Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies
12 (2023) 29-46

# David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face*: Fictional Autoethnography and a Parody on Racialization

***By Quan Manh Ha and JM Christiansen***

David Henry Hwang, a prolific and acute second-generation Chinese American playwright, has published many plays that often center on the fluidity of racial identity, as well as various aspects of the Chinese American experience. Concerning the racial themes and issues in Hwang's drama, William C. Boles, Rollins College professor and founder of the David Henry Hwang Society, states that most of Hwang's plays explore "historical and contemporary biases against Asian Americans" (223). His most renowned and widely discussed play in the United States is *M. Butterfly*, which premiered in 1988 and was adapted into a film in 1993. Ten years after *M. Butterfly* was staged, Hwang wrote a play titled *Yellow Face*, which was made into a film in 2013. While *M. Butterfly* has gained substantial attention from critics in terms of published scholarly exegesis, *Yellow Face* has not, although both plays are frequently taught in courses on Asian American literature and cultural studies.

In *Yellow Face*, a dramaturgically inventive work, Hwang combines multiple narrative forms into a plot that blurs the distinction among social science, social commentary, and fiction. *Yellow Face* is simultaneously self-mocking and self-examining in its representation of the Asian American experience in theatre. It is both a comedy of errors and a biting cultural commentary. In the play, Hwang[1] appears as a character named DHH who is at the center of a highly embarrassing racial controversy in the American theatre. Thus, it is necessary to employ the term *autoethnography* to interpret *Yellow Face*. According to social scientist Carolyn Ellis et al., "[a]utoethnography is an

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[1] In this article, DHH refers to the fictional character David Henry Hwang in *Yellow Face*, and Hwang refers to the real-world playwright.

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ISSN: 2154-2171

approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (1). By placing his character DHH as the protagonist in the cultural exploration of a fictional series of events, Hwang, on the one hand, abandons conventional theatrical forms and creates fictitious autoethnodrama, a term coined to describe a narrative form that simultaneously is fictitious in plot, autoethnographic in nature, and dramatic in structure; on the other hand, he joins the plot himself in order to investigate the performativity of an Asian American identity.

## An Overview of *Yellow Face*

*Yellow Face* begins with the 1991 controversy surrounding the casting of Jonathan Pryce as the Engineer in *Miss Saigon,* a musical by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil. Pryce, a white Welsh man, famously played the Eurasian Engineer (of mixed French and Vietnamese ancestry) in the United Kingdom before the musical transferred to America's Broadway. In *Yellow Face*, Hwang documents his part in the uproar; as DHH furiously writes letters to protest a white actor playing the Asian role. DHH proceeds to write a play about this experience, titled *Face Value* (an actual play Hwang wrote in 1993), in which DHH mistakenly casts a white actor named Marcus in an Asian role. At first, DHH tries to cover up his mistake, coaching Marcus into deliberately misidentifying himself as Eurasian. Then, DHH fires Marcus, who, instead of henceforth identifying himself as a white actor, becomes an Asian celebrity, starring as the King in a revival of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I*.

In *Yellow Face*, DHH also faces complex racial and political issues with his father, HYH (the initials of Hwang's real father, Henry Yuan Hwang). HYH, whose concept of the American Dream differs starkly from his son's, is accused of acting as a spy in the United States for the Chinese government. Ultimately, these subplots converge as DHH convinces Marcus, also accused of spying, to out himself as white in order to undermine the US government's case against the members of the Asian American community who, like HYH, have been wrongfully accused primarily due to their ethnicity. Marcus's ability to switch his racial identity so freely resonates with literary critic Caroline Porter's observations: "We become racialized by a largely covert, neither completely conscious nor completely unconscious, process. During this process, we interpret cultural ideologies, embody them, and wear our bodies accordingly" (15). *Yellow Face* is a complicated and form-defying play in part because some of the events in *Yellow Face* are true to life (in the sense of having actually happened to Hwang and other members of the Asian American community), even while much of the story is a fictional construction, built entirely from Hwang's imagination.

Critical reception of *Yellow Face* has been varied since its 2007 world premiere at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, the play won an Obie Award for playwriting and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2008. Winyan Soo Hoo, who writes for the *Washington Post*, notices the play's humor, referring to it as "acidly funny." Ben Brantley, of the *New York Times*, states that the play is "erratically entertaining." Behind the humor, however, is Hwang's acerbic cultural commentary. "'Yellow Face' will make you laugh," writes reviewer Susan Brall for *MD Theatre Guide*, "but it will also make you look inside yourself to see your own prejudices and false perceptions." Probably because *Yellow Face* is both engaging comedy and penetrating recrimination, critics have noted that the play is not rooted in a consistent, conventional form or style. For instance, Brantley remarks that the script "suffers from its own artistic identity crisis," and Jane Horwitz, who writes for the *Washington Post*, observes that the play "is constantly shifting in plot and tone."

## *Yellow Face* and Fictional Autoethnography

It is no surprise that critics have struggled to classify exactly what *Yellow Face* is and does as a piece of drama. Hwang's storytelling borrows from many theatrical forms; in other words, it is a kind of dramatic shapeshifter. Some sections of the play resemble an objective historical record, as when Hwang documents his own involvement in the controversy surrounding Pryce in *Miss Saigon*, while other sections are outright farcical, as when DHH is hired to consult with a production trying to be "more Asian" (Hwang 46). Still, in other moments, *Yellow Face* is a brilliant political satire. In order to gain a better understanding of the play's hybridity, it is important to explore how *Yellow Face* responds to Hwang's earlier play *Face Value*. The 1991 *Miss Saigon* controversy that opens *Yellow Face* actually began in 1989, when *Miss Saigon* premiered on London's West End. In *Miss Saigon*, Pryce plays the role of the Engineer, a disreputable pimp who prostitutes the play's female protagonist. Pryce's performance as the Engineer won him both an Olivier Award and a Tony Award for Best Actor in a Musical. In 1991, the West End production of *Miss Saigon* transferred to Broadway, erupting a controversy within both the Actor's Equity Association (AEA) and the American media concerning Pryce's casting. The casting of a white actor as the Engineer was vehemently protested because "making up a white man to look Vietnamese was 'an affront to the Asian community'" (Bunbury). The AEA ultimately ceased its objection and allowed the production to proceed. In his book *Race and Resistance*, Viet Thanh Nguyen notes that "Asian American intellectuals, artists included, have rarely found it problematic to speak out against anti-Asian racism in American art, most memorably in protests directed against the Broadway musical *Miss Saigon*" (9). Thus, it can be inferred that Hwang wrote this play to continue and extend the discourse on race and racialization in Asian American arts and letters.

Pryce's casting reinforced a Eurocentric artistic standard that ultimately is rooted in white superiority. Historically, minstrelsy, a racist theatrical or cinematic form, was founded by white American men in the early nineteenth century. According to literary critic Karen Cronacher, minstrel shows were "traditionally written and performed by white men" who imitated African American dialects to degrade black men and objectify black women (178). Similarly, yellowface, as Vickie Rozell elucidates, refers to "the practice of Caucasian actors donning yellow makeup and artificially changing their looks to make them appear 'Oriental' to comically insult Asians." An earlier example of this practice is seen in the casting of a Caucasian actor to play Charlie Chan, a Chinese detective in a series of films set in Honolulu. In his protests of Pryce's casting, Hwang was responding to yellowface: a white man playing an Asian character. Two years later, in 1993, inspired by "the intensity, vehemence, and anger" of the debate focused on *Miss Saigon*, Hwang wrote his play *Face Value*, which closed in rehearsal and became an "infamous flop" (Maher). In writing *Face Value*, Hwang aimed to explore the notion of performative race. In other words, race is a social construct, and thus it is subject to destabilization and denaturalization. Although *Face Value* was a debacle, Hwang was not discouraged from elaborating on the topic of performative race further. Jack Viertel reveals that Hwang remained convinced that the conversation on race needed to find its way onto the American stage, and thus the playwright spent more than a decade imagining how to fix *Face Value*. Ultimately, in 2007, Hwang premiered an entirely new play, *Yellow Face*, which addresses many of the same issues and which was inspired by the same events. There is a strong nexus between *Face Value* and *Yellow Face*, especially noting that both titles feature the word *face*. Whereas the former was loosely inspired by the vitriolic response to Pryce's casting in *Miss Saigon*, the latter documents Hwang's personal involvement in the *Miss Saigon* controversy. According to William C. Boles and Linda Wagner-Martin, both of Hwang's plays use "mistaken racial identity" as a "comic through line." *Yellow Face* is widely considered, however, to be a stronger script, and it "successfully accomplished what [Hwang] was trying to do in *Face Value*" (74–77).

In her 1993 article in the *Seattle Times*, Misha Berson quoted Hwang's statement about the defects of *Face Value*: "I suspect that the audience just didn't believe in the characters. The farce wasn't grounded enough in psychological reality." In *Yellow Face*, Hwang deals directly with this criticism of *Face Value*. Rather than constructing an entirely fictional situation and set of characters, as he did in *Face Value*, Hwang roots *Yellow Face* in "a trio of sour real-life events," including the *Miss Saigon* controversy, the fiasco of *Face Value*, and the prevalent stereotype of Asian Americans as the Yellow Peril in the late 1990s (Rich vii–viii). *Yellow Face* attempts to ameliorate the lack of credibility in *Face Value* by employing the genre of stage documentary, also known as documentary theatre or docudrama—a theatrical form grounded in real events and real speech (Viertel). The stage documentary form is characterized by intertextuality: it borrows from extant text and speech acts (documents, interviews, media, and so on) and amalgamates them to tell a nominally nonfiction story about real characters. Boles observes that, according to the form's proponents, it offers "an unfiltered look at the subject matter" (218). He also points out that in *Yellow Face*, Hwang employs some of the standard conventions of documentary theatre to demonstrate "the veracity of the presented events" (224). For instance, Hwang quotes directly from newspaper headlines and political speeches, uses concise, present-tense narration, and delineates pithy montages in various scenes.

However, the term *stage documentary* is insufficient to encapsulate fully the hybrid form of *Yellow Face*. Hwang describes the script as "a mix of fact and fiction . . . about a character based on me" (Piepenburg). In this statement, he articulates two crucial ways in which *Yellow Face* deviates from the prevailing approaches to documentary theatre. First, while several of the events in *Yellow Face* are based on real-life events, much of the substance of the play is fictional. Hwang invents an alternate narrative surrounding the production, and the eventual failure, of *Face Value*. In his fictitious plot, Marcus Dahlman, a white actor, is cast as an Asian lead in *Face Value* due to an embarrassing mix-up. The fictional confusion and subsequent cover-up surrounding Marcus's casting bleed into the factual situations explored in *Yellow Face*. Hwang does little to mediate the amalgamation of fiction and fact. To the contrary, in fact, he writes the fictional scenario using the same stage documentary techniques that he uses for his real-world events, inventing false headlines and quotations when he chooses. Boles remarks:

> This fluidity between truth and fiction was an effective device in providing a convincing factual world . . .. While there might be doubts about how Hwang's audience was swayed to believe the veracity of some of the more ridiculous elements of the play . . . the audience would weigh those moments against the believable, fact based set-up of the rest of the play. Since the rules of the theatrical world have already been grounded in fact, whatever followed was also processed as being part of that same world as well. (226)

In their article titled "Introduction: Theorizing Asian American Fiction," Stephen Hong Sohn et al. quote Richard Walsh, who states that there are fictional elements in the nonfiction genre and vice versa; thus no fiction is purely fictional and no nonfiction is entirely nonfictional. They conclude, "For Asian Americanists, the line between fiction and non-fiction (or even history) has consistently been hazy, and certainly the critical models the field has generally followed demonstrate the importance of reference and verifiability to the fictional world" (8). Their profound observations are relevant to the world that Hwang creates onstage. It is a world comprising its own truth, where certainty is an unnecessary obstacle to analysis and exploration. By fusing truth with fiction in *Yellow Face*, Hwang intended to situate the audience in the cosmos of uncertainty where the authentic and the unauthentic are intertwined (Boles and Wagner-Martin 104). It is only in this state of uncertainty that the audience can set aside their concern about the "facts" and focus on the message that Hwang is communicating in *Yellow Face*. In Maher's interview with Hwang, he states that "not knowing what is true and what is invented" is conducive to "the fun of the play."

The second departure from traditional documentary theatre is how Hwang situates himself as a central character in the action. Hwang appears as a character in *Yellow Face*, and he is present throughout the play. Therefore, at the heart of the plot of *Yellow Face* is the author himself. It is DHH's involvement in the *Miss Saigon* controversy that begins *Yellow Face*. DHH's father is defamed in America's anti-Asian paranoia. Humorously and ironically, it is DHH himself who (mis)casts Marcus in his own play *Face Value*. The experiences of Hwang, as a second-generation Chinese American public figure and artist, offer fertile ground for the scrutinization of racial identity, which had so disastrously misfired in *Face Value*. Boles and Wagner-Martin elucidate:

> For a playwright who has throughout his career been fascinated with the subject of identity in its many facets (Asian, Chinese, American, Asian American, Chinese American, male, female, religious, and familial), in *Yellow Face* Hwang explores for the first time the concept of identity as it relates to what he knows best—himself. . . . This is the first time he has placed himself directly within the play as its main character. (106)

As DHH, Hwang relives true events from his life by contemplating their significance, detailing their sequencing, and placing them within an intended narrative. This is characteristic of the signature autobiographical form in which an author "retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences" (Ellis 3). Boles points out that both Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, which "rely on a stand-in character for the author as he revisits painful autobiographical memories," had a significant influence on Hwang's *Yellow Face* (216). Employing significant aspects of the autobiographical genre, therefore, is but another factor in the hybrid nature of the play.

It is the coalescence of documentary theatre, fictitious narrative, and autobiography that has led to the challenge of classifying *Yellow Face* properly. Brantley calls it "a collage assembled in haste" and describes the shifting tones as a kind of "whiplash." Theatre reviewers, scholars, and Hwang himself have used a variety of terms to describe *Yellow Face* and how it works as drama. For instance, in a statement in *The Guardian*, and then in the play itself, Hwang calls his work a "stage mockumentary" and an "autobiographical play," respectively (63). Brantley calls *Yellow Face* a "cultural self-portrait," and Keith Appler categorizes it as a "self-satirical retrospective" (223). Brall refers to it as a "farce," and Rich "a Pirandellian comedy" (vii). Boles labels it as a "documentary drama" (223) while Maher categorizes it as an "unreliable memoir." Given the difficulty in categorizing and, thus, analyzing *Yellow Face*, it is crucial to examine its unique, hybrid theatrical form with reference to the definition of *autoethnography*.

Autoethnography is a technique primarily utilized by social scientists who focus their research and articulate their findings on a more personal, less detached subject: themselves. The form hybridizes defining traits of both autobiography and ethnography. The former situates the author's self at the center of a narrative that draws upon events from the author's past. The latter analyzes a culture's "relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences," describing them in a mode that lays claim to objectivity (Ellis et al. 3). Autoethnography, as an amalgam, situates the researcher's self at the center of a narrative of a cultural exploration that admits to the subjectivity that all authors rely upon, even as they aim at factual objectivity.

In her article "Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis," Tami Spry defines autoethnography as "self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts" (710). It is the positioning of the authorial self, or the recognition and empowerment of that self, as an active, vital participant in cultural experiences that characterizes the nature of autoethnography. Thus, one goal of autoethnography is to undermine and performatively counter "the myth of the researcher as a detached head," giving autoethnographic research and writing its inherently personal dimension (720). The self is not outside the subject: of course, the self is involved in the cultural research and analysis as an observer but also, importantly, as an *object* of the cultural research and analysis. Hwang's two plays, *Face Value* and *Yellow Face*, reveal a transition in his authorial perspective from the autobiographical and ethnographical modes of writing to the autoethnographical mode. In *Face Value*, Hwang, as a playwright, stays completely outside the narrative and the cultural exploration, whereas in *Yellow Face*, Hwang becomes an active, vital participant.

Autoethnography is a method of inquiry, as well as a method of research presentation. Within the context of a culture, the self is studied as both observer and subject. Therefore, the long-established demarcations between *factual* and *fictional* representation or *objective* and *subjective* writing become blurred into amalgamations of the classifications. Such factors as identity, belief, and tradition can be critically analyzed on the basis of the researcher's lived experience. In their autoethnographic study of new executives, Steve Kempster and James Steward state that autoethnography requires us not only "to explore the interface between culture and self" but also "to write about ourselves," because the self functions as "both [the] inquirer and respondent" (210).

Most of Hwang's plays are primarily concerned with the multifaceted Asian American identity, but in *Yellow Face*, he shifts the reflection toward himself. Hwang admits to blurring the lines separating traditional categories of writing. Representing DHH was not a purely factual or autobiographical exercise. In an interview with Maher, Hwang states, "I felt free to make him just a character." *Yellow Face* also exhibits Hwang's "personal investment in the events that he details" (Boles 224). As noted above, *Yellow Face* deviates from other documentary theatre pieces and from his previous plays.

Hwang's protagonist and self-representation, DHH, is not simply a narrator describing the action or an observer commenting on the action. DHH is, in fact, an actively participating self in the drama. Therefore, the character DHH is subject to the same observation, analysis, and inquiry as the culture he inhabits. "I'm a writer," DHH says to the audience in the ending of *Yellow Face*, "everything's about me" (Hwang 68). Interestingly, American studies scholar Dorinne Kondo notes that Hwang returns to this self-referential, self-examining mode of drama, autoethnography, in his most recent work—a musical written in collaboration with Jeanine Tesori called *Soft Power* in which the Hwang avatar DHH reappears (265).

Through his fictional story about DHH's mistake in the casting of Marcus (which mirrors stories concerning the casting of Pryce), the failure of *Face Value*, and the anti–Asian American sentiments in the 1990s, Hwang also investigates his own cultural identity. When Marcus is confronted by DHH over the yellowface, which Marcus has decided to take well beyond his role in *Face Value*, Marcus defends himself by clinging to the "Chinese concept of 'face,'" stating that "the face we choose to show the world—reveals who we really are" (Hwang 43). Later in the play, DHH clarifies that *Yellow Face* is by no means an investigation of "face" as it applies to Marcus (a fictional invention) but as it applies to DHH himself:

> DHH: Okay. Years ago, I discovered a face—one I could live better and more fully than anything I'd ever tried. But as the years went by, my face became my mask. And I became just another actor—running around in yellow face. (68)

In the final moments of the play, Hwang distills the ways in which *Yellow Face* is truly self-inquiry, acknowledging the fictional addition of Marcus to the story and placing the playwright at the center of the analysis. DHH ends the play with this statement: "And I go back to work, searching for my own face" (70). The final line of the play could be interpreted as follows: Hwang positions himself as a playwright searching for his own cultural identity, but also as part of a larger commentary on the "serious ethnic issues facing Asian Americans in the United States" (Boles 224).

Although DHH in *Yellow Face* represents the author himself, DHH receives no favoritism. The playwright simultaneously critiques DHH's reputation-protecting treatment of Marcus and reveals flaws in DHH's understanding of his own cultural identity. For instance, one character tells DHH, "You used to stand for something . . .. Now, it's . . . like you've turned into some kind of fake Asian" (Hwang 49). In his interview with Hwang, Viertel remarks that how DHH holds, performs, and conceptualizes his own cultural identity in *Yellow Face* is a fictional, narrative manifestation of Hwang's journey through issues of racial identity in a post-racial society within the larger context of the Asian American experience of which he is a part.

In his article "Double-Talk," published in the *New Yorker*, Hilton Als observes that Hwang himself is "both at home and not at home in the Asian and white worlds that he writes about." In Hwang's narrative fiction about himself, the very methods by which these two worlds are defined come into question. For instance, in *Yellow Face*, DHH tells a group of students, "Nowadays, we really don't 'all look alike,'" and in his explanation of how Marcus, a white man, could possibly be Asian, DHH states, "Looks don't matter any longer" (Hwang 31). Moreover, when DHH later vehemently argues that Marcus is "one hundred percent white," a friend tells DHH, "no one's Asian enough for you" (45). The play challenges conventional understandings of racial identity, especially in using the terms *Asian* and *white*, when they are contextualized within diverse communities: Can these terms be deconstructed and destabilized? The tension that Hwang experiences in his own identity becomes both a subject of *Yellow Face* and a focus of inquiry, manifesting in both Marcus and DHH.

Throughout *Yellow Face*, Hwang satirizes Asian stereotypes. He acknowledges their presence and their impact upon his lived experience as a Chinese American. Marcus's mother claims that "this is America—where race shouldn't matter" (46), but this ideal does not collate with the social reality. Her remark demonstrates her color blindness, a belief that all people are treated equally regardless of their racial or ethnic status.[2] This can be a dangerous belief because, according to critical race theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, it reflects a liberal approach to the racial problems in America: if racism is institutionalized in all social operations and embedded in our consciousness, minority groups are always kept in "subordinate positions." Therefore, they suggest that only rigorous "color-conscious efforts" can "ameliorate misery" and injustice suffered by people of color (22). Unarguably, *Yellow Face* expresses Hwang's severe skepticism of color blindness because race plays an important role in the construction of all major characters' identities in the play and in American social institutions. They are singled out, misjudged, and profiled by their race. Therefore, according to Hwang, the "contradictory ideas"—that we live in a "post-racial society" but "racist things still happen"—are what make *Yellow Face* "necessary" (Viertel). As the audience watches DHH grapple with the complicated reality of defining his identity and his culture for himself and his career, they also witness Hwang's own "vexed relationship to Asian American identity at the birth of a new century" (Appler 216). The personal and cultural dilemmas are given analysis, but they are left unresolved in the play.

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[2] Her naive belief contradicts W. E. B. Du Bois's statement in his famous book *The Souls of Black Folk*: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (15). His statement remains valid in the twenty-first century.

In practice, autoethnography is a method of qualitative research. Although autoethnographers often use such artistic tools as poetry, narrative prose, music, and drama to combine their research and self-examination, ultimately autoethnography is not an artistic form in and of itself. In their book *Composing Ethnography*, Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner wrestle with the form and function of autoethnography. In a dialogue between the two authors, presented as the introduction to their book, Ellis says that she wants to be a storyteller who "uses narrative strategies to transport readers into experiences and make them feel as well as think" (18). However, they argue that the "storytelling" aspect present in most autoethnography can go too far:

> CAROLYN: . . .when you say words like *invent* or *construct*, orthodox social scientists get very upset.
>
> ART: Yes, they think we're giving them license to turn serious, systematic inquiry into frivolous relativism where anything goes, that we've lost all respect for facts. (20)

They argue that autoethnographic writing should be grounded in research and analysis and not solely in "make-believe" (21). While the autoethnographic presentation of science can and *should* be artful, that "doesn't mean art and science become one and the same activity" (22).

In *Yellow Face*, Hwang positions, describes, and analyzes a version of himself—a self "as it intersects with a cultural context" (Ellis et al. 7), but this does not deal with the problem of the fictional elements in the play. *Yellow Face* does not present ethnographic research in an immediately recognizable way. Rather, it presents something more akin to Hwang's conception of a truthful ethnographic portrait through a fictional representation of that portrait. As stated earlier, Ellis and Bochner insist that autoethnography, while presented artistically, must remain a product of science and thus an inherently nonfiction form. Nevertheless, there is precedent for a fictional variation of the autoethnographic form. Both autobiography and ethnography offer examples of fictional realization: fictional autobiography (Newton 138) and fictional ethnography (Rinehart 201). In their book on mockumentaries, Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight note that mockumentaries use fiction to "ask their audience to reflect on the validity of the cultural or political position of their subjects" (131). Fiction has long been recognized as a means to elicit truthful reflections "as an outgrowth of discovery of truths based on the motivations of characters, the story line (or plot), and the interaction of the elements of the story" (Rinehart 204).

In *Yellow Face*, Hwang produces those same "aesthetic and evocative . . . descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience" that researchers "seek to produce" (Ellis et al. 5). Marcus, the fictional white character in *Yellow Face*, does not represent the kind of make-believe that Ellis and Bochner fear. Rather, Marcus represents "a projection of DHH's doubts about his own Asian American identity" (Appler 220). Hwang does not use the tools of the social scientist to reveal and analyze his cultural experience, but he uses the tools available to a playwright to accomplish his autoethnographic goals. Therefore, *Yellow Face* can be classified as a *fictitious* autoethnography. If pure autoethnography included fictitious narratives, there would be no need to specify "fictitious" as a descriptive designation for a type of autoethnography.

## A Parody on Racialization

If *Yellow Face* is autoethnographic in *form*, then it is important to ask what its *function* is. In other words, what commentary does Hwang offer by means of his cultural self-exploration? As *Yellow Face* is a reimagined version of *Face Value*, both plays deal with "the challenging question of what makes someone authentically ethnic" (Boles and Wagner-Martin 4). In an interview with PP Wong, Hwang expresses the tension he experiences when asked what it means to be an ethnic writer: "I felt my race became something of a handicap because certain segments of the theatrical and literary communities would pigeonhole me as an 'ethnic' writer, which at that time, implied my work was necessarily limited, in terms of audience and 'universality.'" This tension is evident in *Yellow Face* as DHH's own Asian identity is dissected and reassembled. Two aspects of Asian American identity that Hwang examines in *Yellow Face* are the perpetual foreigner stereotype and the divergent lived experiences of Asian Americans.

As a contemporary Asian American author, Hwang is critically concerned about the Asian stereotyping he has witnessed in America. In a 2002 *New York Times* article, he states, "Much of my work has involved a search for authenticity," and "if I could discover more truthful images to replace the stereotypical ones of my youth, perhaps I could also begin to understand my own identity." It is worth noting how Hwang uses the language of autoethnography here: he explores cultural images as a means to understand his own cultural identity. Yellowface casting, which is common in American entertainment history, undoubtedly contributed to the stereotyping Hwang recalls. Appler defines yellowface as "minstrelsy, a cross-ethnic practice of ethnic parody and identification" (216). In *Yellow Face*, Hwang turns the parody on its head, quite literally parodying the parodies—a technique he employs again in the more recent play *Soft Power*. Hwang gives substances to many Asian stereotypes, bringing them to life on stage and then mocking, criticizing, and finally discounting them. Therefore, Hwang emphasizes that, to borrow Nguyen's argument, the battle against anti-Asian racism and intra-ethnic prejudice "makes us [Asian Americans] all Asian, rather than singularly ethnic," and Asian Americans as a cohesive group are in a "*defensive* posture" (Nguyen 9; emphasis in original).

Throughout American history, Asian Americans have far too often been stereotyped as inassimilable perpetual foreigners. In other words, they are "often perceived as strangers" harboring ill intent toward white culture, American government, and the American Dream (Kim et al. 290). For Chinese Americans, this stereotype negates their aspirations to become fully recognized American citizens. Iris Chang, author of *The Chinese in America*, states that since the Chinese first arrived in the United States, they have always attempted to pursue and achieve the American Dream. At the peak of gold rush immigration in the mid-nineteenth century, thousands of them "scrambled for gold in the dirt of California" (390). Then, they nurtured a strong desire for land ownership, business ownership, and educational opportunities for their children. Chang adds, "And like the descendants of other immigrant groups, their children have come to call the United States home" (390). Ironically, Chinese Americans have been viewed as plausible "threats to national security" and to the American labor market as well as to the racial purity of whiteness (Hsu 5; Takaki 81–100). In his book *Yellow: Race in America beyond Black and White*, Frank H. Wu observes that "everyone with an Asian face who lives in America is afflicted by the perpetual foreigner syndrome" and that white Americans often consider Asian Americans not full-fledged Americans (79).

Hwang has long been concerned about how this stereotype negatively impacts employment equity and earnest representation of Asians in media (Hoo). In *Yellow Face*, Hwang takes the stereotype to task by pointing out its ludicrous but apparently logical conclusions. The play's characters DHH and HYH experience their American identity in different ways, and the resulting tension has defined many of their encounters. Nevertheless, when HYH is accused of spying for the Chinese government, DHH tells a reporter:

> DHH: You know, you could've accused my dad of a half dozen other things and I would've gone, "Okay, well, maybe." But disloyalty to America? A country he loves, that's been his home for the last fifty years? How come, with Asians, the charge that always makes headlines is also the least original? (Hwang 62)

In this satisfying reversal in DHH's perspective, the very cause of the tension that heretofore has defined the conversations between DHH and HYH becomes a method by which Hwang pokes holes in the perpetual foreigner stereotype. The audience has witnessed HYH's deep love for America and American culture throughout the play, which makes the accusations of disloyalty leveled against HYH especially offensive and racist. By addressing this xenophobic accusation in this play, Hwang shows his awareness of how Chinese Americans have been perceived in the United States as cunning, malicious, untrustworthy spies working for communist China. Historian Erika Lee, in her book *The Making of Asian America: A History*, points out that Chinese Americans' loyalty to the United States has always been questioned, and this toxic skepticism occurs even nowadays, when many Chinese American scholars, experts, and scientists are "targeted" by the FBI and "unjustifiably accused of passing information to the Chinese" (384). In *Yellow Face*, Hwang protests this stereotype, suggesting that when Asian Americans are perceived categorically as disloyal strangers, they cannot be perceived as individuals constructing individual American identities. The perpetual foreigner stereotype is only one point of reference in Hwang's cross-ethnic parody, but it also is yet another form of yellowface.

Hwang takes this element of parody to the extreme in the fictional Marcus. Because Marcus has publicly claimed a false Asian identity, he too is swept up in accusations of espionage. Leah, his romantic partner, contacts DHH late in the play to ask him to help Marcus escape the legal charges he faces for making certain financial contributions—contributions that are only suppositional and resulting from Marcus's claim to be Asian. DHH responds with jovial schadenfreude, enjoying the consequences Marcus has reaped for intentionally misidentifying himself, but Leah pushes back, asking, "Asians? Accused of being evil foreigners? This is exactly the kind of shit they always throw at us" (Hwang 49). Both DHH and Leah affirm that perpetual foreigner stereotyping is a historical reality, applied generally to all Asian Americans. In the specific situation involving Marcus, it becomes clear that the stereotype is so pervasive and ubiquitous that it has been applied even to a white American simply because he has claimed to be Asian. In this way, Hwang parodies this stereotype, which is neither acceptable to Asian Americans nor substantiated by their actions. It is an assumption imposed by the imaginings of the dominant white culture attempting to distance themselves from the "otherness" of Asian Americans. Thus, the stereotype is a perverse reflex of yellowfacing.

Divergent cultural experiences clash throughout the play. DHH, struggling to define his own cultural identity, comes into conflict with nearly every other character in the play. He vehemently contests assertions made by Broadway producers, sinister reporters, and even an ex-girlfriend. During these exchanges, Hwang works out his own conflicting thoughts about his racial identity and his place in America. Apart from the fictitious Marcus, there is no character in the play with whom DHH spars more often than his father, HYH. In the combative, often lengthy exchanges between DHH and HYH, Hwang explores two radically different views on cultural identity in America. Hwang's own experience with his real-life parents informs his commentary. Though he was a child of Chinese immigrants living in America, Hwang did not "attribute any significance to being Chinese because he and his sisters were not raised with that mindset" (Boles and Wagner-Martin 3). Hwang has a different experience of his developing racial identity in American society than do his parents, especially given Hwang's relationship with the American entertainment industry.

Hwang lived the generational divide between new American immigrants and their children, and so his fictionalized avatar, DHH, must contend with the temporal hiatus as well. HYH is a first-generation American immigrant who attempts to embrace his sense of American culture fully. HYH cannot grasp his son's second-generation experience of America and American racism. "This is the land of opportunity," HYH tells

DHH, even as DHH is fighting the yellowface casting of Pryce in *Miss Saigon* (Hwang 14). For HYH, the fact of the musical's popularity has personal significance. The story is a "big hit" because it exemplifies an immigrant experience that speaks to him and others like him but fails to represent him properly:

> HYH: You don't know how much people want to come to America. . . . When I got here, I kept on pushing. Until one day, after I started the bank and it became a success, I looked around, at my office on the thirty-ninth floor, my house in the swankiest part of San Marino . . . I thought, now, I am finally living my real life—here in America. (16)

While DHH protests the racist implications in the casting of the lead actor in *Miss Saigon*, HYH praises an Asian character who wants to come to America. DHH questions the fictional portrayal of Asians in America in general, whereas HYH sees an echo of his own lived experience and identifies in the casting of the lead performer a problem that is "real" (16). Between the father and the son, a Chinese immigrant and a US-born Asian American, priorities of truthful ethnic representation have shifted.

It is not that Hwang seeks either to discredit HYH's understanding of the *Miss Saigon* story or to elevate DHH's. Hwang does not say that one or the other is right, but rather he attempts an evocative, autoethnographic exploration of divergent lived experiences. In capturing this familial division, Hwang notes the gulf between generations of Asian American immigrants and their sense of identity in America. The one seeks to become an American while the other seeks to be an Asian American.

## Conclusion

In *Yellow Face*, Hwang becomes an autoethnographer, not by virtue of becoming a social scientist but by virtue of pursuing the same goal as the social scientist who is doing autoethnography. In her autoethnographic novel about autoethnography, Carolyn Ellis writes that autoethnographers "look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience and then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (37). *Yellow Face* demonstrates Hwang's ability to employ both this cultural "wide angle lens" and the "vulnerable self." He explores not only the larger relationship between American culture and Asian American identity but also the personal experience of his search for his own identity. In particular, Hwang parodies the perpetual foreigner stereotype to highlight its failed logic and to paint it as another form of yellowface. Creating an autoethnographic plot allows Hwang to articulate his own racial explorations as fact and fiction, which should require audiences to arrive at more questions than answers. Asian Americans are not defined by homogeneity, as the

American media so often assumes. Indeed, they are unique individuals whose relationships to their American or Asian American identities are personal and diverse. *Yellow Face* is about "your sense of self—your identity. And identity [comprises] a number of different things" (Hoo). *Yellow Face* succeeds because Hwang does not spare himself in his analysis of the complexity of even his own racial identity. Theatre artists, while not social scientists, should mark how Hwang, like a traditional autoethnographer, avoids the problem of the detached, armchair expert writing from a vantage point of idées fixes. He makes himself a subject of commentary and, in doing so, encourages the audience to explore their own relationship with race and identity.

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