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## The Malleability of Truth and Language in Chay Yew's *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own*

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Chay Yew's plays *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own* do not offer definitive identities for gay Asian men in the Western world, or more specifically in England and America; rather they pose questions regarding the nature of truth and identity. The experimental, unconventional narrative form of these plays expresses a postmodern willingness to examine a world in which the concepts of objective truth and subjective identity are called into question. *Porcelain* approaches these issues by examining the intersectionality of a gay Chinese English man on trial for murder while exploring the institutional issues of moral panics, news media, racism, and homophobia. *A Language of Their Own* examines the relationships among gay Asian Americans alongside the social barriers of language and identity against the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic of the 1990 s. Both of Yew's plays employ few actors, and they rely heavily on clipped and lyrical dialogue. Yew does not seek to influence the audience with elaborate sets, costumes or music, but he focuses on a simple theme or message while utilizing the constructive and performative characteristics of language<sup>1</sup> to examine a reality in which truth is subjective—a proposition wielded to force

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conformity upon groups.

Within the corpus of Asian American literature, Yew's plays, first published in the 1990s, were avant-garde in terms of thematic treatment and experimental form. In 1974, the first Asian American literature anthology, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, was published as the Civil Rights Movement and the Asian American Movement of 1968 revolutionized American higher education, demanding that Ethnic Studies courses be offered. However, this anthology focuses exclusively on the identity of straight Asian men, their masculinity, and patriarchal dominion in the domestic sphere because the anthology aims at debunking white men's "racist myths" and biased stereotypes of Asian men as asexual and effeminate (Cheung 310). In addition, issues related to LGBTQ were a taboo in Asian and Asian American culture, and "AIDS was labelled the 'gay plague'" to which gay men succumbed through same-sex acts (Gander). *Porcelain* (1992) was first produced at the London's Royal Court Theatre, and when it was later produced in Chicago in 2015, Kerry Reid, a theatre reviewer for the *Chicago Tribune*, highlighted the play's "pointed look at desire and difference" and its protagonist's "own self-loathing" and inability to reconcile the "conflicting parts of his identity." *A Language of Their Own* (1995) was first produced at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York, and Vincent Canby, a theatre reviewer for the *New York Times*, called the play "a meditation on love in a chronicle not only of gay love in the age of AIDS, but also of gay love among ethnic outsiders in the age of AIDS." Despite some Asian American artists' disapproval of his gay-themed drama, Yew, a gay Chinese American playwright, is persistent in addressing "elements of gayness" in his works (Swarns). In "Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature," Sau-ling C. Wong and Jeffrey J. Santa Ana identify a pivoting of themes in Yew's plays: a shift from "seeking to 'claim America' to forging a connection between Asia and Asian America," as well as a shift from "centering on race and on masculinity to revolving around the multiple axes of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality" (197). A pivoting of perspectives also is discerned: from a traditional focus on "social history" toward the problem of "being caught in the quandaries and possibilities of postmodernism and multiculturalism" (197). Ultimately, Yew embraces a postmodernist perspective on multiple fronts in his plays in which he is more concerned with "how do we [Asian Americans] live with ourselves and the world at large?" (Swarns).

## Post-Truth Media and Moral Panic in *Porcelain*

*Porcelain* tells the story of John Lee, a 19-year-old gay Chinese English man who is

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imprisoned in London, awaiting trial for the death of a white man killed in a public lavatory during the act of “cottaging,” or sharing anonymous sex. The play presents varying perspectives of John Lee, his psychiatrist, the victim, and a reporter covering the case. With the exception of John Lee, all roles are Voices. They rotate in delivering their perspectives of their characters in the drama. Ultimately John is convicted, and the drama ends with John Lee continuing to fold paper cranes as the populace and media find a new spectacle to obsess over.

*Porcelain* deals with dualisms in a world void of absolutes. The protagonist of the drama, John Lee, spends the story imprisoned, deprived of freedom, as he awaits trial for homicide, but he also is caught between subtler dichotomies: East and West, homosexuality and heterosexuality. The play situates John Lee physically between four white men—the embodied Voices, numbered One, Two, Three, and Four. The play follows postmodern narrative conventions, and it also maintains a postmodern perspective. The theme of relative truth is developed by the information, which is manipulated to present a subjective truth that replaces any notion of self-evident or absolute truth. The Third Voice consistently takes the part of Alan White, a reporter from Channel 4. The reporter’s last name suggests that news in the West filters through white ideology and reflects white observers’ interpretations of events. The play suggests that in the postmodern world, absolutes seem not to exist, and moral compass-readings are preemptively manipulated by biased interpretations. News sources redefine reality, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, to produce a commodified version of truth. In Michael Schudson’s words, the news’s function “is less to increase or decrease the truth value of the messages they [sic] convey than to shape and narrow the range of what kinds of truth can be told” (153). Evidence can be edited out, or even invented, by sources, to fit the narrative that a consumer-audience is prepared to receive.

In “Retrieving Truth: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of Truth,” Jeff Malpas presents the concept of how we may examine truth: “In the modern era [...] truth is unproblematic insofar as the *possibility* of truth is unproblematic” (287). However, the nature of truth is questioned or problematized in the postmodern era. “The possibility of truth” is questioned throughout *Porcelain* in that psychoanalysis, the justice system, and news media all claim to seek to uncover truth. The opening of the play itself reflects the postmodern experience of reality: Voices come and go, and only brief snippets of insight are given into their lives, through a sparing use of dialogue. Any further evidence remains inaccessible to the audience. Malpas highlights the importance of voice and the manner in which spoken utterance in the postmodern sense contrasts with spoken utterance in the pre-postmodern sense: “truth

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is presented within the tradition as the possibility of a transcendent speaking (transcendent because it goes beyond the human context of utterance) of what is real. And the real in turn is understood as unique and exclusive. There is only one reality of which we can speak" (293). Yew employs rotating, disembodied Voices throughout the play. For instance, in a brief conversation between Voice One and Voice Three in Scene 28, Voice One admits that he fabricated his fictional girlfriend named Suzanne because "[to] gain someone's trust, you have to blemish the truth" (Yew 111). When Voice Three asks if Voice One (playing the role of Dr. Worthing) objectively and honestly reports on the romantic relationship between William Hope and John Lee, Voice One states that "[p]erhaps" he is making it "a little more romantic" than he should, and to which Voice Three replies, "This is certainly quite a change from what you told me before" (Yew 112).

John Lee is the only named character. The Voices, however, play numerous parts. The characters of William Hope, Dr. Jack Worthing, and Alan White are played consistently by their respective numbered voices, but the Voices play other roles as well. The fact that the other characters are unnamed allows them to be whitewashed, in a sense. John Lee's isolation from the London society in which he lives is highlighted. All these characters engage in shaping and distorting the truth around them as they deliver their utterances: Dr. Jack Worthing invents a sick wife, William Hope seems to lie to himself and to John Lee about his sexuality, and Alan White is emblematic of the news media as a whole, which creates the story rather than discovers it. Craig Lucas, in his Foreword to Yew's *The Hyphenated American*, observes: Yew's audience is put in a situation in which they must realize that "[n]o character is to be trusted, nor are they ever to be diminished by judgment. All things are possible and nothing is certain. Things change" (ix). Importantly, the play deals with how Alan White manipulates news coverage of homosexual issues before it is disseminated to the public. As a reporter, he is fully aware of the fact that the public should have the same understanding in printed news as the broadcast reporter delivers, due to the public's reliance upon both to check facts and evaluate information. The public relies upon the media and tries to "accept the critic's superior [or more well-informed] judgment" (Newcomb and Hirsch 163).

It is crucial to examine the interpretation of conventions found in the role of Dr. Jack Worthing. When the drama is viewed from the perspective of postmodernism, the name of Dr. Worthing is an important detail to consider. As the character John Lee notices in their first meeting, "Jack Worthing" is the name of the protagonist in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play that satirizes the notions of Victorian sensibility, and particularly, the pliable nature of truth. In Wilde's play, the two main

characters invent an infirm cousin, Earnest and Bunbury, in order to give themselves excuses to visit the city and the country, respectively. Dr. Jack Worthing emulates his namesake by inventing a sick wife in order to get John Lee to speak openly. The doctor is twice a character in a play, and in the case of *Porcelain*, he is played by Voice One. Thus, the play is firmly, and at times confusingly, grounded in postmodernism's use of intertextuality.

This element emphasizes, if somewhat obscurely, one of the subjects at the heart of the play: moral panic instigated by the failure of the media to base reporting on factual, or truthful, evidence. In *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, sociologist Erich Goode defines *moral panic* as "a scare about a threat or supposed threat from deviants or 'folk devils,' a category of people who, presumably, engage in evil practices and are blamed for menacing a society's culture, way of life, and central values" (2). In *Porcelain*, much of the sense of morality derives from the collection of Voices weighing in on the news event. The immediate reactions of ordinary citizens are collected and interspersed alongside those of experts in psychology and criminal law. Between the reporter and the interviewee, there is a tacit understanding that their comments express only opinions. In the case of the professionals, there is an assumption that their comments adhere to established data. The "man on the street" is more easily directed by leading questions because such people generally are eager to have their voices heard.

The means by which a reporter is able to assemble a narrative depends only on having enough footage: "It was almost as if a new story could be written simply by stitching these elements together. There was very little interest in what actually happened; what counted was how closely a news account conformed to the stereotype" (Yew 24). The media make use of this patch-work approach in *Porcelain* primarily for unethical ends. In the play, in an interview with Alan White, Dr. Worthing asks if his comments are off the record, and Alan White assures him, "Oh, definitely. It would be unethical" (Yew 27). The scene ends with White whispering to an unseen producer, "Did we get that sound bite?" (Yew 28). This procedure persists in the interview with Dr. Worthing until Alan White admits that he is "just fishing for particular sound bites" (Yew 17). The ploy is a common tool for feeding upon the susceptibility to fear or panic among the readership.

While the means for encouraging moral panics have evolved alongside technology, the origin of these panics bears a long tradition. In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Stanley Cohen explains the emergence of a moral panic:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined

as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or [...] resorted to. (9)

In *Porcelain*, the “threat to societal values” is the concept of cottaging. The citizens are, for the most part, unfazed by the phenomenon of cottaging, but the news anchors and reporters pursue this angle anyway. Another characteristic of moral panic is this: different communities see problems in different ways, and thus they have different views on what solutions should be considered. Regarding the epidemic of AIDS, Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda note that AIDS, which is closely associated with the homosexual community, demands that the government spend a large budget on “curing and treating the disease,” but that “many heterosexuals may see the problem as avoiding contamination” (164). This issue is brought to light in a scene in the drama in which Alan White interviews a gay man. He raises the issue of cottaging from the vantage point of moral outrage by first asking if cottaging “is a kind of perversion” (Yew 74). Alan White then notes that homosexuals have their own bars and clubs if they feel excluded. He finally asks the interviewee if he believes that “toilet sex spreads homosexuality” (Yew 75). The interviewee, however, is concerned with “job discrimination, police harassment, gay bashing, poor AIDS health care” (Yew 74). Whereas the reality of the hardships of homosexuals is an important topic to the person being interviewed, the guardians of truth have decided what the story must be and how that story must support developing public fear. This fear must not be created for its own sake, but for the sake of giving the consumers of news what they have been led to expect, which then generates higher profits for the media corporations.

The reality of a world without objective truth, amid the phenomena of moral panic, has introduced a dilemma in news coverage. Pablo Boczkowski and Eugenia Mitchelstein define this problem in their book *The News Gap*, a study of the growing disparity between what consumers seek in news and what journalists believe to be newsworthy. Traditional journalists state that “although the news organizations disseminate news about politics, international, and economic matters,” the populace tends to be more interested in stories about “sports, crime, entertainment, and weather” (2). Because the modern landscape of reporting has been shaped by intensified competition and easy access to news, “the supply-demand gap undermines the public service orientation of leading media outlets and their contributions to the democratic process” (5). Alan White’s role in *Porcelain* is that of a reporter concerned

with shaping the news in a way that emphasizes the producer-consumer role of news rather than the role of public service.

This relationship exists not only between the news consumer and news producer but also among those that work together to build moral panic. During his initial interview with Dr. Worthing, the question of money is raised, and the reporter and Dr. Worthing haggle over when he should be paid. Yew introduces the concept early-on in the play that the reporter and the businessman hold symbiotic positions in the media industry. Dr. Worthing assures the reporter, "You'll finally get the ratings your show needs and get yourself some fucking credibility" (Yew 16). Dr. Worthing's cynicism defines news as entertainment. The reporter cuts off Worthing as he presents his expositional information, and White admits that he is "just fishing for particular sound bites" (Yew 17). The role of brand identity is repeated through Alan White's Channel 4 consistently being mistaken for the BBC. Mention also is made of "Kylie Minogue on Capital FM," and the entertainment news show "Good Morning London" as generators of brand identities (Yew 8). Brand identity is important to the news and to other shows built upon that brand, which commodifies reporting for the viewers of programs and the readers of the papers.

The contemporary world is characterized by the driving forces behind media consumption (fear and morality), the nature of what is consumed (brand identity), and the motivation (ratings, capital, etc.) that drives reporting. Yew is most interested, however, in the methods of sensationalization and how Alan White skews the truth or is unconcerned with ethics. In his first interview with Dr. Worthing, Alan White agrees immediately to misrepresent the facts for the sake of ratings. From the outset, he states, "We will say we got this interview from you after the trial" (Yew 15). In the very next line, White assures Dr. Worthing, "We agreed that if you feel there's anything unethical about disclosing privileged information, you needn't answer the questions" (Yew 15). In reporting of the story of the trial, each party—the reporter and the businessman—fulfills a consented position on ethics. The reporter offers that Dr. Worthing may choose not to disclose information, but they reach a consensus on exactly when the interview has taken place.

The hypocrisy intensifies toward the end of White's first interview with Dr. Worthing. Alan White asks some very personal questions, and Dr. Worthing finally responds by confirming that the allegations on his behavior toward patients and colleagues are not true. Alan White then asks him to restate his claim a second and third time, in order to be sure they get the desired audio and visual on record. This event illustrates how a story can be shaped before any facts are confirmed. They know almost nothing about John Lee, but they are preemptively covering all angles of the story in order to pander

to an audience whom they believe to be titillated by sordid details and sensationalism. Alan White's relationship with the truth goes beyond mere disinterest in facts; it entails a complete disregard of them. In a brief scene in which Alan White interviews the inspector who is working on John Lee's case, the inspector gives clipped but factual information. Frustration mounts for Alan White as he tries to pry more speculative statements out of the detective. The inspector admits that he does not know all the facts, and to which White replies, "You don't need facts. Given what you saw, do you believe John Lee is guilty?" (Yew 34). Alan White thus demonstrates his prioritization of editorialized comment over the reporting of facts, which he considers too banal to interest his audience.

Yew returns in the final scene of the play to catching small bits of conversation from the noise on the street. The noise and snatches of conversation shift back to news commentary as the final line of dialogue is delivered. The reporter opens with the tag: "Another crisis at Buckingham Palace" (Yew 116). He then cuts to Boy George. The news cycle has moved beyond John Lee, whose story has been wrung of all elements of fact after White has constructed sellable narrative. John Lee's actual story may exist among disembodied nameless Voices, where facts may lie, hidden and unreported.

## The Murkiness of Truth, Language, and Identity in *A Language of Their Own*

Yew's second play, *A Language of Their Own*, tells the story of separation and a fusing of complex relationships. The drama begins with Oscar and Ming, two gay Chinese American lovers who describe the course of their four-year relationship with each other. Oscar is breaking up with Ming after Oscar has been diagnosed with HIV. Once they separate, Oscar joins a support group in which he meets Daniel, and Ming begins a relationship with a Caucasian head waiter named Robert. The play is primarily narrated initially through clipped, quick conversations between Oscar and Ming, but as the dialogue becomes more complex so too does the plot, and Robert and Daniel begin to assume more substantial roles. The play culminates in Oscar's death, and the characters speak to each other with increasing ambiguity across time and space.

While *Porcelain* paints in broad strokes the issues of a post-truth society through the vehicles of the media and public perceptions, *A Language of Their Own* focuses on four characters and their relationships with each other as they explore love, loss, and identity through the mediation of language. As he does in *Porcelain*, Yew maintains a lyrical style in an unconventional form to underscore a postmodern view that absolute



truth is unattainable. He demonstrates the performative and constructive nature of language, which gives rise to an irreconcilable disconnection between the subjective and objective realms of reality.

The role of postmodern form is as evident in *A Language of Their Own* as it is in *Porcelain*. In "Beyond The Silk Road: Staging a Queer Asian America in Chay Yew's *Porcelain*," Heath A. Diehl states that larger-than-life, or exaggerated, characterization allows the play to be defined by action and "on the ways in which that action is rendered tangible in and through language rather than on the characters' interior psychological motivations, which classic realism emphasizes" (155). Using this stratagem, Yew demonstrates effectively the disconnect between the subjective and objective realms. He also employs purposefully ambiguous interactions between the characters who are not circumscribed by the rules of time or distance. The drama's characters occupy different areas of the stage, and each pair appears to converse in isolation from the other pair. The assumed realms of reality are thus deconstructed: when Ming and Robert are talking to each other, for instance, the segment may end with Ming looking across the stage at Oscar. This device stresses the performative nature of language, which implies double meanings. Intriguingly, Paula A. Treichler comments on the nexus between AIDS and language in her discussion of AIDS as an "epidemic of signification": AIDS remains a frightening, fatal death penalty that we struggle to understand, psychologically, emotionally, and socially, despite progress in medical and scientific research. She further explains, "AIDS is no different in this respect from other linguistic constructions which, in the commonsense view of language, are thought to transmit pre-existing ideas and represent real-world entities and yet in fact do neither." Due to the complicated nexus between language and reality, AIDS is often times not viewed as an epidemic caused by the HIV virus; rather it is viewed as "constructed through language [...]; this construction is 'true' or 'real' only in certain specific ways." However, Treicher warns us that we cannot rely on language to "determine what AIDS 'really' is" and that "we must explore the site where such determinations really occur and intervene at the point where meaning is created: in language" (325).

Early-on, Yew establishes the role that the subjective and objective realms in which language functions throughout the drama. Before the first word is spoken, the staging notes indicate that "in a series of monologues and dialogues, Oscar and Ming often speak to the audience, as if they were lawyers defending different points of view on the same case" (Yew 122). This specific instruction frames the narrative as a court case, and the device highlights the subjective construction of varying versions of the truth. The audience plays the role of the jury, and it is confronted with the unsettling

realization that Yew is not offering concrete answers but posing open-ended questions.

Both Oscar and Ming attempt to navigate the difficulty of identity as gay Asian Americans in a society whose dominant language paints both into stereotyped boxes. Their attempts to grasp each other's language put them at odds, not only with each other but also with society as a whole. In "Racist Love," Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan state that language is used to construct social hierarchies that appear to be innate. These constructions generate social categories of bias and prejudice. For instance, such categories can be used for discrimination against individuals or collective groups, and the categories appear to be specific to different cultures. In similar fashion, the "tyranny of language has been used by white culture to suppress Chinese-American and Japanese-American culture and exclude the Asian-American sensibility from operating in the mainstream of American consciousness" (77). Through the consistent contrasting dualities of Oscar and Ming, Yew presents the further complications of using such linguistic constructions in categories of greater complexity, as is the case for gay Asian American men in a society that limits their possibility of constructing their own personal identity.

In an interview with *American Theatre*, Yew elucidates the notion of a master language that functions as a commanding structure for viewing neutral reality. The interviewer, Steven Drukman, sets the stage for the interview for discussing the way in which language plays an actual role in *A Language of Their Own*. Yew uses language that seems to speak for itself, "from terminology like 'banana' (an assimilationist Asian, yellow on the outside but white on the inside)," as well as such acronyms as "ABC=American-born Chinese" (Drukman 58). In keeping with this linguistic characteristic in the play, Drukman notes that "the acronym informing Yew's drama the most is AIDS," and that the play "demonstrates how the plague has inflected the language of love as it has infected the people we love" (58). This recurring use of language defines interfaces between categorized characters and the other characters inhabiting the same space.

The play argues through its postmodern presentation that no absolute truth can be expressed in language. The characters, therefore, operate through varying degrees of performative behavior and language that express varying levels of authenticity. Further, even their authenticity is continually called into question as infidelity, trust, love, and loyalty are constantly addressed and questioned. For Yew, the "language of love" is loosely defined by its necessarily cryptic nature. This is further complicated by the characters' struggle to find a solid identity footing within gay and Asian American communities that lack defined roles and expectations within the structures imposed by the master language, English. The roles of Oscar and Ming demonstrate a

difficulty in navigating an identity that can be affirmed in neither sphere of the “language” realms of Asian Americans and gay men in U. S. society. In “Beyond Identity Politics: National and Transnational Dialogues in Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight* and Chay Yew’s *A Beautiful Country*,” Nancy Cho touches upon the thematic elements that are discussed in *A Beautiful Country* and in Yew’s larger body of work, stating that the nature of the plays trends toward “performing open-ended dialogues” rather than “prescribing closed answers or moral lessons” (75). Cho notes further that the stereotyped version, or “the ‘official version’ of Asian American identity is notable for its contradictory claims—claims that see Asians either as model minorities or as unassimilable aliens” (75). In *A Language of Their Own*, Yew navigates this gap by emphasizing the gap itself and not by attempting to make an argument that there is a definitive place where a true version exists. He utilizes the differences in language used by Oscar and Ming to navigate this *terra incognita*, while continuing to pose questions rather than deliver a concrete moral thesis.

Throughout the play, there is a persistent contrast in the way that both Oscar and Ming speak. In “Discourses of Belonging: Language and Identities in Gay Asian American Drama,” Astrid Haas highlights the way in which the disparate elements of Oscar and Ming’s use of language demonstrates their educational and social backgrounds:

“Oscar’s speech includes foreign words from a higher social speech register, such as ‘tactile,’ and it reveals his knowledge of European high culture, whereas Ming uses more popular, elementary expressions like ‘way cool’ in his utterances” (154–55). The play’s two parts, “Learning Chinese” and “Broken English,” explicitly emphasize the existence of this difference. The difference in speech not only highlights the disparity in their educational and social backgrounds but it also demonstrates their contrasting handling of their relationships.

The play begins with the end of Ming and Oscar’s relationship. As noted earlier, they share both complementary and opposite traits, and these exist at nearly every level of their identities, including the phrasing by which they terminate their relationships. Oscar, having been diagnosed with HIV, has a view of his situation that exists in stark negatives. When he breaks up with Ming, he states, “I don’t think we should see each other anymore” (Yew 123). Ming, on the other hand, remains open to more positive possibilities. When he breaks up with Robert, he says, “I think we should see other people” (Yew 187). This inverse phrasing *not seeing each other* versus *seeing others* distances Ming in his attempt to mark his identity as diametrically opposed to that of Oscar, even though the underlying sentiment remains the same. This difference in language is presented most starkly in their reception of Oscar’s HIV diagnosis.

In describing the disintegration of their relationship, Ming alludes to the central

problem, stating, “He got sick,” to which Oscar bluntly corrects with “AIDS.” Ming immediately replies, to soften the blow, by restating simply, “Sick” (Yew 137). The difference in language again demonstrates an attempt to shape reality through a performed identity. Oscar is resigned to a fatalistic narrative, which possibly is less euphemistic and well-grounded in reality, while Ming exhibits a mediating denial of the gravity of the situation. Haas emphasizes this linguistic relation to discourse theory: “it is language that most profoundly shapes people’s perception of the world [...]. As the key medium of communication, verbal utterances imply their speaker’s claim to ‘truth’ and authority” (139). The asymmetric assimilation of Oscar and Ming into America and English puts them at odds with each other and their own constructed realities. The language they employ is not congruent with expressing their innermost feelings with each other, as Yew demonstrates the nonexistence of any greater or absolute truth with reference to which they might find common ground.

In “Gay Drama / Queer Performance?” Torsten Graff notes, “Performance opens up an ephemeral space of autonomy for alternative voices that allows for the resignification of official history and culturally institutionalized ‘truth’” (17). Yew is fully aware of the relationship of performance and constructed truth—a meta component recognized early on in the play. Oscar reflects upon the abruptness of the end of his liaison with Ming and ponders whether he should have rehearsed the act more thoroughly: “Some people like to rehearse their speeches, say the right things, use the right words, wear the right color-coordinated clothes, put on the right music—put on a Broadway production just to ease the pain” (Yew 125). This meta commentary on Oscar’s blunt comment, which contrasts it with the artificiality of most speech acts, deemphasizes the theatrical nature of queerness on Yew’s stage by running countercurrent to stereotypical portrayals of superficially considered gay characters in various media. Graff explains the effect that this meta comment implicitly produces: “Queer drama is metatheatrical drama. By theatricalizing theatricality, that is, by exposing the necessary excess defining theatricality itself, queer plays aim at the denaturalization of sex and gender through strategies of resignification” (21).

Like the relationship between Lone Lee and his conservative Chinese father in *Porcelain*, the relationship between Oscar, Ming, and their respective parents explores the complicated reality of being openly gay while being obviously Asian American. Sau-ling C. Wong and Jeffrey J. Santa Ana point out that Asian American queer writings are “dangerous” because they are “inherently political in their attention and challenge to issues and concerns of cross-cultural identity politics. They call for the ‘unfixing’ of identity categories in favor of a concept of self that emerges from the fusion of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity” (207). These serious issues are

explored further in Oscar and Ming's respective attitudes toward their parents. Ming has come out to his parents, who stop speaking to him, while Oscar hides his identity from his parents. Yew presents both ends of the spectrum of this situation and focuses on the lack of any universally acceptable resolution in the conflict. Yew's attention to the opposing alternatives is important not in its posing of the question but in its lack of clear resolution. Yew's postmodern attitude implies, of course, that there can be no absolute resolution deriving from reference to any absolute truth.

In a concluding summary of the themes of identity and expression in *Porcelain*, Ha Diehl notes that the play "remarks upon the need for alternative identity formations that more accurately reflect the diversity within Asian American communities" (162). While Yew recognizes this need, he does not prescribe, but he "suggests that until these identity formulations are explored, gay Asian American men will be sentenced to life without parole under the watchful supervision of others" (163). In contrast to the macro drama that unfolds over the airwaves in *Porcelain*, Yew explores micro drama that unfolds in interpersonal relationships. *A Language of Their Own*, while not offering any more definitive solution than *Porcelain*, depicts a small but powerful feeling of hope expressed in the final reconciliation between Robert and Ming, which ends with Robert beginning to tell Ming that he still loves him. He only gets out a stammering: "I—I still—still," before Ming completes his thought with an acknowledging: "I know. I know" (Yew 228), which concludes the play. For all the duplicity and ambiguity of language that Yew demonstrates throughout his plays, any final conclusion rests on an understood language that transcends the "master language." The structures through which the characters operate are both apart from and representative of the use of language in the real world—a hyperbolic and exaggerated recognition of the ways in which identity is performed through speech, and the degrees by which it is accurately or inaccurately interpreted. For all the complexities inherent in communication illustrated in a postmodern narrative, any conclusion must remain unspoken in the never-ending conversation that forms, deforms, and reforms the constant restructuring of the performance through which we enact, or are coerced to enact, the drama of our lives. This appears to be the reality—the reality in which there is no absolute referent for word *truth*—that Yew conveys in these plays.

## Conclusion

Chay Yew published both *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own* in the 1990 s. According to David Henry Hwang, Yew, an Asian American "third-wave" playwright

(a term referring primarily to playwrights of the 1990s through the first decade of the twentieth century), contributes significantly to the “world of Asian American theatre” by moving beyond traditional ideas concerning identity and the cultural space that had been sought by “first-wave” and “second-wave” playwrights. Yew, like many other “third-wave” playwrights, “regard[s] ethnicity as simply one piece in a much more complicated mosaic of identity” and addresses various issues outside the thematic boundaries of racial stereotypes of identity (ix-xii). *Porcelain* and *A Language of Their Own* demonstrate Yew’s attempt to make the genre of Asian American drama more diverse and more opaque because Yew states that there is no single Asian American theatrical canon: contemporary playwrights incorporate elements from both traditional and experimental dramaturgy, as they explore issues related to “diaspora, immigration and citizenship,” which both enrich and diversify the genre (Yew, Introduction xxvi). That explains why David Román states that Yew wishes to challenge and question the “stability of ‘Asian-American’” identity by writing about themes and issues that traditionally have not been within the “normative world of Asian-America.” Román later praises Yew for his “dramaturgical versatility,” which characterizes his “theatrical vision” (xi). Unarguably, the plays discussed in this article do not attempt to de-stereotype Asian Americans nor to define what it means to be Asian American. Rather, they focus upon the politics of news reportage, language, homophobia, human interaction, the AIDS epidemic, and the problematization of truth—all of which were absent in Asian American drama of the 1970s and 1980s. Yew’s artistic innovation and thematic treatment of these issues emphasize the Asian individual cultural sensibilities and the diversity of the Asian experience in the West.

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## Footnotes

1

In this article, we employ this definition of *performative language*, which is noted by Angela Esterhammer: the "societal discourse and power structure" that "define verbal performativity" (xv). More specifically, based on the perspectives developed in speech-act theory, the effectiveness of *parole* is significantly determined by "the conventions accepted by the relevant sociopolitical community," its context, "the identity of the speaker and the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, and the grammatical form of the utterance" (xiv).

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