especially those members who require the simultaneous surtitles and translation. Further, it is possible for No Foreigners to capture a wider demographic, reaching to audiences who speak Cantonese, English, or perhaps both. Quite simply, No Foreigners offers two Canadian actors of Asian-heritage to be seen within the professional Euro-Canadian theatre scene, a gesture that is slowly becoming more common. By using digital technology to subvert expectations of the genre of realism, No Foreigners achieves two accomplishments: 1) the show creates a space for Asian-heritage performers to engage in bilingual storytelling that operates within (and expands) the larger Euro-Canadian theatre canon; and 2) the show instigates a critical dialogue with audiences, by implementing post-Brechtian techniques and a unique ‘self-objective eye.’ Overall, the production gestures toward interrelated themes of historical exclusion and cultural commodification. The digital technology challenges audience expectations by shifting the gaze from the stage to the screen, and back again.

Characterization also plays a large part in No Foreigners, where the protagonist must become more “Chinese” by learning many dialects, watching Asian movies and developing an appreciation for his seemingly long-lost heritage. He finds a woman in the mall who goes by the name Sodapop Mah and agrees to teach him to appreciate his roots. Here is where the humor and self-mimicry begin to unfold: near the end of the play, the character is placed deliberately within stereotypical contexts and discourses. While pop culture music hits are played throughout the first part of the show, the soundscape changes in the second part as the sounds of a meditative, Buddhist “Ooooooom” are heard through the loudspeaker. The male protagonist’s identity is now rated on the screen: “The Foreigner, Chinese-ness 85%.” He says, “I can feel my Chinese-ness growing. I have earned black belts in Wushu, Kungfu, Wing Chun, Jeet Kun Do, and Shaolin Soccer” (Yee 2018). The humor is not lost and members of the audience release an audible laughter. These self-congratulatory statements are followed by a climactic fight scene in which the doll-like figurines spar like warriors found in wuxia, or the particular martial arts film genre commonly produced by Chinese movie houses. By gesturing towards the larger “media frame” – via references to martial arts
cinema and other Asian signifiers – *No Foreigners* seeks to transcend the limited and simplistic representations historically afforded to Asian Canadian performers (and their Asian American counterparts). The show does this by placing Asian Canadian characters at the forefront of the action, albeit as figurines. Even though their bodies are not always seen onstage, culturally-specific references to language and place, the light-hearted stereotypes and tongue-in-cheek interactions between family members are subversively affective and gesture to the characters' high level of self-awareness. The multi-layered Asian-heritage characterizations broaden the representational field across many different media: dialogue, song, animation, digital technology, and the innovative use of surtitles and animation. In her book, Chow explains how technology is connected to ideology by alluding to Walter Benjamin's thoughts on film montage and his belief that Brecht's theatricality was preoccupied in the interstices between different forms of media (2012, 18).

**Conclusion**

I have offered a brief overview of two compelling Asian Canadian plays, chosen not for their common ground but their differences in tone, aesthetic style and content. *Japanese Problem* relies upon extensive archival research and verbatim text coupled with collaborative writing based on the performers' own backgrounds. The uses of "gestus," the separation between the fictional characters and the actors' real selves, and the act of performing Japanese Canadians who were detained and interned seems post-Brechti-an in tone and intention. By contrast, *No Foreigners* operates in radically new and interesting ways, using digital technology to draw audiences into a bilingual world that is simultaneously of the present, future and past. In a humorous journey that interrogates cultural expectations and stereotypes, the show is successful in its implementation of distancing effects. Audiences are continually required to refocus their attention from the actors onstage to plastic figurines on the large video screen, where the dialogue is continually projected throughout the performance. In both productions, the playwrights seem keen on implementing the "self-objective eye" through the characters' reflexivity about their place in the world and how they navigate within and beyond the Euro-Canadian structures impacting their lives. The two case studies in this article are only two productions in the flourishing field known as Asian Canadian theatre, a forward-thinking art practice unfolding in the 21st century.

**Works Cited**


8 I borrow the term "media frame" from Rey Chow, but use it more directly to signal the relationship between representation that takes place not only in mainstream media (news), but in theatre and cinema alike (see Chow 2012, 160-165).


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