

Spring 2019

母语/Mothertongue

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母语/Mothertongue

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Arts of Bard College

By
Janine Sun Rogers

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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So much love to my collaborator Madeline Qi. I cannot imagine going through this process with anyone but you. Thank you for bringing this piece to life with such beauty, grace, and patience throughout the whole process. So proud of us.

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For my family, especially Yusong, Yumei, Yuzhu. For Yazhen, my namesake. Thank you all for teaching me.

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INTRODUCTION

“In my dream, I speak to my mother in her own tongue

But my western nose grows until it knocks her off her feet

And she cries at the sight of the foreigner.”

I came up with this random fragment of text in the middle of the night, and realized that there was a pressing subject I had never made a theatre piece about: my racial identity. My mother is Chinese and my father is a white American, and while I feel strongly connected to my identity as a member of the Chinese diaspora and an American, I have always struggled with not quite fitting into Asian or white social circles. I decided to spend my senior year exploring my Asian American identity through making a performance about it, and writing this paper. I partnered with my close friend Madeline Qi, a compelling performer of a similar racial background to me with whom I’ve already had in-depth talks about being a member of the Asian American community while mixed race. We decided to create a piece together that explored this identity and experience.

I was initially interested in using Puccini’s opera *Madama Butterfly* as source text, a story of a white American naval officer who travels to Japan and has a child with a young Japanese woman. The woman later sends the child to live with the American and his new American wife, and commits suicide. I wanted to explore this child’s story, imagining the empty space left by the absent mother and homeland. I began looking into other half-Asian origin stories, such as the musical *Miss Saigon*, a retelling of *Madama Butterfly* in the context of the Vietnam War, and the poetry of Ocean Vuong: “An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese

farmgirl. Thus my Mother exists. Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me. / Yikes.”¹ I also spent a lot of time listening to *Pinkerton*, a 1995 album by the rock group Weezer that was inspired by *Madama Butterfly*.

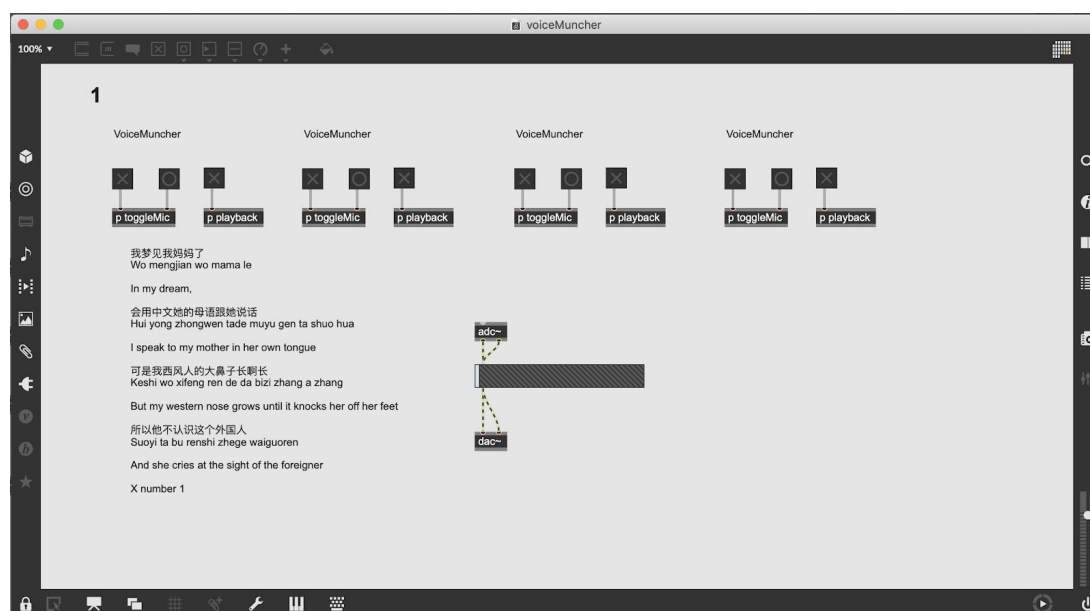
I also had my own text that I wanted to incorporate: “In my dream, I speak to my mother in her own tongue/But my western nose grows until it knocks her off her feet/And she cries at the sight of the foreigner.” I was fascinated by the idea that if I were to travel back in time to meet my mother in Beijing, even without a language barrier, my mother would not recognize me as a possible family member. I imagined applying this scenario to the fictional child of *Pinkerton* and Cio-Cio-San in *Madama Butterfly*, and staging a dream sequence in which he is able to meet and confront his mother. I began to realize, however, that I was interested in creating something that spoke more directly to my own personal experiences. Professor Gideon Lester, my advisor at the time, suggested I hold onto the emblem of the mixed and abandoned child but move towards making a more autobiographical piece.

At the same time, I began to experiment with processing live sound. By programming with the sound software Max/MSP, I created a few different “stagings” of my text that utilized various reverbs, delays, and/or loops. I workshopped these with various professors and classmates. I read a paper on the effect of headphones in the courtroom for an anthropology class, and was immediately attracted to the idea of having all audience members wearing headphones. The distancing effect that the headphones would create felt somehow familiar to me, relevant to my cultural experiences. I was intrigued by the idea of audience members performing cultural Chinese activities and only hearing the sounds of those activities filtered

¹ Vuong, Ocean. *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Fort Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2016.

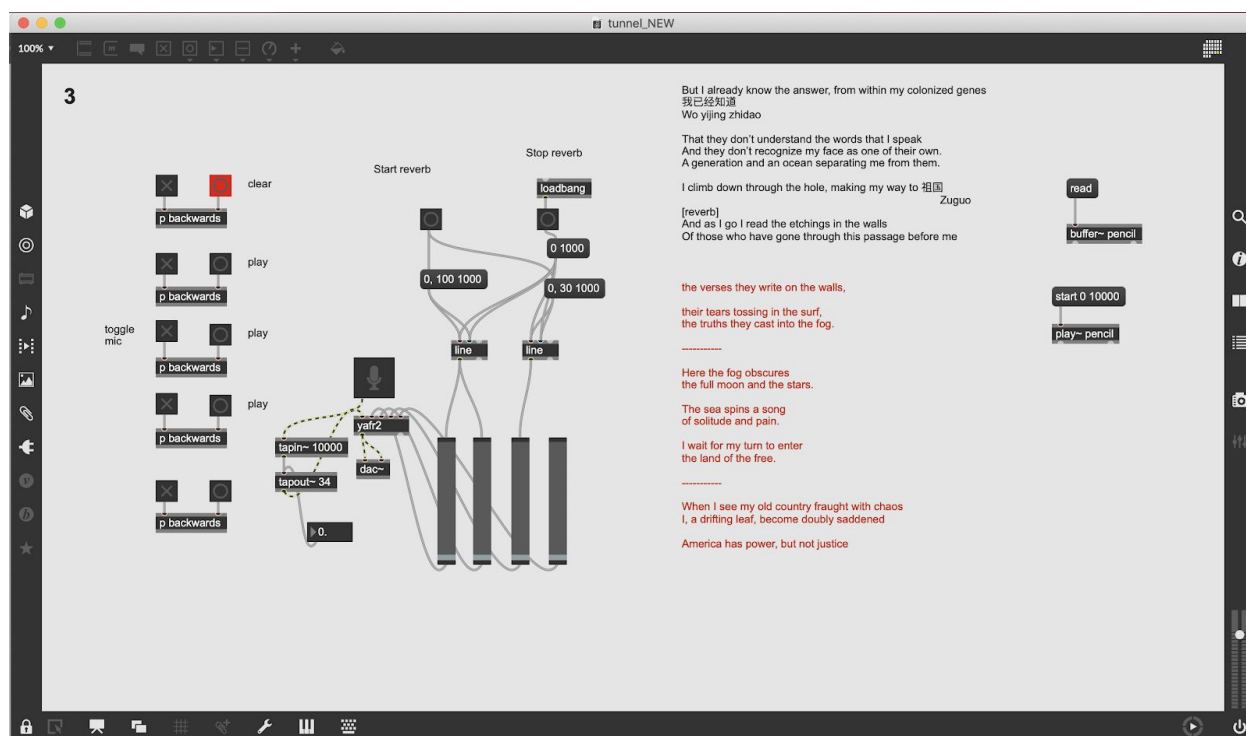
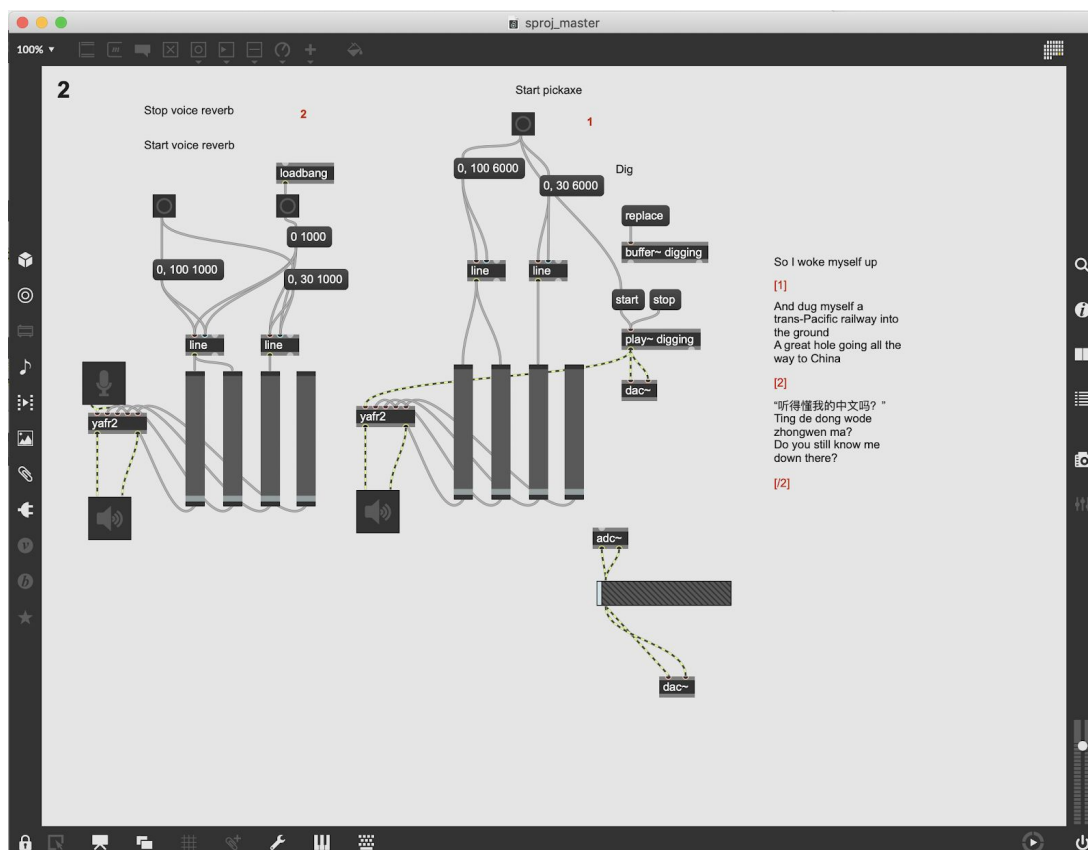
through headphones and computer programs meant to distort the audio, as well as being prompted to speak at points and having to hear their own voices as well.²

An early draft of the piece was structured as a dumpling-making workshop which morphed into storytelling. For a test run, I prepared dumpling-making materials³ and had a few classmates come sit with Madeline. She opened by teaching everyone how to fold the dumplings and spoke about the significance dumplings held in her life, before going into a script that I had written for her, supplemented by a complicated Max/MSP patch that required her to toggle various sound effects and trigger audio cues herself. See pictures below:



² See Section III: Sound

³ See appendix for recipe



The early script comprised three short acts: my original dream narrative, a sequence that invoked early Chinese American railroad labor through digging a hole to China, and a reading of excerpts from poems inscribed in the walls of Angel Island, the San Francisco immigration checkpoint through which many early Asian American immigrants passed. I appreciated this script for its references to early Asian American history, but I realized that I found Madeline's honest conversation with the audience members much more compelling. It was also difficult for Madeline to navigate performing, dumpling-making, and working the Max patch all at the same time. I ended up deciding to cut the script and Max patch completely, and just focus on Madeline's ad-libbed conversation with the audience members.

Madeline and I had many long talks about the icon of the dumpling. Madeline grew up making dumplings at every major celebration for holidays and birthdays, starting out just helping to arrange dumplings on baking sheets before being promoted to a dumpling-folder. For me, dumplings had a more mysterious quality. My mother always cooked pre-made, frozen dumplings, and I always felt that my inability to make dumplings was a symptom of my disconnect from my Chinese heritage, along with my lack of Mandarin fluency or any experience visiting China. Madeline and I decided to create a space where the act of dumpling-folding explicitly acted as a signifier for one's Chinese-ness, to articulate the pressure associated with dumpling-making and successfully performing as a Chinese person in general.

The format of the final piece was as follows: six participants meet me in the lobby of the Fisher Center, right outside the studio where the actual performance was to take place. I greeted them and chatted with them as myself until everyone had arrived, then gave a pre-show announcement inviting them to interact with my performer, asking if anyone had any food

allergies or objections to being videotaped/photographed, then sending them to wash their hands. Once everyone had reassembled, I led them into the studio, greeting Madeline loudly, saying “美玲好,” greeting Madeline in her Chinese name. I also made every participant take off their shoes, a common courtesy in Chinese households. Madeline invited all of us to sit and put on our headphones, and reminded us that it is Chinese New Year’s Eve and that we need to make enough dumplings to feed our families. As the audience members makes dumplings, Madeline critiqued them and implied that the Chinese members of their family would be proud or disappointed, depending on the quality of the dumpling. Madeline would also use the dumpling-folding skills as a metric to determine how Chinese a person was, with explicit lines such as “You’ve folded the dumplings so well, I can tell you’re a real Chinese person.” I also began to play certain sound effects that established a kitchen setting, then introduced different bits of audio related to a Chinese identity.⁴ As time went on, the sounds became more and more distorted and Madeline became more and more distressed about the upcoming dinner for which we were preparing, the quality of everyone’s dumplings including her own, and her own anxieties concerning her identity and relationship to her family. At a point near the end, she typically goes as far as to throw out a particularly bad audience-made dumpling. Madeline also begins to compare herself to me, making me out to be perfectly in touch with my Chinese side. At the end, when the sound has degraded to the point where it is just noise, Madeline asks me to turn the music off. I oblige and, after emptying out a bag of frozen dumplings, alternate between English and Chinese as I speak my original text: “我梦见我妈妈了/In my dream, I speak to my mother in her own tongue/会用中文他的母语跟她说话/But my western noise grows until it

⁴ See Section III: Sound

knocks her off her feet.但是我的西风人的大鼻子涨啊涨/And she cries at the sight of the foreigner/所以她不认识这个外国人.” The piece ends there, and Madeline and I chat with the audience members as we all put our dumplings into plastic bags, which audience members are invited to take home.

Because of ideas surrounding sound and participation I realized that my piece would not fit in the format of the Theatre and Performance Festival, which would require a proscenium staging that played nicely with the other student projects, from a logistical perspective. Most “independent” senior projects such as mine (that is, outside the festival) utilize the Old Gym, a student-run black box theatre on campus. The Old Gym, however, did not seem to be a good fit for my project. While the space offered impressive storage and lighting capabilities (neither of which I required for my piece), in my experience it lacked a reliable sound system or any kind of professional maintenance. The personality of the space felt off as well– it was much too large for what I envisioned to be a contained and intimate performance, and since I was inspired by installation and performance art I wasn’t interested in a space that felt too much like a theater. Furthermore, the Old Gym receives so many project proposals per semester that not every piece is guaranteed a slot– many projects are rejected every year, including senior projects. I didn’t want to risk relying completely on this space, and thought it would make more sense to leave room for projects that would be better matches for the Old Gym– those that required more in the way of set, costume, lighting, and storage/audience space.

I was more interested in Resnick Studio in the Fisher Center, which had a reliable sound system with which I was familiar, underwent regular maintenance by the Fisher Center production staff, with whom I was also familiar, and ambiance-wise felt like a much better fit.

While the studio is generally free for students to reserve for rehearsals and other projects, students do not typically use the space for their senior project performances since it is assumed they would need support from Fisher Center staff. However, because of my own technical experience and professional relationship with members of the Fisher Center team, I was confident that my project would be sufficiently self-contained and that I could work out any technical needs with minimal support from Fisher Center staff. In the end, the Theatre and Performance department generously allowed me to use the studio space for my performance. Through meetings with production management, and the audio/visual and lighting supervisors, I was able to find performance times that worked with my own and the Fisher Center's schedule, and address all my technical needs.



(Left to right) My performer Madeline Qi and test participants Imogen Thomas and Bill Wang during a draft showing)



The final setup

Another challenge pertaining to my choice not to present my project in the Theatre and Performance festival was publicity. Because my performance would be separate from other senior projects and not advertised through the Fisher Center, it was up to me personally to get the word out. And since my piece could only take a handful of audience members at a time, it was crucial interested parties are aware of how to sign up for a slot beforehand. I enlisted my friend Ella Garcia, a photographer, to help me launch a social media campaign to spread the word. We staged a series of photographs with Madeline that juxtaposed a traditionally Chinese and all-American identity:





I made a Facebook event page for the project, and I, Ella, and Madeline all shared photos from the photoshoot to our Instagram pages, with links to sign up for the performance. We got responses immediately, and within about a week we were completely sold out, with a growing waitlist. We had one performance Wednesday evening for professors, three performances Friday night, and six performances throughout the day on Saturday. We had a few no-shows on Friday, but after emailing, texting, and/or Facebook messaging each audience member for Saturday's showings I am proud to say that every person who RSVP'ed showed up to the performance.

In the following sections, I will outline the research and thought behind each major component in my senior project performance. The first section, on Asian American history, details the historical context of Asian Americans performing race, to which I consider my senior project an addition. The second section, on interactivity, investigates the use of audience participation and immersivity. The third section, on sound, dissects the different aural elements of my piece.

SECTION I: HISTORY

A common thread throughout my research into Asian American history, and musings on my identity as a mixed Chinese woman, is the theme of exclusion. The word “exclusion” holds an emotional weight, calling to mind childhood bullies and cliquey friend groups, yet also possesses a strong political significance in Asian American history as it references the name of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, recognized to be the first law barring all members of an ethnic group from immigrating to America. Thus from the earliest immigrants, this theme of exclusion has followed the Asian American community— in political scientist Claire Jean Kim’s 1999 essay “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans” she cites Michael Omi and Howard Winant in saying “Native Americans faced genocide, blacks were subjected to racial slavery, Mexicans were invaded and colonized, and Asians faced exclusion.”⁵ In my project, I have found it helpful to research the various ways Asian Americans have reacted to exclusion and place my own experience, as a mixed-race Asian American exploring feelings of exclusion from the Asian American community itself, in a larger context. I’ve found that just as I find myself preoccupied with performing Asian in order to fit into and legitimize my status within the Asian American community, Asian American history is intertwined with performing and emulating other races in order to fit into the American community as a whole. In this section, I draw upon a few moments in Asian American history to explore the role of performance in Asian American identity.

Asian Americans have long experimented with fitting into blackness and whiteness. Asian Americans are excluded from the black/white dichotomy typically recognized in conversations about race in America and occupy a space that cannot be easily defined by

⁵ Kim, Claire Jean. "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (March 1999): 105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329299027001005>.

traditional models of racial stratification.⁶ Claire Jean Kim proposed a racial triangulation theory, which plots racial categories on a two-dimensional plane: one axis ranks “superiority” to “inferiority” in order to illustrate the relative power and privilege held by the racial group in question, and the other ranges from “foreigner” to “insider.”⁷ By Kim’s metrics, Asian Americans are ranked between “Blacks” and “Whites” in terms of superiority, and heavily on the side of foreigner. According to Kim, Asian Americans’ relationship to both white and black American society is complicated by their perceived status as perpetual outsiders. Asian Americans have thus adopted the tactics of performing whiteness or blackness in order to find a space and voice in American society.

Asian Americans are commonly credited with assimilating into white culture, to the point that “the Asian American struggle has at times rested upon the appeal to be considered White.”⁸ This is notably demonstrated in the 1922 case *Ozawa v. United States*, in which Japanese immigrant Takao Ozawa reasoned that since his skin was “white in color,” and that some Japanese were “whiter than the average Italian, Spaniard, or Japanese,” he was therefore entitled to American citizenship, a right reserved for white persons.⁹ Besides in appearance, Asian Americans have faced pressure to perform as white in their actions— from life choices adhering to the American dream to everyday performances of white mannerisms. In her book *The Racial Mundane*, Ju Yon Kim describes how early Chinese immigrants’ everyday actions, such as personal and domestic hygiene, fueled anti-immigrant sentiments— “The mundane could be

⁶ Xu, Jun, and Jennifer C. Lee. "The Marginalized 'Model' Minority: An Empirical Examination of the Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Social Forces* 91, no. 4 (June 2013): 1363-97. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43287504>.

⁷ Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans.” 108.

⁸ *Ibid.*,

⁹ Lee, Erika. *The Making of Asian America*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2015: 121.

called on to manifest racial difference and support claims of a fundamental incompatibility, but also arouse anxieties by suggesting the potential for traversal.”¹⁰ Kim suggests that the small details of an Asian American’s everyday performance could be seen as symptomatic of a greater racial divide, but could also be seen as contagious and a threat to white society. A person’s everyday habits and customs, when deviant from a dominant cultural norm, are thus grounds for exclusion. Differences in everyday behaviors not only imply a fundamental racial divide, but also stirs anxieties over the contagiousness of said behaviors. An immigrant’s behavior thus threatens fragile white cultures and communities. Because of this, Asian Americans have performed whiteness for their own survival and right to stay in the country.

Asian American culture is also associated with performing blackness in order to find their place in the Civil Rights Movement. In Karen L. Ishizuka’s book *Serve the People: Making America in the Long Sixties*, she quotes Gary Okihiro as he asks, “Is yellow black or white?” and answers “Yellow is emphatically neither white nor black; but insofar as Asians and Africans share a subordinate position to the master class, yellow is a shade of black, and black, a shade of yellow.”¹¹ Okihiro defines the Asian American community as its own distinct identity, while aligning with black community and recognizing its marginalized status. As a result of this sentiment, the Yellow Power movement arose during the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s, taking inspiration by and collaborating with the Black Power movement. In her essay for *Gidra* Magazine, Amy Uyematsu writes, “Asian Americans can no longer afford to watch the black-and-white struggle from the sidelines... A yellow movement

¹⁰ Kim, Ju Yon. *The Racial Mundane*. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2015.

¹¹ Ishizuka, Karen L. *Serve the People: Making America in the Long Sixties*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2018: 46

has been set into motion by the black power movement.”¹² As a result of this alliance, many Asian Americans began to imitate black American culture. As Daryl J. Maeda writes in *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America*, “Performances of blackness catalyzed the formation of Asian American identity... the Red Guards adopted the Black Panthers’ language and style... as a political statement that underline their espousal of the Panthers’ racial politics.”¹³ Asian American activists adopted black American behaviors as part of their radical praxis— the act of performing as their allies was a way to politically demonstrate in their own personal lives.

This behavior can be seen In Frank Chin’s 1972 play *Chickencoop Chinaman*. In *Chickencoop Chinaman*, the Asian-American main characters co-opt black American culture as a way to find their own sense of power— by sounding black over the phone, they’re able to score an interview with the black trainer of their black idol, a black, hypermasculine boxer. Japanese-American Kenji, who earned the nickname “BlackjapKenji” in high school due to his mimicry of black American behavior, is criticized by another non-black character for mocking black culture. Kenji responds that since he grew up immersed in black American culture, this racial performance is actually most natural to him: “Maybe we act black, but it’s not fake.”¹⁴ In Kenji’s self-defense, he draws a distinction between acting and faking— he acknowledges that he does “act black,” that he is co-opting behaviors that belongs to a separate cultural group than his own, but that it still holds a sense of authenticity and comradeship to him. Playwright Frank Chin may have been intended this line as a response to accusations of blackface minstrelsy towards

¹² Uyematsu, Amy. "The Emergence of Yellow Power in America." *Gidra*, October 1969, 8-11.

¹³ Maeda, Daryl J. *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009: 75

¹⁴ Frank Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Act I Scene II

the Asian American community. Maeda defines minstrelsy as “the performance of blackness by whites and soon-to-be whites in order to partake in while simultaneously disavowing the pleasures thought to reside in unrestrained blackness.”¹⁵ While the characters of Chickencoop Chinaman do partake in the pleasures of blackness as they embody their own ideas of black hypermasculinity and virility, they do not disavow it. Chin suggests that Asian Americans’ performance of blackness is in solidarity and identification with the black community, rather than acting as a punchline. This performance signals a change from previous generations, signalling “an explicit rejection of rather than an assimilation into whiteness.”¹⁶ Asian Americans attempted to counter their exclusion by assimilating instead into the black community, identifying with a shared marginalization while attempting to co-opt their status as insiders, rather than foreigners.

In my experience of the Asian American community, I’ve found my peers attempt to carve out a space for themselves in American culture through their own distinct identity as Asian Americans, rather than assimilation with other ethnic groups. Online communities, such as the massive Facebook group Subtle Asian Traits, are sites of cultural identification through the sharing of memes and anecdotes that supposedly call upon a collective Asian experience. This includes indulging in food and drink associated with Asia such as bubble tea, Korean barbecue, or dim sum; electronic music festivals and rave culture; visits to the “motherland”; common Asian phenotypes such as dark hair, monolids, and the “Asian glow,” and jokes relying on a grasp of an Asian language or experience with Asian language learning. These online spaces, while meant to provide a sense of belonging for members of Asian descent, are often perhaps

¹⁵ Maeda, Daryl J. *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America*. 90

¹⁶ Ibid.

unwittingly bigoted and exclusive. Subtle Asian Traits is rife with homophobic, anti-black, and ableist language, and Facebook-based dating group Subtle Asian Dating openly rejects any potential member whom the moderators deem not Asian enough¹⁷. More subtly, these communities perpetuate the idea that Asian identity can be summed up through these allegedly universal experiences. I joined Asian-centric online communities in the hopes of finding a sense of belonging, but instead found the same rhetoric that excluded me from the Asian American community throughout my life.

As a mixed-race Chinese American, my identity was often scrutinized by my monoracial Asian peers due to my failure to convincingly perform Asian— my Western physical characteristics, inability to speak Chinese, mediocre grasp of Chinese cuisine, lack of experience visiting China itself. In my piece 母语/Mothertongue, my performer embodies these characteristics and struggles with them throughout the performance, as well as invites the audience to struggle along with her. Madeline critiques the dumpling-making skills of herself as well as the audience members, establishing a stark metric by which a person is evaluated on how much they've earned their supposed Chinese identity by how masterfully they fold a dumpling. Madeline struggles with the other characteristics as well— as I walk in I confidently call out a greeting to her in Chinese, to which she sheepishly responds in English; during performances in which an audience member creates an unusual dumpling, I identify it as belonging to a certain region and justify them under Madeline's ignorantly critical eye; and Madeline bursts out at the end of the piece expressing her insecurities regarding her identity. In further developing this piece, I'm interested in exploring each of these other characteristics further than a passing

¹⁷ Discussion within private Facebook group

comment. This may take the form of independent pieces to my original– Madeline and I have discussed creating a one-on-one performance that would create a high-pressure simulation of the “一对一,” or one-on-one language instruction class.

As I described the end of the piece, after Madeline confesses her feelings of inadequacy next to my relatively more adept performance of the Chinese identity, I aggressively empty a bag of frozen dumplings out on the table, and speak some text: “[translating between Chinese and English] In my dream, I speak to my mother in her own tongue/But my Western nose grows until it knocks her off her feet/And she cries at the sight of the foreigner.” In this final gesture, I reveal to Madeline that despite my apparent mastery of the skills that she believes she needs to learn in order to be accepted as Chinese American, I still am not satisfied with how I am able to perform my race. My argument is thus that a racial identity does not come along with mastering a language, or the cooking, or geographical and cultural knowledge– those were all a part of a performance of race, while my actual identity still lacked legitimacy. As for what a racial identity does comprise– that is left ambiguous by the end of the performance.

SECTION II: INTERACTIVITY

“Art is a state of encounter,”¹⁸ writes Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics*, a foundational book in the realm of interactive performance and art. I kept this in mind while creating and performing 母语/MotherTongue, framing the piece as an “encounter” with the pressures of a mixed-race experience. Immersion and interactivity were essential parts of my performance. It didn’t feel satisfying to simply tell the audience about my experience—I was more interested in inviting them to live the experience beside me.

In this era of social media, it is likely that any audience member is familiar with being told stories of marginalized identities. My own social media feed is consistently filled with first-person confessionals and thinkpieces dedicated to sharing an experience of being othered. I saw this performance as an opportunity to truly share my own experience through inviting audience members to participate in it with me, rather than having it performed for them. Bourriaud writes that in a contemporary over-mechanized society, art “creates free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the ‘communication zones’ that are imposed upon us.” The phrase “communication zones” brings social media to mind, as a default space in which everyday discussions are not only encouraged, but engineered. 母语/MotherTongue was an attempt to deviate from the structure of the read-only narratives that I encounter daily online, creating an experience for my audience that would last beyond the duration of the piece and facilitate a deeper connection.

¹⁸ Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon, France: Les presses du réel, 2002.

In this piece, my audience was treated as if they were, like me, of mixed Chinese descent. My performer expected them have a certain cultural know-how associated with being Chinese, and treated them accordingly– if they folded the dumplings well, they were praised for their Chinese-ness, and if their technique was lacking, they were a disappointment to half their family. This was a crucial element for me, as I was determined create a performance that went beyond simply telling a story– I wanted audience members to live in my head and hands for the duration of the piece. I felt as though there was enough media from marginalized voices targeting a majority audience, and I was interested in creating a piece that challenged that dynamic and did not assume a white audience. I also felt that the discomfort of being asked to perform as a different race would be productive, leading audience members towards the outsider effect associated with being mixed race.

However, I do question how radical this structure was. As Claire Bishop writes in *Artificial Hells*, regarding participatory art, “the artist both relinquishes and reclaims power: he or she agrees to temporarily lose control over the situation before returning to select, define and circulate its representation”¹⁹ While I gave the audience members the power to accept or decline their roles, and the performance was ostensibly in their hands, my collaborator was prepared to combat any uncooperative audience member and had rehearsed responses– she would chalk up any audience comment contradicting a mixed-race identity to a case of self-denial, and prepared derisive feedback if an audience member went off-script with their dumpling-folding methods. Though audience members were participating in an emotionally- and intellectually-involved way, they actually held very little autonomy. While interactivity in my piece does help position

¹⁹ Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. N.p.: Verso, 2012: 237

audience members in a half Asian identity, the audience isn't given any real power over the narrative.

This dynamic calls to mind Sophie Nield's critique of the use of masks in Punchdrunk's work: "Could the hood, the mask, the enforced anonymity, perhaps not be merely to give the audience the illusion of freedom? Does it not also continue to protect the theatre from having to see us seeing it, to watch itself be watched."²⁰ The audience's assumed racial identity is a mask of sorts— as I invite them to participate actively as cohabiters of the mixed-race experience, I am also muzzling them into the position that best fits my piece's narrative. I've found this dynamic to be paradoxically fitting, reminiscent of the mixed-race experience itself: having any degree of ethnic ambiguity leaves room for others to impose their own judgement. Though there is the illusion that identity can be formulated and claimed personally by individuals, I've found that my own identity relies more on the opinions of those around me— while in primarily non-Asian spaces I become more aware of my Asian identity and am more likely to receive comments on it, while in Asian spaces I feel more aware of my whiteness. This theatrical element thus suits the lived experience of a mixed-race person, having an illusion of choice only to bend to the perceptions of others.

I was also interested in exploring the role of labor in my performance. Besides the mental work of assuming a new identity, audience members are also called upon to perform the physical labor of making dumplings. These dumplings are embedded with a complicated weight: my performer explicitly establishes that quality of dumplings directly translates to each participant's acceptance into the Chinese community. When discussing the human body as a tool, Claire

²⁰ Freshwater, Helen. "You Say Something": Audience Participation and The Author." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 21, no. 4 (May 2017): 406. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2011.610308>.

Bishop cites Pierre Klossowski's 1970 book *Living Currency*, which investigates the relationship between desire and production. Embedded into each dumpling is a sense of desire and longing as Klossowski describes in *Living Currency*: "Just like labor, emotion itself "produces" as well, that the voluptuous emotion "manufactures" an image... so that the emotion can treat it solely as an object, i.e., as the fantasy through which the emotion is developed and grows."²¹ These dumplings, along with being the hard-earned fruits of labor, become emotional objects and stand in for a certain fantasy of cultural acceptance and satisfactory racial performance. By the end, Madeline's dismissal and destruction of the audience's dumplings carries that much more weight. The emotional associations with the handmade dumplings are also drawn into stark contrast when I reveal the frozen dumplings at the very end— they signify a surface-level, commercial Orientalism also implied by my "China Chalet" tee, the saccharine background music, and the traits that Madeline lists that supposedly affirm my cultural status and identity.

I am not the first artist to use food as an iconic cultural artifact— the use of food in performance appears throughout the Asian diaspora, notably in Rirkrit Tiravanija's exhibition *Untitled/Free*, installed in New York's 303 Gallery in 1992 and remounted at MoMA in 2012. In this piece, Tiravanija converted gallery space into a kitchen, and served Thai curry and rice to museum goers. This piece fostered engagement and conversation between participants, supplemented by the communal nature of a group meal and the iconography of Thai curry. The fragrant nature of curry, as well as its status as most Americans' only direct interaction with Thai culture, makes for a strong and commanding cultural symbol in a gallery space. I believed that dumplings would do the same: they hold symbolic power to those outside the Chinese

²¹ Klossowski, Pierre. *Living Currency*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2017.

community, cultural and muscle memories to those within the Chinese community, and strong somatic elements through the scent of garlic and sesame oil, as well as the tactile involvement of actually folding them. A major difference between my piece and Tiravanija's is that while the curry is digested and disappeared in real time throughout the gallery visit, my audience members' dumplings return home with them. In a response to performance artist Sam Rose's 2011 interactive performance *Bed of Roses*, Helen Iball writes, "And yet. . . Sam Rose got to me the next morning. I opened my suitcase and crumpled inside was the shirt I'd been wearing the day before. The smell of roses was overpowering. All of those memories I had been suppressing in *A Bed of Roses* flooded in."²² Just as how Rose's signature rose scent sent Iball's memories back to her, by sending my audience members home with the spoils of their labor and cooking instructions I invited a second act. This may be where the real interactivity of my piece comes in, as each audience member has their own experience with the dumplings due to their own choices. Audience members could choose to abandon their dumplings completely, or throw them out as soon as they left the building. One audience member revealed to me that she kept the dumplings in her freezer for months, putting off cooking them until they had all converged into an unsalvageable glob. A few audience members happily texted me pictures of their successfully-fried dumplings. Just as there are many ways to deal with a complicated cultural identity, there were many ways in which audience members may choose to interact with their dumplings.

²² Iball, Helen. "Come Closer: Confessions of Intimate Spectators in One to One Performance." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no. 1 (March 2012): 129. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2011.645233>

SECTION III: SOUND

When first conceiving of my project, I was inspired by James Parker's article "The Soundscape of Justice", published in 2011 in the Griffith Law Review. This article reflects on simultaneous interpretation during a trial, and I was especially interested in the role that headphones played in the courtroom. Each person in the room was given a set of headphones in order to follow the court's proceedings in their own language, and I found it fascinating how each participant had the individualized experience of the headphones, while still listening together to the same court proceedings.

Parker quotes sound theorist Jonathan Sterne in describing the experience as "'highly individuated, standardized, yet collectivized'. Participants, that is, must listen 'alone together'. Their isolation is collective."²³ Sterne's quote, originally in the context of radio operators, draws attention to the paradox of collective headphone use—each user is ostensibly in their own isolated world, yet joined together through the fact that they are all similarly isolated. This reminded me of my relationships with fellow people of mixed race: we each felt uniquely distanced from our respective cultures or ethnic groups, but felt a sense of solidarity with each other through this collective struggle to find cultural acceptance. I was interested in using headphones as a tool to call upon this dynamic in my performance.

Each audience member was invited to enter an isolated aural environment, which I hoped would create a dissociative effect—just as Madeline was describing her own cultural distance and complicated relationship to the act of dumpling-making, and verbally distancing various

²³ Parker, James. "The Soundscape of Justice." Griffith Law Review 20, no. 4 (December 2011): 973. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2003534>.

audience from the task at hand by criticizing their respective dumplings, the audience experienced an aural distancing effect by having all audible feedback mediated through headphones. I was also interested in the effect of hearing one's own voice through headphones, and many audience members found it to be unsettling and caused them to be self-conscious. I also find this evocative of the mixed-race experience as a dissociation from one's own identity.

Parker also discusses sound's power to create space. He cites Sean Cubitt's book *Digital Aesthetics* to describe how "transmitted by air, sound occupies and creates an environment."²⁴ A court's traditional resonance evokes a cavernous and reverent space, while headphones muffle and reduce space to "an optimal (and imaginary) point midway between the ears."²⁵ Working with headphones thus allows me to manipulate space in a unique way, as I have control over types of microphones and live audio processing. For the different performances, I oscillated between using a Crown PCC160 and my own MacBook's microphone for the live audio feed—both of these options picked up sound relatively evenly throughout the room, as I attempted to acoustically emulate the actual room for the audience members. I also included similarly-recorded audio of myself and my roommate chopping vegetables and washing dishes, which I panned to my audience members' left and right ears in order to simulate a real kitchen environment, along with footsteps that traversed the pan.

I also used a field mic to record my Chinese friends saying common phrases spoken by Chinese parents, ranging from neutral caring words such as “你吃了吗? (Have you eaten?)” to more aggressive phrases, such as “我看你长大会怎么办! (What will become of you!)” These phrases were inspired by Chinese-Australian artist Joy Li's infographic, “Dear Joy, I ____ You” in which

²⁴ Cubitt, Sean. *Digital Aesthetics*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998: 103

²⁵ *Ibid.*

she plots her parents' common sayings along axes of frustration and condescension. I recorded these voices at a shorter range, hoping to retain the intimate nature of parents' words to their child.

The soundscape also included a sound piece that I created while studying Mandarin at the Middlebury Language Schools, titled “生日” (shengri, birthday). The piece included some language learning tapes that I listened to repeatedly while studying Mandarin, from a chapter that I felt included especially evocative vocabulary: time-related words such as September, birthday, month, year; as well as the verbs “to give birth to” and “to be born.” A flat male voice, which I found to be strangely addicting, reads out various vocabulary terms and definitions, while two overly-emotive textbook voice actors play out a dialogue in which two characters make birthday party plans. Opposed to the other recordings, these audio tapes are placed soundly in Cubitt's ‘point midway between the ears,’ recorded in an insulated studio with a sort of clinical quality to them. Juxtaposed with the textbook recordings is audio from the 1986 play *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land* by Taiwanese director and playwright Stan Lai. I included audio from the opening of the play, a quietly melodramatic scene between two lovers before they are forced to part ways. A saccharine-sweet melody, featuring the Chinese stringed instrument *erhu*, plays while the characters murmur to each other in Mandarin. This melody repeats over and over again, each time bitcrushed, or distorted, further by Max/MSP's “degrade~” object. By the end of the play, with Madeline at her most distraught, the melody has been distorted beyond recognition and is simply a grating noise. In the end, I alternate between Chinese and English to speak a text that had come to me once in a dream: “我梦见我妈妈了 / In my dream, I speak to my mother in her own tongue / 会用中文他的母语跟她说话 / But my Western nose grows until it knocks her off

her feet / 但是我西方人的大鼻子涨啊涨 / And she cries at the sight of the foreigner / 所以他
认识这个外国人。”

I first created 生日 as a direct response to my experience learning Mandarin in an intensive and immersive environment. Being in an isolated community, my classmates and I had little else to do but drill vocabulary and listen to these textbook recordings religiously. In this sound piece, I used the recordings as icons of the laborious language-learning process, which jostled and merged with the sweet Chinese melody, representing my yearning to connect with my ancestral heritage on an artistic and spiritual level. The melody, though beautiful, which listened to repeatedly becomes a bit of a grating earworm (exacerbated of course by the bitcrushing), and is of ambiguous authenticity— I haven’t been able to find the tune anywhere else, and when one listens closely it feels very simply “Chinese-y.” Likewise, the scene that plays out underneath may seem heartrending at first, but under closer inspection is actually over-acted and melodramatic— in the actual play, this scene is a spoof of the Taiwanese soap opera genre. Through my use of this audio, I scrutinize my own fixation on Chinese culture— is it superficial? Fetishization? Orientalist? The text at the end, I believe, vindicates me to myself as I confess to my own intimate and tenuous tie to Chinese culture, only to be thwarted by my Western appearance.

I found that this sound piece, though originally composed for a very specific situation, could be applied to my performance piece. The repetitive textbook audio mimics the act of dumpling making, especially since many audience members were going through a learning process. Many audience members gave feedback that they found the Secret Love melody soothing— which I appreciated, since it lulled helped the audience members feel more

comfortable participating, and ended up betraying them as it becomes more distorted and hard on the ears. I was delighted that a few of my audience members were familiar with *Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land*, and recognized the scene that I played– that adds a whole other level to the piece, as the plot of the play follows a theater (representing the country of Taiwan) caught between old and new theatrical (political) traditions. I am likewise caught between two cultures.

There are many obvious technical improvements I would like to work on in future iterations of this piece. I would take more care with choosing my microphones, and perhaps work with a more specialized sound engineer in order to mix everything properly and achieve the spatial effects I was working towards. I also began to work with binaural processing in order to place different sounds in more specific locations than left or right (further or closer, up or down) but didn't have time to make it really work. It would be interesting to be able to calibrate everyone's headphones so that sounds seemed to really come from the same place in the room (e.g., a sound that seems to come from behind one person's left shoulder, would seem to be coming from the front and to the right to the person sitting across from them), and Madeline could interact with the parents as ghosts without there being any discrepancy in the way she turns to address them, depending on an audience member's vantage point.

I also wonder if the extra audio is necessary at all. Though the audio samples are very familiar to myself and some other members of the audience, the meaning of each sound seem to be lost on most– one audience member describe the soundscape as “vaguely Chinese-y.” For future iterations of this piece, I'm curious to try a staging that uses only the headphones themselves as a dissociative tool– perhaps I could put more effort towards working more with the live audio feed. I would also be interested in experimenting further with language and

interpretation, since I was inspired by Parker's essay on interpretation in the first place. It might be interesting if an audience member had the autonomy to switch between languages, or if I had someone simultaneously interpreting.

CONCLUSION

My favorite part of my performance was the bags of dumplings that audience members took home. I liked that my project, besides perhaps being an enriching artistic experience, could at the very least provide someone with a nice snack for later, and if any audience members decided not to take their dumplings home, I at least had a snack for later as well. For months, my freezer was full of gallon bags of dumplings that I or my roommates would occasionally dip into in order to fry up a quick bite. It felt special that my project served a practical purpose.

Before this piece, I barely spoke any Chinese, didn't know how to make dumplings, and didn't know where even to begin to articulate the complicated feelings surrounding my racial identity. As a side effect of creating this performance, I experienced incredible growth in all these areas. Anticipating that I may want to use some Chinese in the performance, I threw myself into my Mandarin studies and am now enrolled and succeeding in an Advanced Chinese class. And as my roommates may attest, I spent so many hours sitting on my kitchen floor with a blender and chopsticks, trying to coax cabbage and onion and garlic into just the right level of mushiness, as well as studying Madeline's and other audience members' dumpling-folding techniques that I now feel like a dumpling-making master. In addition to all the incredibly enlightening research into Asian American history that I did in preparation for this project, I spent a weekend at my aunt's house where we cooked delicious Chinese meals and talked about my own family's history. And everything that I discovered I discussed along with Madeline, who was an incredible sounding board and conversation partner for the complicated feelings and ideas I had surrounding my identity, and translated them beautifully into performance. Just from

making this short performance piece, I have learned so many skills and made so many memories that I will treasure forever.

There are many ways I'd like to develop this project further. As I mentioned in Section I: History, I'd like to engage with other aspects of Asian American identity such as language or location, most likely in completely separate pieces. Also, I am still intrigued by the Madama Butterfly narrative I discussed in my introduction, and would like to explore it in a more concrete sense. I also hope to further experiment and improve in my work as a sound artist in relationship to this piece, as I outlined in Section III: Sound. And as an academic, I hope to continue my investigation into the relationship between performativity and the Asian American identity. In the end, however, I am satisfied with my completed theatre piece. I set out to express my feelings about being mixed race, and I hope that audience members left the studio with a better understanding of the mixed race experience. If not, at least they will go home with a better understanding of how to fold dumplings, and will have a snack for later.

Appendix

Recipe for prop²⁶ dumplings:

Ingredients:

- Napa cabbage (one head)
- White onion (one head)
- Garlic (a lot)
- Sesame oil
- Dark soy sauce
- Corn starch
- Store bought dumplings skins
- Chinese dark vinegar (for dipping)

Instructions:

1. Dice cabbage, onions, and garlic as finely as possible
2. Blend in blender or food processor until goopy
3. Squeeeeeeze as much liquid out as possible, either using just hands or cloth/paper towel
4. Add sesame oil, soy sauce to taste. Sprinkle in a little corn starch to make it stickier
5. Assemble using dumpling skins
6. Add dumplings to hot oil in frying pan, pour in some water
7. Cover for 5-7 minutes on high heat, then uncover. Let cook until water cooks off and dumplings are crispy
8. Dip in vinegar and enjoy!

²⁶ Note: this recipe is meant for theatrical purposes only– I only included the ingredients that would create the correct smell and texture on the tightest budget. They do not taste very good. Recipe makes enough for an evening of performances.

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