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On Teaching Kim's Convenience: Asian American Studies, Asian Canadian Studies, and the Politics of Race in Asian Canadian Theatre and Performance Studies

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Article abstract

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On Teaching *Kim's Convenience*: Asian American Studies, Asian Canadian Studies, and the Politics of Race in Asian Canadian Theatre and Performance Studies

COLLEEN KIM DANIHER

This article offers a critical overview and rationale for why and to what ends Daniher put a comparative Asian North American method into practice in her classroom on Asian American Theatre and Performance Studies at Brown University in Spring 2016. In particular, Daniher focuses on pairing Ins Choi's play-text *Kim's Convenience* (2011) alongside a viewing of the made-for-PBS broadcast of Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (2001) in order to broach the topic of anti-Black racism in both Canada and the US in the Black Lives Matter moment. Although Daniher describes here a course and learning experience from within a US-American institutional setting, she directs the following emergent queries to the field of Canadian Theatre and Performance Studies in light of its recent inauguration of the new "sub-field" of Asian Canadian Theatre and Performance Studies: *How* should we frame Asian Canadian theatre and performance in the classroom? For what purpose and under what curricular conditions do we teach racialized "minority" repertoires of theatre and performance in Canada? Drawing on overlapping genealogies of Asian American and Asian Canadian Studies, Daniher contends that a more rigorous engagement with existing theories, methods, and critical analyses of racial power is urgently needed if Asian Canadian Theatre Studies hopes to coincide with the larger political-ethical stakes of "Asian Canadian studies projects" writ-large.

Dans cet article, Colleen Kim Daniher présente une justification critique de sa décision de mettre en pratique une méthode comparative axée sur un contenu asio-américain dans un cours sur les études du théâtre et de la performance asio-américains qu'elle a enseigné à l'Université Brown au printemps 2016. Daniher s'attarde notamment au jumelage d'une lecture de la pièce Kim's Convenience *d'Ins Choi (2011) avec le visionnement du téléfilm* Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 *(2001), d'Anna Deavere Smith, diffusé sur les ondes de PBS, afin d'aborder le sujet du racisme envers les Noirs tant au Canada qu'aux États-Unis à l'avènement du mouvement Black Lives Matter. Le cours et l'expérience d'apprentissage que décrit Daniher ont eu lieu aux États-Unis, mais cette dernière tisse des liens entre ses pistes d'interrogation et le nouveau « sous-domaine » des études du théâtre et de la performance canado-asiatiques. Comment devrait-on présenter le théâtre et la performance canado-asiatiques en salle de classe? À quelles fins et dans quels contextes pédagogiques enseigne-t-on les répertoires « minoritaires » racialisés du théâtre et de la performance au Canada? Sachant que les champs d'études asio-américaines et canado-asiatique reposent sur des généalogies qui se recoupent, Daniher souligne que nous devons de toute urgence faire preuve d'un engagement plus ferme à l'endroit des théories, des*

méthodes et des analyses critiques du pouvoir racial si les études du théâtre canado-asiatique souhaitent un jour être en mesure d'aborder les enjeux politiques et éthiques importants des « projets d'études canado-asiatique » au sens large.

When I joined the department of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University as a diversity postdoctoral fellow in the fall of 2015, I was thrilled to be given the opportunity to teach a course of my own design in the spring semester.[1] A few years earlier, I had outlined a syllabus idea on "Asian American Theatre and Performance in Transnational Contexts" that I thought would be perfect for the department. Partly inspired by my own personal history of US-Canada border crossing and partly inspired by a sudden groundswell in Asian Canadian theatre production and criticism coupled with the "transnational turn" in Asian American Studies,[2] I wanted to see what kinds of critical conversations about race, nationhood, and citizenship would be possible in a classroom where "Asian American" and "Asian Canadian" theatre historiographies, texts, and artists encountered each other. Using the perspectives of critical race theory, postcolonial cultural studies, and transnational cultural critique, the operative questions that informed our class were the following: "What is Asian American? *Where* is Asian America? And how do histories and practices of theatre and performance help us answer these questions?"

Implicit to the rationale for my course are debates about the critical utility of a transnational "Asian North American" category of cultural and socio-political analysis that have now been circulating in Asian Canadian literary and cultural studies for close to twenty years.[3] In their introduction to the 2004 edited collection, *Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen*, editors Eleanor Ty and Donald Goellnicht propose Asian North America as a useful critical analytic because "Asian subjects who reside in the United States and in Canada face many of the same issues regarding identity, multiple cultural allegiances, marginalization vis-à-vis mainstream society, historical exclusion, and postcolonial and/or diasporic and/or transnational subjectivity" (2). And indeed: overlapping histories of Asian racialization vis-a-vis immigration, legal exclusion, internment, and post-1960s social movements in North America provided the structure to my course's weekly topical themes.

However, as scholars like Henry Yu and Iyko Day note in their respective contributions to *Amerasia Journal*'s groundbreaking 2007 special issue on "Pacific Canada: Beyond the 49th Parallel," the relationship between Asian America and Asian Canada is decidedly *not* just one of homogenizing similarity: important differences exist alongside striking similarities.[4] The task of our class, then, would be that of what Day describes towards the end of her essay as a "reconfigured comparativism": that is, not just a ledger-accounting of similarities and differences between Asian American and Asian Canadian theatre and performance, but an investigation of their mutual *interactions* and *exchanges* across time (80). Specifically: what kinds of interactions and exchanges can be tracked between Canada and the US as *racial states*? How do Asian American and Asian Canadian racial formations reveal "the history of Asian alterity to the modern-state" (Lowe, "The International" 30)?

Topical Outline for "Asian American Theatre and Performance in Transnational Contexts"	
Week 1	Introduction to the Course and its Key Terms
Week 2	Situating Performance in Transnational "Asian/America"
Week 3	Exclusion Acts I
Week 4	Exclusion Acts II
Week 5	Internment Acts
Week 6	Stage Realism & Theatres of Cultural Citizenship in the Civil Rights Era
Week 7	Midterm Research Projects: Regionalism and Asian North American Theatre Presenters
Week 8	Model-Minority Myths and Divergent Multiculturalisms
Week 9	Sex and Asian/American Screens
Week 10	Solo Performance and Experimental Forms
Week 11	Intercultural Theatre and Performance
Week 12	Diversifying Diasporas and Performance Beyond Theatre
Week 13	Asian/American Critique and the Asian/American Subject
Week 14	Final Thoughts and State-of-Research Presentations

Figure 1. Weekly Themes for "Asian American Theatre and Performance in Transnational Contexts"

In this essay, I offer a critical overview and rationale for why and to what ends I put a comparative Asian North American method into practice in my classroom at Brown. In particular, I focus on the methodological and pedagogical challenges that arose in one week in particular, when I assigned students to read Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience* (2011) alongside a viewing of the made-for-PBS broadcast of Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (2001). The pairing, I wagered, would enable us to talk about two theatrical representations of Black-Asian relations in Canada and the US, respectively, and I had assigned two critical readings to help ground our conversation: Claire Jean Kim's "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans" (1999) and Donald Goellnicht's "A Long Labour: The Protracted Birth of Asian Canadian Literature" (2000). Grouping the week's assigned texts under the heading "Divergent Multiculturalisms and the Model Minority Myth," I hoped to engage students in a dynamic conversation on interracial racisms across borders, always an important topic, but seeming especially so in the spring of 2015, after a fall of nation-wide campus protests in the US (including at Brown University) and nearly two years of Black Lives Matter mobilization in both Canada and the US.

Although I describe here a course and learning experience from within a US-American institutional setting, let me be clear that I write now with an express purpose: to provoke further conversation within Canadian theatre and performance studies about the kinds of critical methods and pedagogies that we have available to us to talk to students about race and racism in the classroom. While scholars in Canada have been quick to "inaugurate" a new field of Asian Canadian Theatre and Performance based on a thriving (in some cities) contemporary theatre scene (Aquino and Knowles), this inauguration has occurred with very little sustained discussion or debate about how to teach Asian Canadian topics from the perspective of anti-racist cultural critique.[5] *How* should we frame Asian Canadian theatre and performance in the classroom? For what purpose and under what curricular conditions do we teach racialized "minority" repertoires of theatre and performance in Canada? While

there is certainly no one right way to do Asian Canadian Theatre Studies as pedagogy, I suggest here that a more rigorous engagement with existing theories, methods, and critical analyses of not just ethnic or cultural difference but *racial power* is urgently needed if Asian Canadian Theatre Studies hopes to coincide with the larger political-ethical stakes of what Guy Beauregard has called "Asian Canadian studies projects"—a project and praxis of radical liberation that has never been easily disarticulated from Asian America or from the inherently transnational social movements from which the latter stems.[6]

It is nearly impossible to discuss the workings of my class without first acknowledging how Asian American and Asian Canadian Studies have been differently institutionalized, and how this has impacted pedagogical practice. In what follows, I begin by surveying some of this institutional history in order to counter what I see as a prevailing nationalism in the tendency to cast Asian Canadian theatre as a "sub-field of Canadian theatre" (Li, "Performing" 11) without sufficiently grappling with the transnational and interracial politics of coalition that have considerably informed both Asian Canadian and Asian American social movements. I then turn towards a more substantive analysis of *Kim's Convenience*, outlining how the play's (oft-overlooked) thematization of Black-Asian Canadian relations invites not only a representational or symbolic analysis but a *sociological* critique of the racialization of Asians as model minorities. Drawing on the analytic frame of "racial triangulation," a well-known comparative theory of Asian American racial formation,[7] I describe how emphasizing Black-Asian themes in *Kim's Convenience* and Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992* enabled a difficult but fruitful conversation that shifted our classroom conversation away from "identity" and "difference" writ-large to the operational logics of Black and Asian racisms in North America from the late 1960s to the present BLM moment.

Ultimately, I argue that the recent interest in Asian Canadian theatre and performance as a disciplinary field of study should and must go beyond preemptive celebrations of progress in the professional-class language of theatre "equity" and "diversity": the large-scale success of a play like *Kim's Convenience* offers Canadian theatre scholars an important opportunity to not only teach and learn Asian Canadian theatrical repertoires, but Asian North American histories, politics, and socio-political modes of analysis that emphasize race, racism, and racialization.

Why Comparison, Take #1: Asian American Studies and Asian Canadian Studies in the Shadow of US Ethnic Studies

> "Asian Canadian" is not a self-contained and naturally given category that derives from one's cultural heritage; rather, it is a name/identity that some individuals or groups, after becoming conscious of their status as the "other" in Canadian society, chose for themselves and brought into being through discursive practices and socio-political actions. To call oneself "Asian Canadian" is very much a political exercise—one that is also exerted by black and Asian Americans in their respective struggles. (Li, *Voices* 24)

In order to understand the stakes of Asian Canadian and Asian American comparison in my class, one must first understand the institutional backdrop against which both have emerged as disciplinary sites of knowledge formation in the university. In contrast to the five-decades long institutional history of Asian American Studies—an academic and *activist* field of knowledge

production inextricably linked to the Asian American Movement and student-led struggle for the establishment of an Ethnic Studies curriculum in California in the late 1960s—today, only two programs in Asian Canadian Studies exist in Canada: a minor at the University of Toronto, launched in 2012, and a minor at the University of British Columbia, started in 2013 (Goellnicht, "Outside" 86-87). What this relative institutional absence has produced, argues cultural critic Chris Lee in a 2007 article in *Amerasia Journal*, is a condition not of Asian Canadian "emergence"—as some have optimistically claimed—but of characteristic "lateness" (1-2).

In his theorization of Asian Canadian institutional lateness, Lee joins a cohort of Asian Canadianist scholars—notably, most writing from within the disciplinary perspectives of history, literature, and cultural studies—to bring a comparative lens to the study of Asian Canadian culture and politics. Central to this move is the acknowledgment that Asian America is, among other things, a historically-situated political formation emerging out of converging and coalitional sites of social struggle: a history that Asian Canada does not share—or at least, does not share in the same way. In a much-cited 2000 article on "the protracted birth" of Asian Canadian literature, Donald Goellnicht historicizes and enumerates some of the many reasons why a large-scale, pan-ethnic Asian American social movement took place in the US in the late 1960s and not in Canada. Citing the mobilizing effects of *other* significant social movements—the Civil Rights Movement, black radicalism, New Left counter-cultural protest, and anti-imperialist, anti-Vietnam war movements—on the Asian American Movement, Goellnicht notes that 1960s radicalism in Canada was meanwhile centered on Quebec separatism, with its bifurcated lines of English and French ethnicity, language, and culture ("A Long Labour" 6-8). Critically, then, whereas the political landscape of the US in the 1960s was definitively transformed by racial social justice struggle, led by first the Civil Rights Movement and then Black Power, the political landscape in Canada was defined by nationalist struggles over "culture" and "ethnicity," here cut along French and English lines.

While Goellnicht is careful to point out that local acts of Asian Canadian activism did in fact occur throughout the 1970s and 1980s, they were often isolated, occurring under the sign of single issues and ethnic groups (such as in the Chinese Canadian struggle to preserve Vancouver's Chinatown in the 1970s, for example, or the case of Japanese Canadian Redress in the 1980s). Xioaping Li has since revised this historiography, meticulously documenting pan-ethnic Asian Canadian social organizing beginning in the 1970s under the broad rubrics of a "cultural activism" that was itself significantly impacted by contact and exchange with Asian American activists (Li, *Voices* 18-19).[8] Nonetheless, it remains true that "Asian Canadians never attained the status of a mass, panethnic social movement" (Goellnicht, "A Long Labour" 9) and relatedly, Asian Canadian Studies never emerged as part of a grassroots, race-based demand for a decolonized curriculum, as it did in the case of Asian American Studies.

Here, it is important to note how closely aligned the Asian American Movement and Asian American Studies as a disciplinary field were from their start: it was, after all, the galvanizing events of the 1968 student strikes at San Francisco State College and the University of California, Berkeley that precipitated the formation of national political organizations like the Asian American Political Alliance, which "marked the first time that the term Asian American [*sans* hyphen] was used nationally to mobilize people of Asian descent" (Espiritu 34). As Glenn Omatsu recalls, the San Francisco State strike was "the longest student strike in US history" and "the first campus uprising involving Asian Americans as a collective force":

> Under the Third World Liberation Front—a coalition of African American, Latino, American Indian and Asian American campus groups—students "seized the time" to demand ethnic studies, open admissions, and a redefinition of the education system. Although their five-month strike was brutally repressed and resulted in only partial victories, students won the nation's first School of Ethnic Studies. (25)

Scholars of the Asian American Movement agree that the San Francisco State strike was significant not only because of its foundational role in the origin story of Asian America, but because of the way it established the agenda of that movement as: 1) class-based, 2) coalitional among African American, Latino, American Indian, and Asian American student groups, 3) focused on questions of power and oppression not only in America but in places likes Asia, Africa, Latin American, and the Middle East, where Third World revolutionary struggles and ideologies greatly informed the objective of the movement to establish "a New World Consciousness" (25-26). The strike, in other words, was less about simple curriculum reform than it was about demanding the means through which to realize a new world order.[9]

Canadian Ethnic Studies was also founded between 1968-1969, but under decidedly different conditions. More concerned with questions of immigration, assimilation, and pluralism than in revolution, the field approached the study of ethnicity in deracialized terms, thereby aligning itself with the government's 1971 policy of official multiculturalism and its benign yet "race-evasive" project of recognizing all forms of difference as one kind: "cultural" (Beauregard, "What Is At Stake"). Under these terms, European immigrant ethnic groups (that is, not French and not English) were the predominant focus of Canadian Ethnic Studies, and when Asian Canadian topics were addressed, they were addressed through the analytics of ethnic difference, not racialization. As Goellnicht and Daniel Coleman point out, it wasn't until a convergence of events in the late 1980s and early 1990s—including the Japanese Canadian movement for redress, Indigenous activist responses to the Oka standoff and the shooting of Dudley George, the controversies around the 1989 Into the Heart of Africa exhibition and the 1994 Writing thru Race conference, to name just a few—that scholarship on Asian Canadians began to develop against the specific backdrop of race and racial formation in Canada ("Race Into" 11-12).

I recite these admittedly provisional institutional histories to make a simple point: the Asian American Studies classroom is also a US Ethnic Studies classroom, with its explicitly activist, anti-racist agenda and now-fifty-years-long inheritance of curricular norms, critical vocabularies, pedagogical expectations, and protocols of behavior. The still-formulating Asian Canadian Studies classroom, in contrast, has had a much more gradual and uneven history of institutional emergence. Moreover, this unevenness has been decidedly disciplinary, with the majority of research on both Asian Canadian and Asian North American themes coming out of scholarship in literature and cultural studies—much of which I draw on here.

While it exceeds the limits of the current paper to enumerate all of the debates, positions, and subsequent implications surrounding Asian American and Asian Canadian institutional emergence that currently exist, suffice it to say that these comparative conversations do exist, they have existed for a while, and they should be taken into account as Canadian

Theatre Studies makes its own pronouncements about the distinctiveness of a national canon of work and disciplinary field of study called Asian Canadian.[10]

Institutional histories matter here because they impact our interpretive frames and our ability to think about these frames meta-critically. For example, against the larger canvas of Asian Canadian Studies as a social formation emerging out of the various intellectual and social justice struggles that I have just outlined, Asian Canadian Theatre Studies does not merely exist as the once-missing now-found "other" to Canadian Theatre Studies; rather, it exists in dialogue with a larger social formation of Asian Canadian identity, politics, and critical discourses beginning in the 1970s. Therefore, we might ask: how does thinking about Asian Canadian theatre from the perspective of Canadian Theatre Studies yield one set of questions? How does thinking about Asian Canadian theatre from the perspective of Asian Canadian Studies yield another? Are the epistemological, pedagogical, and political objectives of Asian Canadian Studies and Canadian Theatre Studies *necessarily* the same?

While these questions might seem separate from the matter of Asian Canadian and Asian American comparison, I am arguing that they are not if we understand Asian American and Asian Canadian inquiry as converging at the point of their shared activist origins and investments in race-based social justice struggle and community-based critique. Asian American and Asian Canadian comparison at the level of institutional emergence is thus useful to the degree that we recognize each not only as naturalized *locations* of study but as *modes* of study that necessarily implicate issues of social justice, social analysis, and social critique with issues of pedagogical practice.

Why Comparison, Take #2: Racial Triangulation and The Model Minority Myth in *Kim's Convenience*

In the fall of 2015, questions of race, social justice, and pedagogy were exploding, and, from my vantage point as an Asian Canadian working within a US-American institutional context, they were exploding from multiple directions. The Black Lives Matter movement was then two years strong and had forcibly placed issues of anti-Black policing, incarceration, and Black death at the front and center of US national and campus conversations about race and social justice. At the same time, concurrent debates over Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Canada were confronting Canadians with difficult and long-suppressed histories of anti-Black racism, too easily dismissed and renounced as a case of "importing racism" from the United States.[11] As I put my syllabus together, addressing anti-Black policing, surveillance, and incarceration in my Asian American Studies classroom—which, as I have described above, is also an Ethnic Studies classroom and thus an activist classroom—was not so much a question of "if" but of "how."

The opportunity presented itself in week eight of the class, after having taught students key moments in Asian American and Asian Canadian racial formation. Following a historical trajectory with previous weeks on Chinese legal exclusions and restrictions around immigration and citizenship, Japanese American and Japanese Canadian internment, and post-Civil Rights era cultural nationalisms and their artistic movements, it came time to address a more "contemporary" racial formation: the post-1965 and post-1967 liberal reforms to American and Canadian immigration policy that would effectively shape what we now know

as the "model minority myth." The two plays on deck were Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience* (2011) and Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992* (1993).

Kim's Convenience premiered in 2011 at the Toronto Fringe Festival, where it won the Best New Play Award. Later, Toronto's Soulpepper Theatre produced an extended, sold-out run of the show that was so successful that *Kim's Convenience* launched a nation-wide tour that was the first in the history of Soulpepper. Today, *Kim's Convenience* is a nationally-syndicated Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television series, having completed its first season in the Spring of 2016. The television adaptation features original theatrical cast members Paul Sun-Hyung Lee as Appa and Jean Yoon as Umma, while Jung—who was played by playwright Ins Choi in the Fringe and Soulpepper productions—and Janet are now played by Simu Liu and Andrea Bang, respectively.[12]

The play tells the story of a Korean-Canadian family who owns a convenience store in the gentrifying immigrant neighborhood of Toronto's Regent Park. Much of the drama revolves around the Kim family's changing dynamics after Appa, the family patriarch, is faced with an offer to sell his beloved convenience store. The other members of the family are Umma, his wife, and Janet and Jung—his two adult children. Janet is a photographer who still frequently stops by the store to visit her parents and help out with the store. Jung, who is estranged from the family, is an offstage character for the majority of the play. His absence is explained by the other characters through allusions to his troubles with the law and unresolved conflict with Appa, and we see Umma sneaking out of the house to meet with him at her church. Eventually, Jung returns home and reconciles with Appa; instead of selling the store in order to retire comfortably, Appa bequeaths the store to Jung, who is struggling to support his young family. Meanwhile, Janet has just begun a romance with Alex, a neighborhood police officer and childhood friend of Jung's. The play ends on this tentatively optimistic note of resolution for the Kim family: Jung has been integrated back into the family, Janet's romantic future looks bright, and Umma and Appa's "legacy" seems secure, both in terms of their children and their business.

Notably, Alex is Black—just like all the other secondary characters in *Kim's Convenience* that make up the cast: beyond Alex, there is Rich and Mike, both patrons of the store, and Mr. Lee, a family friend and successful real estate agent who makes the offer of sale on the store. As indicated in the 2012 production notes of the published script by Anansi Press, each of these secondary characters should be played by a single Black actor: in the debut production of *Kim's Convenience* at the Toronto Fringe in 2011, this was actor Andre Sills, while a subsequent run and touring production of the show with Toronto's Soulpepper Theatre featured actor Clé Bennett in the role (Choi 3).

Even this cursory summary suggests the ways that *Kim's Convenience* might productively, even provocatively, be read against Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles*, *1992*, which debuted in LA in 1993. As some readers will already know, *Twilight: Los Angeles* is a verbatim play by Anna Deavere Smith that was commissioned by LA's Mark Taper Forum in the wake of the international media spectacle that ensued after the 1991 police beating of African American motorist Rodney King and the subsequent trial and acquittal of the LAPD officers who were caught on video beating him. While theatre scholars have written at length about the play's formal properties at the level of scripting, casting, and genre, my own purpose in bringing this teaching text into the classroom was a matter of history, not form. After all, the LA upris-

ings have become a signal moment from which to understand an event in US history where interracial conflict exceeded overly-schematic formulations of race and racism as Black and White.[13] As Smith's script and interviews clearly illustrate, this was a "multiethnic rebellion," where members of the Black and Latino working poor made up the majority of the uprising's participants and Korean immigrant shopkeepers and property owners were the targeted recipients of the lootings, vandalism, and arson that broke out over two days (Oliver, Johnson, and Farrell 118, 130-32). Even more to the point, reporting on the riots shored up images of Black-Korean *racial* conflict, but deracinated from the important *economic* backdrop of urban poverty, white flight, and social spending cuts.[14] In the aftermath of the Rodney King uprisings, contemporary scholars of race and ethnicity have had to contend with the extent to which what was reductively presented as a "race" riot was in fact a racialized *class* uprising, forcing a more rigorous analysis of the ways in which political economies of race and class entangle, and entangle *differently* across racialized subject positions.

As I will explicate shortly, numerous scholars agree that the seeds of a specifically Black-Korean American racial conflict narrative have been brewing since at least the 1960s, but public consciousness around Black-Korean antagonisms flared up most spectacularly in the 1990s, first with the New York City boycotts of Korean-owned grocery stores from 1990-1991, and then again with the 1991 trial over the shooting death of 15-year-old Latasha Harlins by Soon Ja Du, a 51-year-old Korean shopkeeper in LA. The Harlins case has been widely understood as a catalyst leading up to the events of April 29th.

I wanted my students—almost all of whom were born after 1992—to grapple with the historical legacy of the LA uprisings and its spotlighting of Black-Asian racializations not least of all because of present-day circumstances. Once again, all around us were stories and images of Black criminality, policing, and civil unrest. Moreover, the 20 November 2014 shooting of Akai Gurley by NYPD police officer Peter Liang had once again thrown radically polarized political representations of African Americans and Asian Americans into public high relief. Following Gerald Graff's elegant injunction to "teach the conflicts," I wanted to give my students the tools to dissect, analyze, and discuss the model minority myth as a far-reaching racial ideology inculcating not only Asian Americans and anti-Asian racism, but African Americans and anti-Black racism.

In brief, the model minority myth is a racial discourse that attributes Asian American minority "success" to essentializing cultural traits, such as the seemingly natural propensity of "Asians" as a group to work hard, to hold similar values rooted in education and the heteronormative nuclear family, and to achieve economic upward mobility in a relatively short amount of time without the help of social supports from the state. As a number of critics note, the myth first made its appearance in a number of news outlets in the mid 1960s at precisely the same moment in which public discourses of Black cultural pathology, Black urban social ills, and the fear of insurgent Black radical politics were circulating widely (C. Kim 118-22; Osajima; Prashad 166-71). The 1965 Moynihan Report, the 1965 LA Watts riots, and Stokely Carmichael's 1966 articulation of Black Power each contributed to this public discourse.

Moreover, the myth intersected with immigration reform policies in both the US (The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965) and Canada (the adoption of a merit-based point system in 1967) that significantly impacted the demographic makeup of the immediate wave of post-1965 Asian immigrants to North America. These population-shaping policies made

it easy to single out Asian North American immigrants as "models" in regards to broad cultural generalizations about education, class, familial status, and political leanings while effectively obscuring the hand that national immigration policy had in selectively producing an upwardly-mobile immigrant class of Asians (Chuh 225-27; Sharma 93-96).

As sociologist Claire Jean Kim has stated succinctly, the model minority construct in the US has always been a comparative one, contrasting the perception of Asian economic success and cultural assimilation with Black social failure: "The model minority myth has always worked in tandem with explicit constructions of Blacks as culturally deficient" (121). In her 1999 article, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," Kim develops the idea of racial triangulation in order to argue that the racialization of Asian Americans is "profoundly interrelated" to Black and White racialization, such that all three groups operate within a "field of [hierarchical] racial positions" together (106). One of Kim's most potent analytic contributions through the racial triangulation concept is the notion of "relative valorization," whereby a dominant racial-social grouping [Whites] valorizes one minority racial-social grouping [Asians] in order to subordinate another [Blacks], effectively dominating both minority groups in the process (117-18).

Crucially, for Kim, the model minority myth is one such mode of relative valorization, and thus should be understood as an expression of white supremacy's divide and conquer tactics. By mobilizing naturalized discourses of Black and Asian racial and cultural "difference," the model minority myth reduces structured class and economic disparity drawn along racial lines to a set of dubious cultural traits, thus explaining away one racial group's oppression with another's putative "success"—all the while erasing the presence of a white ruling class that continues to control the distribution of social resources along a racialized (and contingent) hierarchy of access.

In my class, I used Kim's triangulation thesis to both draw out and raise questions about the thematization of Black-Korean interracial relations in *Kim's Convenience*. Like *Twilight: Los Angeles, Kim's Convenience* explores the daily social exchanges and economic transactions between Korean immigrant store owners and Black patrons in the economically-depressed, predominantly immigrant, multiracial, multicultural urban community of Regent Park. Unlike *Twilight: Los Angeles*, however, *Kim's Convenience* takes place in present-day Toronto and has been all but overlooked as a play about Blackness in urban Canada.

A few key passages help to solidify these claims. In the play's very first scene of spoken dialogue ("I Am Korean"), Rich, ("a young black man") comes into the store to buy a scratch-and-win card and a pack of cigarettes. Rich is Appa's first customer of the day, but what begins as a passing economic transaction results in Rich receiving a corrective history lesson on the differences between Japanese and Korean as distinct ethno-national categories, with their own longstanding histories of colonial antipathy (Choi 8-12). Moreover, Appa—a former high school teacher—extends his lesson on things that "look same…but not same thing" (11) when he specifies Rich's blackness as seeming to be from Kenya. Early on, then, the play establishes a simple but effective meta-lesson on race and ethnicity for its viewing audience. Importantly, we are asked to see *both* Appa and Rich as not only racialized subjects (Asian and Black), but also ethnic ones (Korean and Kenyan). An homology is thus established between Appa and Rich that refutes the (tacit) racial logic of the model minority myth, which constructs Asians as paragons of culture and Blacks as paragons of race, in order to separate one from the other.

In another early scene titled "Steal or No Steal," Blackness is again highlighted in a vignette that alludes to the omnipresent criminalized racial surveillance of Black bodies, especially as they move through urban sites of commerce. Appa wants to give Janet her first lesson on how to run the store should he retire. To her horror, this consists of what, at first blush, seems to be a game of racial profiling called "Steal or No Steal." When Mike, ("a Jamaican Canadian") patron walks into the store, Appa takes Janet aside and says:

> APPA: You see [...] that guy? [...] He is black guy, jean jacket. That combo is steal combo. You don't know how to run the store, I teach you. This is training day. Lesson number one, steal or no steal. Every customer, have to know. Steal or no steal *(Beat. Pointing to a girl outside)* See that girl? She is no steal. She is black girl, fat. Fat black girl is no steal. *(Pointing to a guy outside)*. Fat white guy, that's steal. Fat guy is black, brown shoes, that no steal. That's cancel-out combo.
> JANET: That is so awkwardly racist.
> APPA: Not racist...survival skill. (28-30)

As Appa and Janet continue to debate Mike's potential culpability, the conversation becomes increasingly ludicrous as it is revealed that Appa's system of identifying thieves adheres to a logic that is more equal opportunity than initially presumed:

> APPA: Okay, brown guy, that's steal. Brown girl, that's no steal. [...] If you is the gay, that's no steal. Easy. The gay is never steal. If you is the lesbian, that is girl who is the gay, that's steal, one hundred percent guarantee they is steal. But two lesbian, that's no steal, cancel-out combo.
> JANET: What about a black lesbian with long straight hair and a fat Asian gay man with short hair together? Steal or no steal?
> APPA: That is impossible [...] the gay Asian is never fat. Only skinny Asian is the gay. That's rule. (30-31)

In production, the entire scene is played for laughs. But things take a serious turn again when Appa, despite Janet's vehement protests, accuses Mike of stealing. In response, Mike pointedly asks, "'Cuz me black, y'accusing me of teefin'?" (32). A few moments later, it is revealed that Mike has, in fact, pocketed a pack of toothpaste, along with the tub of Vaseline he lawfully purchases. Although from here the scene quickly diffuses by devolving into physical pratfalls involving Appa's hapkido moves on Mike, Mike's question hangs in the air, pointedly and poignantly left unanswered by the rather convenient plotting that Mike did in fact steal some toothpaste.

The specter of a specific historical genealogy of class-based conflict between Korean merchants and Black customers that this scene and the previous one hints at is returned to and clarified in Scene 18, "Who you go out with." Here, Appa recounts the story of a family friend, "Mr. Chae," to Janet, who has just revealed that she will be going on a date with Alex, the Black cop:

> APPA: You remember Mr. Chae? [...] Yah. He is having store in South Central L.A., California. Lots of black people is living there too. One day black lady is come and ask five-dollar loan. So, he give loan five dollar. Next week, she come and pay back. No interest. Then she ask loan ten dollar. And he give and she pay back. And continue. They have good friendship. She tell all her friend, and they come and ask loan too. He is help all of them. Then 1992. Rodney King L.A. riot happen. All Korean convenience store is on fire and black people stealing. So he take shotgun and go to store. When he gets out of car, he see fire and smoke, people screaming, running, crazy and he look at store. He see all black people in front of store. So, he get gun, ready to shoot, then he stop. What he see is that black woman who he give to loan and all his black customer hold hand, make big wall, stop other people stealing his store. *Beat.*
> JANET: What are you trying to say, Appa?
> APPA: Alex is not Korean, but if you want to marry him, that's okay with me. (69-70)

For the canny reader of Asian North American culture and history, this scene is complexly layered and multivalent. First, Appa's story illustrates the fact that the LA riots—collectively remembered as *sa-i-gu* (April 29th) by Korean and Korean diasporic communities—was an international event that projected images of Black-Korean American conflict into global public consciousness.[15] Correspondingly, the reporting on the event inculcated Koreans across the diaspora. That Appa draws on an anecdote from *sa-i-gu* to express to his daughter that he is "okay" with his daughter's interracial romance with Alex is significant because it sets up the expectation that Appa will in fact *not* approve of the relationship. Of course, the tacit presumption of Appa's anti-Black disapproval of Janet's dating choice is also part and parcel of the model minority myth: the unquestioned assumption that the "conservative" first generation would disapprove of any non-Korean, but perhaps especially a Black non-Korean, as a dating partner.

However, Appa subverts this controlling generational narrative by telling an unexpected story of Black-Korean collaboration, not conflict, during the uprising. This moment simultaneously expresses Appa's approval of the Janet-Alex pairing *and* his awareness of the imposed social expectation that he might not. In contrast, to the widespread media images of armed Korean American militiamen on rooftops aiming at Black and Latino looters during the LA conflict, Appa's second-hand, verbal testimony of Black patrons forming a human shield around Mr. Chae's storefront offers a vivid counter-memory to the master-narrative of Black-Asian racial antagonism made hypervisible during and after the riots. Recalling that the model minority myth is not merely a harmless "cultural" compliment but a controlling racial stereotype, we can see that it is one that, in this scene, Appa purposefully rejects.

Second, Appa's self-conscious reference to the LA riots as the frame through which to express his approval of his daughter's Black boyfriend reads as significant because it distances narratives of Black-Korean urban conflict from the immediate space-time of Toronto. Specifically, it side-steps Toronto's own linked history to the Rodney King uprisings, anti-Black policing, and Black justice unserved in the form of the Yonge Street riot, which occurred on May 4th, 1992. As with debates over nomenclature surrounding the Rodney King protests, "the Yonge Street riot" has also been called an uprising or a rebellion, most recently in *It Takes a Riot: Race, Rebellion, Reform*, a 2017 documentary directed by Howard Grandison and produced in collaboration with Ryerson University's Akua Benjamin Project.[16]

As the documentary recounts, the Yonge Street rebellion began as a peaceful afternoon demonstration organized by the Black Action Defence Committee (BADC) in solidarity with the protests expressing outrage over the King verdict, but also in local protest against two recent events: the police murder of twenty-two-year-old Raymond Lawrence of Toronto, and the acquittal of two white Peel Region police officers for the shooting death of seventeen-year-old Michael Wade Lawson. BADC protestors gathered in front of the US Consulate, staged a sit-in on the corner of Yonge and Bloor, and then marched to City Hall. Later that evening, however, demonstrations turned violent after the official protests had ended and renegade protestors, counter-protestors (including White supremacist groups), and police encountered each other on the streets. According to a 1992 *Maclean's* cover story on the "riot," at its peak, a crowd of over 1,000 took to the streets; property was damaged, stores were looted, and around thirty related arrests were made (Deacon and Brady; Paradkar).

Remembering the Yonge Street uprising in relation to *Kim's Convenience* raises all sorts of salient questions about the model minority myth, racial triangulation, and the disavowed history and ongoing present of anti-Black racism in Canada. Many of these questions exceed the frame of the current analysis, including how, if, or to what extent Korean Canadians or other Asian Canadians were implicated in the rebellion. Nonetheless, the play prompts further inquiry along these relational lines, not because Black-Korean American and Black-Korean Canadian relations are necessarily identical, but because in their very incommensurability, they might tell us something important about the distinct yet still-related racial structures of Canada and the US.

In some ways, it is hard not to see *Kim's Convenience* as a textbook case study in the social phenomenon of racial triangulation. The play traffics in familiar racial tropes wherein hard-working Asian immigrant merchants are juxtaposed against a less-developed backdrop of Black urban life. However, to say that the play can be usefully illuminated by a theory of racial triangulation is not to say that *Kim's Convenience* is racist or commits anti-Black racism full-stop. On the contrary, I find the play's representations of Black masculinity to be quite nuanced, and not in spite of but *because of* the quadruple-casting device of the four Black characters in the play. After all, to put the body of the same actor in the role of both youthful petty thief (Rich) and love-interest police officer (Alex), of both unaccented Kenyan Canadian (Mike) and patois-speaking Jamaican Canadian (Rich), and of both the ethnically-unmarked, class-ascendant Black professionals Mr. Lee and Alex, is to say something powerful about the variable expressions of class, politics, and diasporic affiliation that Black Canadian masculinity can take on.

In fact, I would argue that it is precisely *because* of the play's exploration of how Black and Korean Canadian lives become entwined through the intersections of global immigration, urban commerce, housing policy, and racial minoritization that make it such a remarkable teaching text on contemporary race and racism in Canada. As much as I concur that we should be critical of a multiculturalist ideology of romanticized race and ethnic relations, we should not forget that official multicultural policy is not *only* an ideology, and thus not only abstract in its effects. Neighborhoods like the Regent Park of *Kim's Convenience* actually exist, scenes of Black Canadian and Korean Canadian sociality actually exist, and they exist in part because of the shaping hands of federal immigration and multicultural policies dating back to the 1960s.[17]

However, the play's simultaneous representations of Blackness and Koreanness become more problematic when left uninterrogated through an analysis of race in Canada; when, for example, *Kim's Convenience* becomes little more than a representative or substitutable "ethnic minority" placeholder on a Canadian Theatre syllabus, with little investigation or socio-historical framing for students about what Asianness or Blackness represent racially within but also beyond the world of the play. While I do not think the play is racist, per say, I do think that the play's all-Asian, all-Black cast of characters and assimilationist narrative of immigrant hard-work and individual success requires careful and critical scrutiny, informed by a rigorous understanding of transnational history, political economy, and contemporary racial formation theory. Which is precisely why the question of *how* this play is brought into classrooms—and I think it should be—matters so much.

Conclusion: Towards a Pedagogy of Entanglement

As a matter of activist pedagogy, *Kim's Convenience* necessitates a more robust arsenal of critical tools and questions than "is this play racist or not?" The truth is, the answer to what is already a politically-circumscribed yes-or-no question may rest more on how we teach the play than on any singularly deterministic interpretation of the text. Indeed, being able to articulate for our students *which* racisms, when, where, and against whom becomes part of the necessary work of responsibly re-representing this play and its reception in the classroom. So too is making the critical leap from "play" to "world"—because isn't the larger issue of naming, critiquing, and dismantling a racist social order ultimately the more urgent task at hand than identifying this or that cultural text as racist?

This pedagogical work is, of course, challenging and risky: when it came time to discuss racial triangulation as a critical capstone to our reading of *Kim's Convenience* and our viewing of *Twilight: Los Angeles*, my students were unusually reticent during discussion. While I had expected them to be challenged, I had also expected a dynamic conversation because of just how prescient the relationships among the model minority myth, anti-Black-racism, and anti-Black policing seemed to be.

My lecture invited students—a cohort of ten undergraduates, all identifying as of Asian-descent but not all as American—to make links between LA in the early 1990s and the Black Lives Matter movement today. Further, I asked them to consider this history in relation to an evolving *political* conception of Asian North American activism and identity. What kinds of conversations are you (or are you not) having about BLM in your on-campus communities, I wanted to know? Does the history and language of the model minority myth give us a useful working vocabulary for understanding the perception of Asian American conservatism and political apathy in the face of other racialized and specifically anti-Black violence, and how might we challenge that perception in the BLM era while still acknowledging that racism occurs within and between racialized groups? These questions were particularly important for me to raise in my role as a diversity postdoctoral fellow, knowing full well that institutionalized diversity projects—like institutionalized multicultural projects—too frequently become silo'd sites of confirming and affirming "difference" without really interrogating *how* difference is constituted, on whose terms, and for whose benefit.

I was surprised when, after some prodding, I found out that the source of the students' discomfort was what some of them perceived to be the questionable "appropriateness" of

talking about Blackness and anti-Blackness within the parameters of our class, a class on Asian American Theatre and Performance. What to me had seemed like an obvious link between our course material and the BLM moment had, for my most activist-minded students in the course, risked appropriating Black injury, and had for others simply crossed the expected threshold of what they thought they'd be asked to do in an Asian American Studies classroom in the age of the diversified (read: multicultural) university: that is, talk about "themselves."[18]

With some hesitation, I offer this brief classroom anecdote not to single out or criticize my students, but to identify some areas of overlapping concern between my class dynamics and the nascent field of Asian Canadian Theatre and Performance Studies as it continues to articulate its pedagogical goals, methods, and values.

Like my students, Canadian theatre scholars and critics have seemed unwilling or unable to contend with the concurrent representations of Koreanness and Blackness in *Kim's Convenience*. Widely lauded as a "universal" fantasia on immigrant uplift, cultural adaptation, and ethnic assimilability across generations, reviews and promotional materials of the play have noticeably highlighted its ethnic and "immigrant family" plotline while substantially downplaying the fact that the play also features a number of Black characters who remain outside of a singular ethnic immigrant family narrative.[19]

One notable exception to this trend is Barry Freeman's analysis of the play in a chapter in his recent book, *Staging Strangers: Theatre and Global Ethics* (2017). Here, Freeman offers a soft critique of the play for its "stereotyped" characterizations of Blackness and Asianness (74), but ultimately undercuts what could be a promising line of inquiry by failing to substantiate his claims with a convincing reading of the play.[20] The incisiveness of Freeman's analysis is perhaps further hindered by the fact that he places *Kim's Convenience* alongside two other Asian Canadian plays (Betty Quan's *Mother Tongue* and Catherine Hernandez's *Singkil*) without really addressing them *as* Asian Canadian plays. Instead, in the chapter titled "Domesticating the Stranger," he mobilizes concepts like immigration, the making and domestication of strangers, and the global flows of neoliberal capital as if these weren't themselves part and parcel of a very specific structure of Asian North American racialization vacillating between the contrasting poles of alienated abjection and idealized assimilation.[21]

The popular and critical responses to the play help clarify, I think, some of the limits to the prevailing critical paradigms of Canadian Theatre and Performance Studies for dealing with "difference." Simply put: *Kim's Convenience* is an Asian Canadian play that is about a Korean-Canadian family *and* about the disavowed presence—and thus, peripheral status—of Blackness in Canada. Have the existing national, intercultural, "ethical," and now Indigenous/decolonial paradigms of Theatre and Performance Studies in Canada provided us as scholars and teachers with adequate tools to explain or describe anti-Black and anti-Asian racism in Canada—let alone in the same breath?

I think not. And so, anticipating the ongoing emergence of a "sub-field" of Asian Canadian Theatre and Performance Studies, my purpose throughout this essay has been to generate some provisional notes and observations about what an entangled pedagogy of race and racism could look like. In "Asians Are the New ...What?," cultural critic Kandice Chuh offers this pedagogical formulation at the end of an article that positions the contemporary model minority as "a figure and lived subjectivity that emerges at the conjuncture of the rise

of global capitalism and US neoimperialism" (228). For Chuh, drawing on Lisa Lowe, pedagogies of entanglement are necessary to understanding how Asian racialization is a relational phenomenon, produced at the global interstices of settler colonialism, slavery, and transnational global trade and labour economies (232). While I am not proposing a wholesale "import" of Chuh or Lowe's vision, I am suggesting that "Asian Canadian Theatre Studies" can stand to sharpen its theoretical articulation of race and racism, as well as clarify its relationship to a politicized, transnational project of Asian Canadian study, institutionalized or not. As I suggested from my class anecdote, pedagogies of entanglement at times entail risk and discomfort, but at their best they can challenge a still-dominant strain of multicultural thinking on both sides of the border that "was and is an idea that presents each racialized community as having been born in splendid isolation from all others and each having a largely separate existence" (Sharma 96).

Notes

1 My thanks to organizers Katherine Zien, Fiona Ritchie, and Myrna Wyatt Selkirk, and the participants in the "Bodies in Difference: Race and Performance In and Beyond North America" symposium at McGill University in May 2017, which provided me with the opportunity to express these thoughts in an earlier version of this work.

2 For more on the transnational turn in Asian American Studies, see Leong; Hune; Mazumdar; Wong; and Collet and Lien. For more on transnational approaches to American Studies, see Kaplan; Fishkin; Stoler; and Saldívar.

3 For a brief overview of these debates as they have predominantly played out in Asian Canadian Literary Studies, see Goellnicht, "A Long Labour" and "Outside the US Frame"; Miki; Beauregard, "What Is at Stake" and "Asian American Studies"; Lee; and Day, "Lost in Transnation" and "Must All…" For a slightly different genealogy through the broader frame of "cultural activism," see Li, *Voices*.

4 See Yu and Day, "Lost in Transnation."

5 In their introduction to Asian Canadian Theatre, Aquino and Knowles state that the collected volume "is intended to inaugurate a new scholarly field: Asian Canadian theatre and performance studies" (vii). The edited collection, loosely based on the GENesis Asian-Canadian Theatre Conference proceedings held in May 2010 in Toronto, could be understood to be the critical companion text to Aquino's two-volume edited anthology series, *Love + Relasionships: A Collection of Contemporary Asian-Canadian Drama* (2009). While the editors list a number of provisional interpretive rubrics through which to understand the newly-enunciated field (the politics of recognition/visibility, the politics of identity, the politics of scale, the politics of affect, and the politics of solidarity), noticeably absent from this list is the politics of race in Canada.

6 In "Asian Canadian Studies: Unfinished Projects," Beauregard helpfully distinguishes "Asian Canadian studies projects" from "scholarship on Asian Canadian topics." Whereas Asian Canadian studies projects are scholarly works that attempt to "work out an awareness of the social movements, the cultural activism, and the intellectual histories that have enabled the category of 'Asian Canadian' to come into being" (7-8), scholarship on Asian Canadian studies topics takes up aspects of Asian Canadian history or culture or social formation with "a limited awareness of and engage-

ment with the social movements and the intellectual histories that have, since the early 1970s, enabled 'Asian Canadian' topics to become visible as sites of knowledge production" (7).

7 By racial formation theory, I refer to Michael Omi and Howard Winant's influential conceptualization of "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed" (55). At the same time, I acknowledge that there may well be transnational limitations to both racial triangulation and racial formation models that should be explored further.

8 Li recounts that, in 1970, "Ron Tanaka, an Asian American activist who was teaching in the English Department, introduced Asian American activism to his Chinese and Japanese Canadian students," which led to the formation of two influential student groups, the Wakayama and the Ga Hing, and an on-campus exhibit of Asian Canadian poetry, history, and photography (18).

9 This is not to say they were successful, exactly. For more on the limitations of the US Ethnic Studies project, see Okihiro.

10 In addition to those I have mentioned in note 2, see also Kamboureli and Pon, et al.

11 See, for example, Wente and Wang. See also Cole for a first-hand account of anti-Black policing in Toronto.

12 Much more could be said about the adaptation for television in regards to two things: the marked sanitization of the play's focus on Blackness, and the TV series' Asian pan-ethnic casting. While close analysis of the television series exceeds the purview of the current study, both should be noted. For more on the intricacies of Asian pan-ethnic casting, see Pao.

13 Throughout I will shift between "uprisings," "riots," "rebellion," and "protests" to refer to the events of 29 April 1992 to illustrate the contested terms of naming.

14 For an excellent synopsis of the role that mediation played in representing the "Black Korean Conflict," see Ju Yon Kim's *The Racial Mundane*, 126-37.

15 See Elaine Kim's explanation of the political significance of the renaming in her article, "Home is Where the Han Is," as well as the documentary *Sa-I-Gu*, produced by Christine Choy, Elaine Kim, and Dai Sil Kim-Gibson.

16 For more on Grandison's documentary, see Black and Paradkar.

17 For example, see historian Sean Purdy's article on the links between immigration and public housing policy in Regent Park.

18 I thank Christine Mok for a conversation that helped clarify the analogous relationship between multicultural and diversity projects.

19 Here, I draw on reviews by Nestruck, Schmidt, and Wheeler, as well as Albert Schultz's foreword in Choi. The Wheeler review title, in particular, is illustrative of the kind of universalizing immigrant discourse surrounding *Kim's* that I am describing.

20 In particular, Freeman's description of Rich as "an uneducated black man who speaks in slang and has trouble understanding basic conversation" (74) significantly glosses over nuances of dialogue where Appa and Rich both misunderstand each other, and collapses Rich's idiomatic speech with his educational level (which is nowhere identified).

21 See, for example, Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*; Palumbo-Liu; Shimakawa, and Day, *Alien Capital*.

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