

## Beyond Identity Politics: National and Transnational Dialogues in Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* and Chay Yew's *A Beautiful Country*

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Nearly twenty years have passed since *Theatre Journal* published a special issue on “Theatre of Color,” featuring essays on Chicano, African American, and Native American drama. In her opening “Comment,” editor Sue-Ellen Case reflects upon the special issue’s title and the implied norm of “colorless” theatre, or a theatre in which “the color of one’s skin is not a constituent element in the mode of cultural production.”<sup>1</sup>

She registers her hope that a collection of essays on “theatre of color” will “move this tradition and critique from the margins to the center of our focus, rather than to create another ghetto for this work.”<sup>2</sup> Certainly the past twenty years have witnessed the flourishing of works by playwrights of color as well as scholarly responses to them. Nonetheless, the phrase “theatre of color” still begs some questions: just *what* are we talking about when we use such a phrase? And how have the last two decades challenged us to re-think the work of playwrights of color? The widely divergent productions within this field remind us to be cautious when comparing different kinds of cultural representations, theatrical practices, and political orientations. Yet the salience of “race” as both critical problem and element of performance provides compelling reasons for thinking about a tradition of “theatre of color” and doing comparative dramatic criticism across ethnic and racial boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

This essay cross-reads the work of two contemporary theatre artists, Anna Deavere Smith and Chay Yew, who are creating new dialogues about race, performance, and American identity. Unlike many playwrights, such as Ntozake Shange and Luis Valdez, who came to prominence before the 1986 special issue of *Theatre Journal*, Yew and Smith produce works that depart from conventions of identity-based theatre. In plays such as Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1975) and Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* (1978), the stance of self-representation—or the taking ownership of one’s portrayal on the stage—operates in direct challenge to a long history of racial fantasies, ethnic stereotypes, and minstrelized representations in American theatre and the popular culture at large.<sup>4</sup> Even though acts of self-representation inevitably run the risk

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of creating new stereotypes about particular cultures and ethnicities, the gesture of “telling your own story”—prominent in the period following the Civil Rights movement—signals a key political move for playwrights speaking from historically marginalized positions.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s, with the contributions of such playwrights behind them, Chay Yew and Anna Deavere Smith suggest new directions that a “theatre of color” might take. Instead of trying to “represent” their own ethnic experience, these writers create what might be called “post-identity theatre,” a theatre in which questions of what it means to be Chicano or African American or Asian American no longer take center stage.<sup>6</sup>

The title of my essay, by invoking a move “beyond” the politics of identity, perhaps misleadingly implies the promise of a “new and improved” mode of talking about race in America. While acknowledging the importance of race-based political projects and cultural productions, I wish here to examine the different valences that distinguish the work of Yew and Smith from more identity-based dramatists. A post-identity theatre does not ignore or efface questions of race, culture, and ethnicity, but rather puts into play a different set of emphases: collectivity rather than individuality, American horizons rather than ethnic roots, and transnational contingencies rather than national belonging. Indeed, if the *re*-presentation of identity implies a notion of culture as stable or fixed, then a post-identity theatre privileges a performative approach to culture over a representational one and regards both identity and community as dynamic and contested processes rather than given facts. In *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994) and *A Beautiful Country* (1998), Smith and Yew exploit the potential of dialogue to animate the complexities of staging culture. For these writers, dialogue operates not as transparent communication but as an active mode of negotiating social difference. Too often in discussions of diversity and multiculturalism, the concept of dialogue is assumed to be a sort of simple antidote or remedy for inter-racial conflict. Recent work in the field of communication studies, however, provides a more rigorous understanding of how dialogue “is emergent (rather than preformed), fluid (rather than static), keenly dependent on process (at least as much as content), performative (more than representational), and never fully finished (rather than completed).”<sup>7</sup> Smith and Yew dramatize this more critical understanding of dialogue through their plays. Whether dialogue occurs onstage in performance or offstage during pre-production, and whether it functions as a literal conversation between characters or more metaphorical performance of double-voiced-ness, these playwrights engage the difficult process of de-centering authority and rejecting essentialist notions of culture.

The careers of Anna Deavere Smith and Chay Yew certainly exceed one-dimensional labels and highlight the heterogeneity of what it means to be an “African American” or “Asian American” playwright at the turn of the twenty-first century. Smith, an African American actress, playwright, and teacher, is by far the

better-known artist; her interviews with communities in crisis form the basis for her acclaimed series of one-woman shows about America. She has been lauded for her ability to encourage dialogue across the borders of race, culture, gender, and class; she plays *all* the roles in most of her plays and hence literally stages an exchange mediated by her body and voice.<sup>8</sup> In *Twilight*, Smith performs the diverse and conflicted Los Angeles in the wake of the urban unrest commonly known as the Los Angeles riots. Yew, a playwright from Singapore now based in the United States, stages the intersections of gay identity with more familiar Asian American themes of immigrant struggle and cultural assimilation. Like Smith, Yew also is invested in remaking theatrical conventions to embody his ideas; his plays blur the boundary between drama and performance art and tend towards lyrical rather than naturalistic treatments of dialogue, character, and setting. *A Beautiful Country* is unusual within Yew's *oeuvre* insofar as it treats queerness not as personal experience but as reference point within a larger exploration of the making of Asian American history. By creating performances that cross multiple sites of identity, Yew and Smith challenge us not to "ghettoize" their work but to critique the binary thinking that opposes "margins" to "center" in the first place.

These playwrights are redefining the role of the minority artist in American society at a particular historical moment, one that registers the changing demographics of the population and the changing material conditions for playwrights of color. In short, the revisionist dialogues that Smith and Yew stage are not exclusively a matter of artistic choice but are rather contingent upon demands and opportunities created by specific material circumstances. Conversations about the changing racial demographics of America at the turn of the twenty-first century are commonplace; the traditional black-white racial binary has been challenged if not yet displaced. It is no surprise, then, that the fields of Latino and Asian American drama have grown rapidly over the past twenty years. Furthermore, in terms of creating and producing their work, contemporary playwrights of color have benefited from the resources of well-established ethnic theatres around the country as well as from major regional institutions, such as the Mark Taper Forum's Latino Theatre Initiative and Asian Theatre Workshop.<sup>9</sup> Writers like Smith and Yew, then, do not bear the burden of merely critiquing hegemonic practices, nor do they need to function as spokespersons for their ethnic communities. In their revisionist performances of what it means to be American, these playwrights negotiate their authority within a society challenged to question or rewrite its master narratives of identity and citizenship.

As a post-identity playwright, Smith is in the remarkable position of using her individuality (through the form of the one-woman show) to create broader communal dialogues about American cultural politics. Her work has been so lauded that it is sometimes easy to lose sight of the startling fact that she is doing one-woman shows about American identity in a country with a long history of

racist and sexist practices. Her plays are quite explicitly about the complexity of the American racial landscape, rather than her particular cultural experience. With her cross-racial documentary theatre, she both rewrites theatrical conventions and intends to reshape the social relations that her plays examine. In pondering the relationship of theatre to community, she notes a two-fold goal: “1) bring people together into the same room (the theatre) who would normally not be together, and 2) attract people to the theatre who don’t usually come to the theatre.”<sup>10</sup> *Twilight* attempts to connect a number of quite different communal sites of discourse: the actual residents of Los Angeles who granted her interviews, the collaborators at the Mark Taper Forum where she first created the play in workshop, and the audiences who attended these and subsequent performances of the piece. Smith’s engagement of the public sphere points to the *multiple* signs under which people can cohere and differentiate themselves from others; her practice of staging community is thus an excellent example of the way in which community always “encapsulates both commonality and difference,” as Sonja Kufninec emphasizes in her discussion of this elusive concept.<sup>11</sup>

The “Los Angeles” of *Twilight* is a particularly complex instantiation of community that deserves closer inspection, given that, in some ways, Los Angeles functions as the protagonist of the play. By putting this city’s identity on stage, Smith calls attention to one of the most visible sites of an America in search of itself. The historian Henry Yu recently reflected upon his complicated but, in some ways, representative position as a citizen of Los Angeles:

I have come to Los Angeles from elsewhere and now call it home, but instead of seeing myself at the end of a one-way journey that has ended in Los Angeles, a migrant to this place from somewhere else, I think of Los Angeles as an intersection on a larger grid . . . . Los Angeles is one . . . intersecting node for many journeys, and if we follow the roads outward we find ourselves navigating the well-worn paths of a much larger world, where people . . . come to and from and through Los Angeles.<sup>12</sup>

Yu’s evocation of the layered, intersecting histories of migration that have shaped this city provides a striking lens through which to see *Twilight*, a play that both embraces the idea of America and offers an unflinching examination of its historical practices. Smith does not simply represent the community of Los Angeles or honor the diverse perspectives of its residents; rather, she *performs* the site of Los Angeles as a dynamic and contentious interplay of criss-crossing journeys. Smith, in short, demystifies Los Angeles by refusing to portray it as either hopelessly balkanized battlefield or utopian site of social harmony. She offers instead what Dorinne Kondo has called “creative weavings” of “cross-racial identification, alliance, and

cleavage”—a telling description for thinking of both Los Angeles and Smith’s performance as crossroads that cannot neatly be contained within conventional categories of analysis.<sup>13</sup>

Smith’s cross-racial performances in *Twilight* highlight intersections between immigrants and natives, longtime residents and new arrivals, that force us to move beyond a media-created myth of the Los Angeles riots as primarily a commentary on police brutality or black-white racial conflict. Smith clearly attempts to create a more nuanced view of the communities involved, Latino and Asian as well as black and white, and her broadening of the American dialogue on race is one of the play’s most compelling features. Although *Twilight* certainly is not Smith’s first experience with cross-racial performance, this play nonetheless marks Smith’s heightened preoccupation with potential biases. She notes that her “own history, which is a history of black and white struggle, would make the work narrower than it should be,” and she explains her decision to hire a group of dramaturges who would bring to the project both “ethnic diversity” and “diversity of expertise.”<sup>14</sup> Given Smith’s interest in making theatre responsible to its surrounding communities, it is utterly appropriate that her process of creating *Twilight* involved not only interviews with people in Los Angeles but also ongoing conversations with the cultural consultants who served as her dramaturges. Through these interactions, Smith de-centers her own authority to “speak for” the city of Los Angeles and turns the form of the one-woman show into a kind of public debate or civic dialogue.<sup>15</sup>

Mary S. Strine draws upon Bakhtin’s theories of dialogism to explore the workings of Smith’s documentary theatre project and its act of “implicating audience members imaginatively in the boundary work of bridging cultural differences and of negotiating identity in difference.”<sup>16</sup> Strine locates particular moments in *Twilight* where different people seem to be “speaking to” one another in ways that would fail to occur in normal, everyday discourse, and she also notes that the gaps between Smith and her interviewees make her characterizations “internally dialogized.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, Smith in effect collapses the distinction between monologue and dialogue in her performances. Each scene is clearly a monologue insofar as we have one actor speaking, yet the layering of Smith speaking through another person that she interviewed implicitly embodies the idea of dialogue.<sup>18</sup> In the context of post-identity theatre, I wish to focus attention on the dialogues Smith brings out *within* the experience of the racialized subject and *between* different communities of color as well. For all the substantive scholarship on Smith’s work, the impact of cross-racial performance upon the representation of racialized minorities has been surprisingly under-examined—an ironic situation in light of widespread praise for Smith’s ability to encourage dialogue across multiple color lines. Smith’s strategic choices about how to order the monologues and where to place dramatic emphasis reveal that the voices of people of color are central to her inquiry into the state of

Los Angeles following the riots. And her comparative approach to race through her dialogic theatre is critical to her revision of American identity politics.

For instance, in the opening monologue of the published text of *Twilight*, Smith performs the words of Rudy Salas, Sr., a longtime resident of Los Angeles who recounts his memory of the police beating he suffered during the zoot suit riots of 1942. Los Angeles's history of racial violence is thus vividly evoked, not only to highlight a history of oppression suffered by Chicanos, but also to mark Salas's own racial biases: "You see, I still have that prejudice against whites. / I'm not a racist! / But I have white friends, though, /but I don't even see them as whites! / I don't even see them as whites!"<sup>19</sup> Salas's defensive posture and his ironic mimicry of the language of white racism towards people of color are framed for the spectator's scrutiny through Smith's performance. In other words, as we peer through the layers of Smith playing Salas, a person *visibly* unlike her, we are forced to see Salas both as disenfranchised citizen and as a participant in racial separatism. With such strategically imperfect acts of representation, Smith encourages the spectator to witness and engage in a dialogue across difference rather than to choose "sides" or to pass blunt judgments upon either the interviewees or Smith herself. Clearly this sort of dialogue is different from Smith's consultations with dramaturges or her conversations with Salas and other interviewees, but nonetheless this dialogic mode of performance—like more literal forms of dialogue—shatters the notion of absolute truth or authority and offers instead the double-voiced-ness of Smith both embracing Salas's perspective and pointing to the gap between them.

This central problem of representation in *Twilight*—the way in which Smith *makes* it a problem—clearly invites further analysis. Although it is tempting at first to regard Smith as an expert mimic, we must accept that she is not trying to disappear into someone else's identity via the imitation of that person's words and gestures. For instance, on a purely physical level, we know that there is no way she can completely convey the appearance of writer Mike Davis, who is described in Smith's notes as looking "kind of like Robert Redford. Prematurely white hair, light eyes."<sup>20</sup> Smith's challenge, then, is to communicate to us the particular *roles* each person is performing. If the racial, class, and gendered scripts are visible enough, the audience understands who is speaking despite, or rather because of, the dissonance of Smith not looking and sounding quite like them. We are constantly reminded that Smith's performances are *incomplete*; we are aware, in short, of the gap between reality and representation, between original and copy, and of the dialogue embedded within each monologue. Indeed, Smith has embraced this idea of the gap between herself and her interviewees: "I try to close the gap between us but I applaud the gap between us. I am willing to display my own *unlikeness*."<sup>21</sup> In what sense, however, might Smith's "unlikeness" either help or hinder the cross-racial dialogues she is attempting to foster?

The gap between Smith and her interviewees is nowhere more apparent than in the monologues representing Los Angeles's Korean community. My Korean American background is perhaps on display here, but I find these scenes to be some of the most powerful *and* problematic in the play.<sup>22</sup> An ongoing debate about Smith's work is the question of whether she is perpetuating racialized thinking through her border-crossing performances or whether she is dismantling essentialism by stressing that race is a construct and process rather than a biological fact. Debby Thompson captures this tension succinctly when she discusses Smith's performance of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in the early 1990s:

One the one hand, Anna Deavere Smith can clearly perform, recreate, embody, inhabit, "become" another race. On the other hand, she is just as clearly an African American woman playing a white woman—and even if we "blind" ourselves to her "color," we are recreating her race by the very act of consciously and conscientiously blinding ourselves to it.<sup>23</sup>

I am persuaded that Smith is doing both these things at once, and yet the stakes of this tension are not the same for every group Smith portrays. *Twilight* is particularly exciting for the intersections it performs between different communities of color—a highly underrepresented encounter in the American dialogue on race—and yet this is also the area in which racialized depictions threaten to undermine Smith's credibility and deflate the power of her performance. In the case of the Korean American community, one has to confront the reality that the playing field of representation is not level and that acts of speaking *as* a Korean American are also problematically acts of speaking *for* that community.

Several things distinguish the Korean perspective in *Twilight*. First, we get no monologues from the Korean community until the middle of the play, in the section entitled "War Zone," where Korean voices are especially marked in conveying the mayhem and terror of the riots. The first interview features Chung Lee discussing, in Korean, the looting of his store. The published text represents this interview via phonetic transcription of the Korean language, while the English translation is given in parentheses. With this monologue, the only one not in English in the entire play, we are asked to ponder the distance between Smith and her performed subject. Emotionally that distance is closed later during a heartbreaking group of interviews with a mother, father, and son who all react to the devastating event of the father's gunshot wound through his eye. These few monologues paint an extremely moving but fairly one-dimensional image of Koreans as victims, one that does little to reflect competing historical realities concerning the relations of Koreans with Blacks and Latinos in Los Angeles. I am not necessarily saying that Smith should have given a "fuller" representation of the Korean community but



am rather proposing that Smith *risks* something important in her performance of the gap between herself and these particular subjects. In a country where Korean American voices are rarely heard in the public sphere, what does it mean for Anna Deavere Smith to choose which voices to represent and then to embody these stories on the stage? Although she clearly walks a delicate line here, Smith makes the strategic choice of allowing questions of representation to become part of the play itself and, therefore, something we are invited to interrogate.

Smith quite poignantly animates a meta-commentary on representational bias in one of the play's final monologues. In "Swallowing the Bitterness," Mrs. Young-Soon Han both perpetuates the notion of Koreans as victims and complicates it. Mrs. Han (as performed by Smith) says, "I really realized that / Korean immigrants were left out / from this / society and we were nothing. / What is our right? / Is it because we are Korean? / Is it because we have no politicians? / Is it because we don't / speak good English? / Why? Why do we have to be left out?"<sup>24</sup> (245). Her passionate critique of the under-representation of Korean voices in American society marks the play's own limited portrayal of this particular community's experience. This monologue is also remarkable for the way it evokes a Korean-Black dialogue through Smith's performance. In speaking of African Americans, Mrs. Han says, "They have fought / for their rights / over two centuries / and I have a lot of sympathy and understanding for them."<sup>25</sup> Yet at the end of this same monologue she adds, "I wish I could / live together / with eh [sic] Blacks, / but after the riots / there were too much differences. / The fire is still there—."<sup>26</sup>

Smith's performance of this monologue is enormously moving, and yet, given the awkwardness of Smith's accent work and her pronunciation of certain lines in Korean, the audience is taken perilously close to the edge of racial caricature. Not only is her "blackness" visible in this scene, as Thompson might contend, but a dangerously flat or cartoonish "Korean-ness" threatens to deflate the power of the performance.<sup>27</sup> Is this, then, a moment that opens up a space for a Korean-Black alliance, or is a Korean voice being muted once again? Smith chooses not to resolve these tensions but instead uses her various identity crossings to suspend us in this gap. For me at this moment in the play, an uncomfortable space opens up that resists simple closure; the text is not fixed but rather demands that we engage in dialogue with it. In this sense, Smith refuses to present a flat notion of community in which we might all take refuge but instead performs community as a problem or live question that will not be settled.

In the end, *Twilight* succeeds not in accurately representing all the voices of Los Angeles but in calling our attention to the limits of representation even as we see that such efforts to understand one another are vital to our own survival. She performs not a utopian space where conflicts and misunderstanding can be transcended but a much messier version of reality in which she demands that we do the work of entering into dialogues that we might rather avoid and that could indeed



fail.<sup>28</sup> The risks of Smith's performance method are clear, particularly in places where her monologues seem almost to speak *for* rather than to speak *through* the perspectives of her interviewees. Yet Smith makes clear that she has little interest in mono-racial performance; her theatre eschews what she calls the "safe houses of identity" and embraces instead "the crossroads of ambiguity."<sup>29</sup> Certainly in *Twilight* that idea of ambiguity could not be more central to both its themes and formal strategies. The play's final monologue features the words of Twilight Bey, who refers to twilight as that "time between day and night / Limbo. / I call it limbo."<sup>30</sup> This idea underscores how much this play is about not identity or community but a state of inbetween-ness, the contingencies of interethnic understanding that inform life in Los Angeles and America. *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* is a mapping of Los Angeles's complicated cultural intersections, in which charged, asymmetrical, and open-ended dialogues are performed between Smith and her others and, in a larger sense, between the audience and Smith.

This concept of "inbetween-ness" could not be more applicable to the theatre of Chay Yew. When asked in an interview to reflect on the way he sees himself in the American landscape, Yew replied, "There's an inbetween-ness about me—coming from Asia, living in America, being in Los Angeles, going to New York all the time, working in one rehearsal room to another. And with this template, this is how I look at how I fit in."<sup>31</sup> Yew's series of gerunds—"coming," "living," "being," "going," "working"—offers a particularly fluid way of conceptualizing identity and hints at the significance of transnationalism in the making of culture. In immigration studies, transnationalism signals a departure from traditional notions of one-way migration and the paradigm of "becoming American" through the process of assimilation. Transnationalism, whether broadly or narrowly defined, always suggests the *multiple* ways in which home-building can occur; a process that can blur past and present and span geographic space as well as the political boundaries of nations. Sociologist Yen Le Espiritu posits that transnationalism is a "disruptive strategy, enacted by immigrants to challenge binary modes of thinking about time and space and to resist their differential inclusion in the United States as subordinate residents and citizens."<sup>32</sup> Chay Yew, with his embrace of inbetween-ness not only in his life but also in his theatrical art, makes just this sort of disruptive claim against traditional modes of defining Asian Americans. And in *A Beautiful Country*, Yew's 1998 collaboration with Cornerstone Theater Company in Los Angeles, Yew deploys the idea of inbetween-ness as the controlling metaphor of the play. Throughout its innovative staging of 150 years of Asian American history, *A Beautiful Country* animates the space between Asia and America, between past and present, between immigrant and native, and between memory and invention. Even the protagonist, an Asian immigrant seeking entry to the United States, is a figure caught in the middle—an image that Yew underscores by opening and closing the play with scenes of the protagonist being interrogated at the threshold of America.

*A Beautiful Country*, because of its focus on Asian American-ness, may appear to stake a claim to identity more than it evokes a “post-identity” stance. Indeed, this play seems to mark itself as “Asian American” much more overtly than some of Yew’s other works, such as *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own*, which primarily highlight issues of sexuality.<sup>33</sup> By positioning the protagonist Visa, an Asian man in drag, at the center of Asian American history, *A Beautiful Country* explicitly traverses multiple sites of identity. In so doing, Yew in effect performs the current trajectory of scholarship in Asian American Studies, which locates the construction of Asian American-ness along diverse axes of social and historical experience.<sup>34</sup> Whereas Smith explodes the coherence of American identity through her cross-racial, inter-communal performances, Yew explodes the coherence of American identity by highlighting the contradictions and heterogeneity “within” the sphere of Asian America. Writing approximately twenty-five years after the pioneering plays of Frank Chin, Yew expresses less interest in claiming America or raging against stereotypes than in trying to re-imagine the multiple formations of Asian American identity as forged in the process of making history.<sup>35</sup>

Like Smith’s *Twilight*, Yew’s *A Beautiful Country* rejects the familiar terrain of ethnicity as personal experience and instead draws attention to the public, communal, and historical dimensions of Asian American subjectivity. The original production of this play featured a multi-racial cast of professional actors alongside residents of Los Angeles’s Chinatown, thereby crossing community lines in the very making of the play. Yew also constructs the larger communities of Asian America and America through his re-visionary use of “newspapers, journals, literature, historical documents, and interviews” as sources for the play.<sup>36</sup> His collaboration with Crossroads Theater Company represents yet another dimension of performing community. Crossroads is a multiethnic ensemble company that sees its mission as bringing theatre directly to diverse communities across America and in their home city of Los Angeles. Their “urban residency” work ranges across the diverse sites that constitute Los Angeles: from shopping malls to the Los Angeles Police Department, from Watts to Beverly Hills, from African American churches to communities of Catholic immigrants.<sup>37</sup> *A Beautiful Country*, then, functions as a collaborative, cross-cultural, and cross-racial performance that refuses to be narrowly defined. Although obviously resonant in particular ways with the locale of Los Angeles, this play engages questions of community across a range of sites—Los Angeles, Asian America, and America—that are not so much literal locations as they are powerful structures in which to imagine one’s sense of self and world.

In this play, which rejects the form of realist drama, a multimedia collage of dance, music, language, and video disrupts the master narratives of American immigration and Asian American cultural politics. In *A Beautiful Country*, Asian immigrants do not embark on a one-way journey towards becoming American, nor do they engage in a struggle for equality within the so-called “dominant culture.”

Instead, Yew deploys a fascinating device of doubling that performs the play's dialogue with history and identity politics. Sometimes the doubling is structural, as in the case of the dialogues between Visa and the Immigration Officer that open and close the play. At other times, the doubling is more metaphorical, as in the case of the re-telling of the Negro Alley massacre in Los Angeles, 1871, another predecessor to Los Angeles's racial violence in 1992. Yew stages the Negro Alley massacre through the projection of slide titles on the video monitor, while an actor, "in silence and through movement . . . physically enacts the massacre from all different points of view."<sup>38</sup> In this scene, history becomes a dialogue rather than a fixed text, and we understand the events of 1871 through two perspectives, two tellings of the same story. In a much lighter moment of dialogic history, the infamous *Time* magazine article of 1941, entitled "How to Tell Your Friends From the Japs," is presented as a fashion show in which "a very camp Truman Capote-esque MC takes to the mike."<sup>39</sup> Like Smith, Yew presents a de-centered performance of America that refuses to speak from a single perspective or position.

In an important essay on *A Beautiful Country*, David Román discusses how the "vernacular imagination of the queer immigrant subject" works to explore "histories and memories that exist as alternatives to those that circulate as the 'popular imagination,' or more firmly as 'official history.'"<sup>40</sup> Román is particularly interested in queer performances that may exist beyond the scope of official public knowledge or visibility, but his remarks resonate with my reading of the subversive potential of Smith's play as well. It is striking to note the degree to which in Yew's play, as in *Twilight*, "documentary" sources work not to underscore or provide evidence for some kind of fixed, ascertainable truth about America. On the contrary, both of these plays operate in *dialogue* with true statements, real stories, actual events, and so forth. The end result is not to support truth but to radically de-stabilize it; in other words, these plays are more interested in performing open-ended dialogues than in prescribing closed answers or moral lessons. The "official version" of Asian American identity is notable for its contradictory claims—claims that see Asians either as model minorities or as unassimilable aliens. Thus Yew is in the important and challenging position of trying to create a conversation across this gap.

Yew's dialogic approach to Asian American history is extraordinarily rich and imaginative. The device of doubling allows Yew to connect different characters and events throughout time and also to open up a play of difference and heterogeneity within the Asian American community. The play contains a number of two-person scenes that use dialogue not to affirm communication but to fracture the "coherence" of identity and history. In one scene, Visa's migration to America is counterpointed with the journey of "Chinaman," a nineteenth-century immigrant; the two characters relate their parallel stories from opposite sides of the stage. Another dialogue, set in the 1940s, features characters named Yoshi and Ralph Lazo; they speak naturalistically but face the audience as they mime the actions of baseball

and discuss Ralph's decision as a Mexican American to enter an internment camp. The doubling device is used to particularly good effect about halfway through the play, in a scene framed by two slides: "SLIDE: A Story of Two Mothers. / SLIDE: On Two Sides of the Ocean."<sup>41</sup> In this scene, Visa and his mother talk on one side of the stage as they practice words from a Chinese-English phrasebook, while on the other side Ah Ma and Mary have a conversation before Mary's night on the town. Yew performs the ironies of Visa and his mother in Asia speaking entirely in English and referencing McDonald's and Tina Turner; while on the American side of the ocean, Ah Ma switches frequently into Cantonese. As Visa and her mother read from the phrasebook, their simple dialogue of "yes no yes no" becomes almost a poem that both rehearses and dissolves the binary confines of identity—whether Asian or American, straight or queer, insider or outsider.<sup>42</sup>

The central character, Miss Visa Denied, is probably Yew's most powerful device for opening up dialogue across binary difference. To begin, Visa is neither the stereotypic model minority nor the equally stereotypic Asian villain. Furthermore, as a cross-dressed subject, Visa displays a performative identity that unsettles the very idea of truth vs. fiction. Perhaps the use of multiple performers to play Visa's role most clearly underscores what Román refers to as Visa's "fragmented subjectivity." Román explains that Visa's identity represents more than a simple duality; he notes that the play presents "a male actor who embodies Visa on stage but does not speak, another male actor who speaks Visa's inner thoughts but only from an off-stage microphone, and a female actor who is meant to represent Visa's 'soul' and performs only through dance."<sup>43</sup> Yew, in short, approaches Visa's subjectivity dialogically, and we get no sense of the "real" Visa for almost the entire course of the play. Just as in the two-person scenes, the dialogues "within" Visa sharply rupture the conventions of normative discourse. For instance, Visa remains mute during the opening interrogation scene with the Immigration Officer and the stage directions indicate that Visa's back is to the audience. In Visa's next appearance, during the dialogue with the "Chinaman," Visa lip synchs while a company member speaks Visa's dialogue from an off-stage mike. In a much later scene, Visa delivers an interior monologue softly, in Malay, while a company member recites the monologue in English. In all of these scenes, Visa's identity alternately advances into and recedes from view, as the play stages dialogues both within Visa's character and between Visa's life and the larger scripts of American and Asian American history.

When Visa finally removes her make-up and clothes at the very end of the play and speaks directly to the audience in English, a space opens up for interrogating the "truth" about America, about immigration, about Asian American identity. In a complete refusal of an either/or, yes/no, stay/go set of possibilities, Visa states: "My / name / is / Wong Kong Shin / I / come / from / Penang / West Malaysia / No / I / come / from / Los Angeles / California / United States of America."<sup>44</sup> I read this line

not as an indicator of Visa changing her mind or preferring her American identity, but rather as a revelation of the false choice presented by the immigration interrogation process. Where is Visa from? From multiple places, multiple continents, multiple perspectives, from two directions at once. Visa, then, is the transnational subject who complicates easy assumptions about assimilation or about being “forever foreign.”<sup>45</sup> Through a series of national and transnational dialogues, Yew comments not only on Visa’s indeterminate identity, but also on the contradictions of an American society that has always regulated its borders with profound ambivalence. The final lines of *A Beautiful Country* are, perhaps fittingly, as hopeful as they are bleak: “You cannot stay / for more than three months. / Welcome to America / Next.”<sup>46</sup> These lines, almost a verbatim repetition of the immigration officer’s command to Visa in the opening scene, carry the weight of a rehearsed script that now feels open to revision. With the small but critical addition of “Welcome to America”—a phrase that feels generically scripted despite its clearly positive overtones—Yew asks the spectator to feel suspended in the tension between entering and exiting, between staying and going. He does not resolve this tension, but rather elicits a dialogue that dramatizes the open-ended process of becoming American.

This note of quasi-optimism is not unique to Yew’s play, for Smith’s play closes with a similar gesture, that of *Twilight Bey* saying “I can’t forever dwell in the darkness, / I can’t forever dwell in the idea, / of just identifying with people like me.”<sup>47</sup> The hopeful tone of these words provides some relief at the end of a difficult and painful play. Nonetheless, both Smith and Yew refuse to endorse clichés about the democratic ideals of America or to gesture in reductive ways towards an interracial utopia. Rather, their plays perform the *possibility* (and hence the potential failure) of community through their deft staging of dialogic tensions. The revisionist performance of dialogue in *A Beautiful Country* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* has been my primary subject in this essay. On another level, however, I have attempted to stage a dialogue *between* these two works. My hope is that in negotiating the relationship between these plays, which take as their subject the idea of community itself, I might suggest some of the potential of a post-identity theatre. To cross-read *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* and *A Beautiful Country* is in part to see that Smith’s play can be read as an “immigrant” text while Yew’s play can be read as a “native” one. Whereas *Twilight* explores the inbetween-ness of American identity, *A Beautiful Country* intervenes explicitly into the master narrative of “becoming American.” The rich interplay between these works thus models the potential of dialogue to create new pathways of inquiry that refuse easy closure.

Any critical examination of dialogue must come to terms both with its transformative potential and its necessary limitations as an always-unfinished process. In the case of the post-identity theatre that I have examined here, we cannot assume that dialogic performance necessarily improves race relations in any material way. How, after all, could we know if *Twilight* actually succeeded in

bridging cultural differences for the people of Los Angeles or America at large? And how could we know if *A Beautiful Country* helped to close the gap between Asian America and America or create a dialogic understanding of immigrant experience for its audiences? As Wood reminds us:

... dialogue does not necessarily idealize or seek common ground. The search for (and belief in) common ground may thwart, rather than facilitate, genuine dialogue, because almost inevitably the dominant culture defines what ground is common or legitimate. Rather than the reproductive goal of finding “common ground” or “resolving differences,” dialogue allows differences to exist without trying to resolve, overcome, synthesize, or otherwise tame them.<sup>48</sup>

In *A Beautiful Country* and *Twilight*, Yew and Smith refuse to assume a common ground but instead invite the spectator to enter into ongoing, enormously challenging investigations of culture, community, and identity. So often in contemporary discourse about diversity, “identity,” “dialogue,” and “community” function as tainted words, co-opted in the service of a facile and apolitical multiculturalism. A genuinely critical and open-ended dialogue about race is thus all too rare, given the countless ways in which dialogue can go wrong. In his reflections on the lack of constructive dialogue across the United States/Mexico border, performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña puts forth the following definition/caveat: “Dialogue is the opposite of national security, neighborhood watch, racial paranoia, aesthetic protectionism, sentimental nationalism, ethnocentrism, and monolinguality.”<sup>49</sup> Smith and Yew seem to understand this well, and in the context of post-identity theatre in America, they challenge us to engage diversity through critical and potentially transformative dialogues that both perform and undermine the positions from which we speak.

## Notes

1. Sue-Ellen Case, “Comment,” *Theatre of Color*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case, *Theatre Journal* 38 (1986): 388.

2. 388.

3. The special issue of *Theatre Journal* appeared just as important scholarship across the academy began to re-think the category of “race” as a historically and socially constructed process rather than a biological reality or simple indicator of skin color. See, for example, Howard Omi and Michael Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1986) and Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Race,” *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990) 274-87.

4. Here, I in no way mean to imply that the strategies of identity-based theatre are homogenous; I acknowledge that Shange's focus on a women's community differs in important ways from Valdez's focus on a central protagonist in *Zoot Suit*. Nonetheless, both plays stage the act of self-representation in defiance of dominant cultural stereotypes.

5. The tremendous commercial success of Shange's *for colored girls* offers one example of how self-representation may lead to the creation of new stereotypes. After being celebrated for offering a window into the actual experiences of black women (and women of color, in its earliest productions in California), this play eventually came to serve as a stereotypical touchstone for black female experience. George C. Wolfe parodies parts of *for colored girls* in his play, *The Colored Museum* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985), a satirical exploration of contemporary black identity.

6. I use the term "post-identity theatre" broadly to signal a range of different performance strategies available to contemporary playwrights of color. More specific theories concerning alternatives to traditional identity politics can be found in José Muñoz's pathbreaking work on "disidentification," Karen Shimakawa's analysis of "mimetic abjection," and Ryan M. Claycomb's recent discussion of "staged oral history." See José Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002), and Ryan M. Claycomb, "(Ch)oral History: Documentary Theatre, the Communal Subject and Progressive Politics," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 17.2 (2003): 95-121.

7. Julia T. Wood, foreword, *Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies*, eds. Rob Anderson, Leslie A. Baxter, and Kenneth N. Cissna (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2004) xvii.

8. Smith's physical appearance may play to her advantage in this respect. Smith has spoken of her racially ambiguous appearance and how it cost her certain roles early in her acting career because she was told by an agent and a casting director that she did not look "black" enough. This anecdote reflects the tendency to equate race with skin color in everyday life, notwithstanding the idea that race is a social construction. See Ruthe Stein, "Split Personalities: Anna Deavere Smith's Amazing One-Woman Show," *San Francisco Chronicle* 2 Jan. 1994: 19.

9. Recent events in Los Angeles, however, make clear that we cannot take for granted the ongoing support of ethnic theatre on a regional or national level. In May 2005, the Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles (which manages the Mark Taper Forum) suddenly abolished the Latino Theatre Initiative and the Asian Theatre Workshop, along with two other play development labs. The Center Theatre Group's newly appointed Artistic Director, Michael Ritchie, said that the labs were taking too long to develop their products, but one journalist speculates that the "conflict is really between opposing philosophies of what and whom theater is for." See Steven Leigh Morris, "Confrontations in a Con-Art World," *LA Weekly* 3-9 June 2005 <<http://laweekly.com/ink/05/28/theater-morris.php>>.

10. Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* (New York: Anchor, 1993) xxxviii.

11. Sonja Kuflinec, *Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theater* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2003) 9.

12. Henry Yu, "Los Angeles and American Studies in a Pacific World of Migrations," *Los Angeles and the Future of Urban Cultures*, eds. Raúl Homero Villa and George J. Sánchez, *American Quarterly*



56 (2004): 531.

13. Dorinne Kondo, "(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 52 (2000): 83.

14. Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (New York: Anchor, 1994) xxii.

15. I borrow the term "civic dialogue" with respect to Smith's work from Mary S. Strine, who defines civic dialogue as "public discussion among persons who are fundamentally different about issues of common concern." Mary S. Strine, "When is Communication Intercultural? Bakhtin, Staged Performance, and Civic Dialogue," *Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies*, eds. Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna 242.

16. 241.

17. 241.

18. Jill Dolan uses Michael Peterson's term "monopolylogue" to describe the genre of Smith's work—the theatre of one person performing multiple roles. There seems, however, something distinctive in Smith's reliance on interviews and her use of the interviewees' exact language; I would maintain that the interviews in *Twilight* hover vexingly between monologue and dialogue. See Jill Dolan, "Finding Our Feet in the Shoes of (One An) Other': Multiple Character Solo Performers and Utopian Performatives," *Modern Drama* 45 (2002): 498, and Michael Peterson, *Straight White Male: Performance Art Monologues* (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1997).

19. Smith, *Twilight* 6.

20. 28.

21. Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* xxxviii.

22. One of the most profound challenges in analyzing Smith's work is that it calls, in particularly strong ways, upon a critic's affective experience. To see Smith inhabit the persona of someone from your own ethnic community is quite different from seeing her perform the identities of "others." Jill Dolan, in her essay on the "utopian performative," refers to affect as "the most ineffable, most difficult aspect of performance to capture, to manipulate and to 'prove': how it makes people *feel*." See Dolan 497.

23. Debby Thompson, "'Is Race a Trope?': Anna Deavere Smith and the Question of Racial Performativity," *African American Review* 37 (2003): 135.

24. Smith, *Twilight* 245.

25. 248.

26. 249.

27. I experienced a flood of very mixed emotions both when viewing this scene on video and when seeing Smith perform this monologue live during an address at the University of Minnesota. The film adaptation of the play is *Twilight: Los Angeles*, dir. Mark Levin, perf. Anna Deavere Smith, PBS, 2000. The lecture/performance I attended was Anna Deavere Smith, "Snapshots: Glimpses of America in Change," The Esther Freier Endowed Lecture in Literature, The University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 15 Apr. 2005.

28. See both Dolan and Kondo for different versions of how Smith's performances might have utopian possibilities.

29. Smith, "Snapshots: Glimpses of America in Change."

30. Smith, *Twilight* 254.

31. David Drake, "Fusion," *Lambda Book Report* 7.4 (1998): 6-8. Qtd. in Heath A. Diehl, "Beyond the Silk Road: Staging a Queer Asian America in Chay Yew's *Porcelain*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 37 (2004): 149.

32. Yen Le Espiritu, *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2003) 70-71.

33. Chay Yew, *Porcelain and A Language of Their Own: Two Plays* (New York: Grove, 1997). Here, I in no way mean to imply that sexuality is somehow "outside" the sphere of Asian American-ness; however, until recently, scholars have neglected to investigate the intersections of sexuality—especially homosexuality—with race in the formation of Asian American identity. An important book-length study in this growing field is David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001).

34. For the past fifteen years, scholars have been exploring how the term "Asian American" refers not to a coherent identity but rather to a site of socially and historically produced differences. The seminal essay that sparked this generation of scholarship was Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," *Diaspora* 1 (1991): 24-44. Lowe subsequently revised the essay as Chapter 3 of her book, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996).

35. In plays first produced in the early 1970s, Frank Chin stakes a claim both to the ethnic enclave of Chinatown and to the American West. See Frank Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman and The Year of the Dragon: Two Plays by Frank Chin* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1981).

36. Chay Yew, *A Beautiful Country, The Hyphenated American: Four Plays by Chay Yew* (New York: Grove, 2002): 170.

37. Sonja Kufinec's book on Cornerstone Theater offers a fascinating account of how this company both creates and destabilizes ideas of community through its productions.

38. Yew, *A Beautiful Country* 178.

39. 216.

40. David Román, "Visa Denied," *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*, ed. Joseph A. Boone (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2000) 352.

41. Yew, *A Beautiful Country* 226.

42. 232-33.

43. See Román 356.

44. Yew, *A Beautiful Country* 274.

45. The contradictory status of Asians as "forever foreign" or "model minority" is examined by sociologist Mia Tuan in *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (Rutgers: Rutgers UP, 1999).

46. Yew, *A Beautiful Country* 275.

47. Smith, *Twilight* 255.

48. Wood, xvii-xviii.

49. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "The Multicultural Paradigm: An Open Letter to the National Arts Community," *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin/o America*, eds. Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas (Durham: Duke UP, 1994) 20.

