Challenging Nostalgia

Unveiling the Ghosts of Seattle’s Nippon Kan

Byron Au Yong

VOICEOVER: Last June, I revisited Nippon Kan before my flight back to Los Angeles. Frank Minoru Phillips, the Northwest Asian American Theatre’s International Artist Program manager, Michi, his dog, and I stepped out of the car into a typical Seattle summer day, refreshing and crisp with a sky that wants to last forever. I wanted to feel the energy of this hall again.

(A collage of old Nippon Kan performance photographs is projected underneath the theatre’s balcony to suggest a silent movie. The images become more and more disintegrated, as if burned away by time. An out-of-tune piano can be heard, loud and brash. The playing stops and starts at jarring intervals. A woman carries a lantern and walks through the silent movie, taking part of the screen with her like a veil.)

VOICEOVER: As part of the Ford Foundation’s Internationalizing New Work in the Performing Arts initiative, I was hired to collaborate with an artist from Southeast Asia to create a performance over the course of three residencies in Seattle. The Northwest Asian American Theatre, which produced the project and managed the Nippon Kan as a rental house, secured funding to cover two additional visiting residencies in Southeast Asia.

THE PIANIST: (While playing, the PIANIST mutters about the tyranny of equal temperament and universals, of the piano inserting itself into colonized ports around the world such as Turkey, India, Hong Kong, Japan, and Argentina. His playing is a Joplinesque Klavierstucke X. He pauses.) This large black hearse. (Plays, then pauses.) My piano. (A loud chord, then a pause.) A symbol of progress or decay? (A cascade of downward arpeggios, then a pause.) Out-of-tune, with notes that stick—a dysfunctional machine! (Quiet chords.) Music, now a product, flows through global circuits as a symbol of privilege, prestige, power, piano, pianissimo, pianissississississimo. (The PIANIST continues to play underneath the voiceover.)

VOICEOVER: I began the Nippon Kan project two years ago, traveling to Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia to meet puppeteers and mask performers.
Already the dynamics of the collaboration were unequal. Privileged as the American artist, I chose the performers I wished to interview. Conscious of my position, I realized that the artists who worked within inherited familial traditions, such as the mask performers in Bali, could potentially become tokens of an idealized Indonesian past. This fear was confirmed when I viewed the work samples of Balinese dancer I Made Sidia. In one video, Sidia and his family were invited to collaborate with an Australian director on a new work for the Adelaide Festival. Watching the video, I felt that the Australian producers had restricted the Balinese performers to an idealized world that was being destroyed by outside forces of modernization—represented by shadow puppets of bulldozers and skyscrapers. The superficial transformation of traditional Balinese sources, as seen in the change of the shadow puppets from characters in Hindu mythology (the idyllic world) to symbols of Western domination (the bulldozers and skyscrapers), framed contemporary Indonesia as a quiescent paradise that the Euro-Australians could both champion and rescue.

THE PIANIST: Check this out. (He plays the black keys with quick, virtuoso jumps.) Hear that? You can play any old black key: Ching Chong Chinaman. (Calling out to the audience.) Mom? Is this our music? (In broadly stroked chords and quick passages, the PIANIST runs his fingers in and around these ebonies, reducing his color to a game. Later, he explores the opposition of black and white on the keyboard. He separates the white keys from the black keys, playing only one set of seven,

1. Club Lotus dancers and musicians perform at Nippon Kan in 1938. The young adults performing and the children in the audience were mostly energetic Nisei who hauled the Buddhist Temple's upright piano back and forth from the church to the Kan. (Courtesy of the Wing Luke Asian Museum)
then a set of five, the white keys below, rectangular, protected, the black keys thinner, separated, slippery. The black keys never touch, never meet, they forever float in isolation, precariously hovering over the white keys, which form a phalanx. The white keys are the foundation that the black keys color. Musically, the black keys provide chromatics, also known as blue notes.)

I remember those early morning hard-ons as a boy, caressing the smoothness, pounding into jagged edges, alternating between black and white. Dad lived in a different city. Mom worked nights. My private love affair, a boy’s solitary passion before the pubic hair and agony of sexual confusion marked me as different. I love a machine!

(He pauses, caresses the instrument then continues playing a tender passage.) This terrible longing. Hey there Mr. Piano. Will you play with me? I have a crush on you.

I always knew where to find my lover. My first piano was bought by my mom, her consolation during the difficult divorce. She was alone and purchased this lover but never fell in time with the instrument. When I returned, my home was different. Instead of Dad, I found a piano in the living room. Later, the piano was moved to the dining room, then my bedroom, then across town to my dad’s basement, when, after much emotion, I decided to leave the home of my youth.

In time I discovered other pianos, staple furniture of Asian homes wishing to buy into the European middle class, into modernity, and into an affirmed social position (Kraus 1989:14–15). My parents’ adult friends encouraged me to play. They listened and were impressed, all the while renegotiating my parents’ place within their social hierarchy. Demoted by the divorce, marked as American and no longer Chinese, my parents’ failed marriage could be lifted out of disgrace if I could prove mastery over this instrument. In those early years, I dreaded my task of deflecting the onus of a broken contract with the melodies of Chopin or Paderewski, but in time I treasured my fate.

The irony was that my initial love for one could be transferred to many. As a boy, I learned promiscuity. I became a Don Juan of pianos, one night caressing the baby grand of my dad’s overseas business partners, the next night exciting the antique upright at my mom’s friends’ Christmas gathering. I became a playboy under the watchful eyes of my parents, encouraged by relatives and their friends to philander in every home. With each piano, I listened for and delighted in the flaws: the sticky key or out-of-tune twang. As an adult, I continue to search for a mark of imperfection in every lover and rather than focus on one, I desire many. (The PLANIST continues playing the piano underneath the voiceover.)

VOICEOVER: As a Chinese American composer trained in Europe and the United States, I knew that I had to work with someone who consciously lived and explored performance from the margins of a contemporary, cosmopolitan environment. After returning from Southeast Asia, Frank and I invited Swee Keong Lee, a queer Malaysian Chinese choreographer and installation artist
from Kuala Lumpur, to join the International Artist Collaboration. Living in Kuala Lumpur, Keong was part of a vibrant group of young Malaysian Chinese artists. As a performer, Keong incorporated Chinese dance, butoh, and Western modern technique to create performances that commented on his formal Chinese upbringing as he traveled between the “simcities” of Kuala Lumpur. These “simulated cities,” described by Edward W. Soja, are the stores where he works as a visual display artist (2001:45). Assuming the Anglicized work-name Danny Lee, he decorated and sometimes designed the store windows for multinational corporations such as Hugo Boss, Christian Lacroix, and Liz Claiborne. These stores are all housed in shopping malls such as the famed Suria KLCC at the base of the Petronas Towers, the tallest buildings in the world and an icon of advanced capitalism in Southeast Asia.

Most of Keong’s performances were at the Actors Studio, a trio of small independent theatres housed in two shopping malls. Keong has also performed in Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Berlin. After meeting with Keong and viewing his work, I knew that our related experiences, from different parts of the world, would provide a common ground from which we could build our collaboration. What I was unprepared for were the negotiations involved in performing in a Japanese American venue.

(The PIANIST stops playing. An audience gathers outside Nippon Kan. A small brass sign above the door describes the building, Japanese Hall, as a heritage site listed by the U.S. Department of the Interior.)

VOICEOVER: I am reminded of how this gathering place, built by Seattle’s Japanese immigrants in 1909, has always been affected by larger social and political forces—such as the racial hatred and laws of exclusion that ultimately led to the removal of all Americans of Japanese descent from the West Coast. Both the municipal and federal government proclaimed Nippon Kan as an historic space, not because of its architecture, but because of its significance for an early immigrant community. Nonetheless, the space is now used as a rental hall and, aside from this small plaque above the door, nine photos of past performances in the foyer, and a short text next to the old stage curtain, no interpretive material is available for tourists. Even though Nippon Kan is only opened when the space is rented for a performance or event, tourist literature and city web pages highlight the theatre as one of the primary attractions in Seattle’s International District.
Seattle historians have described Nippon Kan as the symbolic soul of the Japanese American community before World War II. This theatre provided Japanese immigrants and their children with a location where they could imagine and perform their lives in America within the safety of their ethnic community (Takami 1998:28–29). Because of racist immigration legislation, such as the 1924 Asian Exclusion Act, as well as anti-miscegenation sentiments, the ratio of Seattle’s Japanese men to women in the early 1900s was 33 to 1. Nonetheless, early performances on the Nippon Kan stage were alive with amateur and professional actors and musicians who performed variety shows, traditional and contemporary plays, concerts and dances. Churches, business groups, sports associations, and university students invigorated the hall with social functions and community debates. Judo, kendo, sumo, and boxing competitions were also held there along with movies and kabuki performances from Japan.

By the late 1920s, through arranged marriages between Japanese women in Japan and Japanese immigrant men in Seattle, the male-female ratio equalized. Performances in the 1930s, such as the *Lotus on Parade* and *Asoka Revue* featured American dance forms such as tap and soft-shoe, as well as dances from Japan, alongside plays in English and Japanese with characters named Sarah Nokemdead and Mr. Revuesky. During this time, 17-year-old Koichi “Art” Hayashi made his debut as leader of a kazoo band. Bored by the Japanese performances of his parents’ generation, Hayashi organized Japanese American big bands such as the Lotus Swingphony and Mikados of Swing. These bands played the music of Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller, and Artie Shaw. Billed as the “Dance Sensation of the Nisei Generation,” Seattle’s Mikados of Swing toured eight cities in Oregon and California in June 1941 (Tomita 1997). In *Divided Destiny: A History of Japanese Americans in Seattle*, David Takami writes: “Most of the entertainers were delightfully unprofessional, sometimes forgetting their lines and struggling to improvise. Between performances, children ran up and down the balcony staircases and their parents caught up on the latest community gossip” (1998:29). The hybrid nature of these amateur perfor-

3. The Fukuhara wedding in Nippon Kan in 1913. (Courtesy of Manuscripts, Special Collections, University Archives [MSCUA], University of Washington Libraries, UW23406Z)

Performances reflected the explorations of a community defining their place as Americans.

Nippon Kan also hosted professional musicians like opera singer Miyoshi Sugimachi, who performed a farewell concert in 1927, before she went on a performance tour of Italy. Sugimachi also appeared at the Hollywood Bowl a number of times as a featured concert soloist. Further validating the significance of this stage, the Seattle Symphony, conducted by Shisui Miyashita, played at Nippon Kan in 1936 (Chin 2001:26). Unlike the Swiss Americans in Wisconsin, who staged their ethnicity as an antidote to modernity (documented by Steven Hoelscher in his 1998 book Heritage on Stage), the first gen-
eration of Japanese Americans in Seattle embraced Nippon Kan as a place to perform modernity. Their daily negotiations as transnational individuals found an outlet in this theatre, funded by the community and designed by Anglo-American architects Charles L. Thompson and C. Bennet Thompson. Inside this building, located within an ethnic enclave bounded by the discriminatory zoning legislation of the time, their only limit was their own imagination. Through both their amateur and professional performances, the Nippon Kan community showed how, even within a restricted space, they could experiment with and create meaning in their lives. As overseas Chinese, Keong and I chose Nippon Kan as much for its dilapidated ambiance as its cultural relevance. The old hall with creaking wood floors, missing light bulbs, and bilingual graffiti was more historically charged than we had expected.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 shocked the United States. Takami writes: “As other Americans exploded with anger and indignation at the news, the Japanese American community reacted with dread and foreboding” (1998:41). “Art” Hayashi, now 82 years old, described his experiences of that time (a recording of Hayashi’s voice):

The thing that’s amazing is that the night before December 7, 1941, my band, the Mikados of Swing, played [at Nippon Kan] in Seattle, and our orchestra sounded great, and I was very happy. I went to bed that night at around two o’clock in the morning, and I always kept the radio on at night, in those days. Next thing you know, I hear someone screaming on the radio: “There are planes over Honolulu, they’re dropping bombs, and it looks like they’re Japanese planes.” And I remember thinking to myself, “I hope it’s not Japanese,” but it was […]. I ran downstairs to tell my father, but he knew already, and he told me that some of his friends already were being picked up by the FBI, and he might be going soon. (in Reich 2001)

The FBI arrested 264 Seattle Issei and a few Nisei, including those who owned shares in and controlled performances at Nippon Kan. Issei business licenses were revoked and bank accounts were frozen. Mainstream journalists,

5. Koichi “Art” Hayashi ("KH" on the bandstands) conducts his ensemble for the Lotus Swingphony performance in Nippon Kan in the 1930s. (Courtesy of Daisy Tomita)
public officials, and army generals publicly expressed racial hostility toward Japanese Americans. On 19 February 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, transferring authority over civilians from the government to the military and removing all persons of Japanese ancestry along the entire stretch of the West Coast. Nearly 7,000 people from Seattle were taken away. Nippon Kan, alive almost every night of the week for over 30 years, was boarded up and closed.

In 1945, Japanese and Japanese Americans were allowed to return to the West Coast. Many internees, like Hayashi, moved to Chicago or other cities that promised fair employment. Other young Japanese Americans died in Italy or France fighting for the United States Army. Only 4,700 returned to Seattle where they faced anti-Japanese groups. According to Howard Droker, writing in the Pacific Northwest Quarterly, “Seattle confronted its gravest racial problem […] anti-Japanese groups had formed” (1976; in Chin 2001:74). These included the Japanese Exclusion League, the Remember Pearl Harbor League, and prominent individuals such as Washington Governor Mon Wallgren. Faced with economic discrimination and ashamed of their heritage, Japanese Americans left Nippon Kan empty. Even though many of the performances at Nippon Kan before the war were American in spirit, the space was associated with Japanese immigrant performances. Japanese culture, once a source of inspiration, was looked upon by the younger generation with a mixture of shame and aversion.

Saijii Nakamura bought the building after the war and managed the upstairs apartment units, but kept the theatre dark. In the 1950s, Interstate 5 cut through the district right next to Nippon Kan. The theatre was reopened in the early 1980s, when the new owners, Ed and Betty Burke, turned the building into a commercial space. The Burkes also had the property listed on the National Register of Historic Places (Chin 2001:26).

In Global Ethnopolis: Chinatown, Japantown and Manilatown in American Society, Michel Laguerre writes: “ethnic enclaves have been projected as business centers […] and as heritage places that serve as a storage space for the immigrants’ memories of their homelands” (2000:14). Before World War II, the Japanese in Seattle operated 206 hotels, 140 groceries, 94 cleaning establishments, 64 market stands, and 57 wholesale produce houses (Chin 2001:75). Without these businesses, the vibrancy of Seattle’s Nihonmachi (Japantown) disappeared. Nippon Kan, situated within this enclave, served as a space for immigrant performers, not merely to remember their homeland, as Laguerre suggested, but also to fashion their lives within American society.

(The kuroko [stagehands] dress the PIANIST in a Chinese American outfit from the 1860s. To complete the costume change, the PIANIST is given a large rice paper box. Inside are 72 pieces of paper, each is about the size of his hand. On each piece is written the name of a location in pinyin, or Chinatown Chinese. Each city is an origin or destination. The PIANIST creates a space of memory with these lyrics.)

THE PIANIST: (Singing in Mandarin) Nan-jing, Yi-da-li, Bei-jing, Mo-si-ke, Xi-ban-ya, Hai-nan, Ba-ri, Bo-shi-dun, Xi-an, De-guo, Mo-xi-ge, Guang-zhou, Si-ya-tu, Yin-guo, Shang-hai, Ao-dai-li, Ar-gun-ting, Xia- men, Ba-xi.9

(Singing in Chinatown Chinese) Gam-saan, Gala-fun, Wah- sing-dun, Dait-fyanh, Ngih-fyanh, Saam-fyanh, Uk-luhn, Li-nob, Haahm-sui-fyanh, Se-luh, Loh-sang, Hohng-saan, Hong-kung.10

(Singing in Mandarin) Fei-lu-bin, Tai-wan, Xin-jia-po, Yin-du-ni-xi-ya, He-lan, Fu-zhou, Niu-yue, Tai-guo, Chao-xi-an, Ao-men, Qu-ba, Jiu-long, Yue-nan, Ma-lai-xi-ya, Xiang-kang.11

(While the PIANIST sings, Program Notes morph.)
Ga-ji. I had to look up the word. It is in Cantonese, a language I do not speak, but one spoken by Chinese sojourners from the mid-1800s to the present. A word many Cantonese speakers would not understand, for it refers to the specific experience of early Chinese immigrants who came to the United States. Ga-ji means “false papers” and describes the fabricated documents used after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which restricted Chinese nationals from entering the United States (Lai, Lim, Yung 1991). In 1906, the San Francisco earthquake and subsequent fire destroyed birth records. This enabled many to claim U.S. citizenship as a birthright. Thousands of Asians spent weeks to years on Angel Island, the West Coast version of New York’s Ellis Island; many of the Chinese were paper sons or daughters, who spent time on the island trying to prove that they were born in the United States. Some were admitted, others were sent back, still others committed suicide. They leave a legacy of poetry written on and carved into the walls of the immigration station, an expression of their impressions of being away from their homeland and of finding a harsh reception in America (Lai et al. 1991).

Currently there are over 37 million overseas Chinese. Two million plus live...
in the United States. The rest are scattered throughout the world, in Singapore, London, Toronto, Buenos Aires, and other large and small cities. Name a place and chances are you will find a Chinese restaurant: Chinese Caribbean, Chinese Italian, Chinese American. Some consider themselves overseas Chinese, yet others do not, preferring instead to identify with their adopted country.

In creating a work that draws on the Chinese experience, I find inspiration in all those who have left China. To do otherwise would be untrue to my experience. The China of today comes to me second hand from the media, exhibitions, and books. The home of my ancestors lives in the stories of my family who migrated and who now live in the Philippines, the United States, and Canada, as well as with the Chinese I have met in Paris, Berlin, New York, Los Angeles, and other cities throughout the world. My work merges impressions of my background with an exploration and disruption of excavated material. Laying aside Western musical conventions, I create a new vocabulary and context for my work.

*Tzu Lho* is a made-up phrase. I coined the title for this vocal work from my limited Chinese vocabulary. It means “simmering song” and is a combination of Mandarin and my family dialect from Fujian Province. Similarly, some of the text in this work is Chinatown Chinese, a dialect spoken by early immigrants from Guangzhou, documented by Marlon K. Hom in his 1987 book *Songs of Gold Mountain*. This language is passing away with the generation that created it. I search for the longing and loss inherent in the sounds of these words, in the emotions they evoke, which transcend the literal meaning of the conventions of language.

*Hang san*. Another Cantonese word I discovered. It means “walking the mountain” and refers to a pilgrimage to ancestral graves. Here Chinese set off firecrackers and make ritual offerings. We are all mountains of memories. On a winter day, you may find your lineage around your heart setting off sparks. Your visible breath comes from the smoke of their fire.

*(A dog barks, startling the PIANIST. He remembers that he is on stage at Nippon Kan).*
Seattle’s Nippon Kan

Kan and stops singing this simmering song from the past. Paper floats from the piano. He silently reads as the voiceover continues. From now until the end of the scene the kuroko continuously dress the PIANIST in various Japanese costumes that range from Ichiro’s Seattle Mariner baseball jersey to a kabuki onnagata outfit.)

VOICEOVER: Frank’s dog Michi ran around excitedly sniffing the stage inside the empty Nippen Kan. Frank commented that the spirits of Nippon Kan must be active. Being Chinese and performing in this Japanese American location, I wondered if ancestors from different countries, across national boundaries, get along.

In Woman, Monkey, and Kabuki Joe, I composed three musical processions: “Kabuki Joe’s Parade,” “The Man’s Lantern,” and “The Woman’s Obon.” These were in the show to allow the spirits in Nippon Kan the opportunity to release. During the performance, some of the cast members chant Japanese American names: George Ishii, Jack Nakagawa, Welly Shibata, Tootie Yama, Lorraine Okada, Kats Suzuki, Kim Takehara, Grant Beppu, Kazzie Hirai, Gary Kumasaka, Ray Kitayama, Bell Himada. The names come from the signatures these early performers etched into the backstage walls, similar to the poetry on the walls of Angel Island. In “The Ghosts of Place,” Michael Mayerfeld Bell writes: “Ghosts [...] help constitute the specificity of historical sites, of the places where we feel we belong and do not belong, of the boundaries of possession by which we assign ownership and nativeness” (1997:815). As performers, my collaborators and I invoked forgotten performers to validate our living presence at Nippon Kan.

(The Program Notes morph.)

Program Notes

WOMAN, MONKEY, AND KABUKI JOE
Presented by the Northwest Asian American Theatre and the International Artists Program at Nippon Kan Theatre, Seattle
10 – 19 May 2002

In May 2001, Swee Keong Lee and I had our first rehearsal in Nippon Kan. With the curtains closed, I played a Chinese drum, then switched to the onstage piano. In the center of the hall, Keong danced. As we played separated by the blue velvet curtain, we connected to each other through sound and movement. Even though I could not see Keong, my music was affected by his presence. Our initial focus on the unseen became the ideological seed that would blossom into the site-specific work Woman, Monkey, and Kabuki Joe.

I have always been fascinated with the spaces that are just out of reach. Nippon Kan, a wonderful hall for acoustic music, has an enigmatic energy. When Patti West, our lighting designer and manager of the Kan, told us that she had seen a female ghost with long black hair and a white dress walk atop the balcony railing, Keong and I were immediately intrigued. Other performers, when prompted in conversation, revealed that they too had seen or felt the ghost. Our stage manager, alone in Nippon Kan after a rehearsal, heard clapping from the balcony. He thought it was an actor playing a joke, but the hall was empty. This ghost’s presence, not documented, contained a hidden truth that had been neglected by the Kan’s existing archival photographs and written history. As queer generative artists and ethnic Chinese from Malaysia and the United States, Keong and I are similarly removed, or at least distanced—as if on a balcony—from the countries where we were born.

During our second residency in August and September 2001, we began to imagine who this ghost woman was and why she continued to haunt the the-

atre. Community stories and images guided us as well as the historic aura of Nippon Kan. The photographs in the lobby, the pre-1942 stage curtain, and the signatures and dates of past performers reminded us that the Kan was once vibrant. This theatre was a transnational crossroads where early-20th-century immigrants from Japan negotiated their lives in Seattle through performance. Our lives as overseas Chinese and our research informed the confrontations we fictionalized for the ghost woman’s life.

VOICEOVER: Frank, Michi, and I said goodbye to Nippon Kan and walked to the car. The Seattle air reminded me that my sentimentality towards the space was constructed, that the presence of ghosts in Nippon Kan was part of a larger project to find a place to situate myself as an American artist interested in what communicates across cultural boundaries. Again, Michael Mayerfeld Bell elucidates the presence of ghosts: “Ghosts have good reasons to haunt the specific places they do. These reasons derive ultimately from the character of our social experience, as mediated by the landscape upon which that experience unfolds” (1997:835). Nippon Kan is a local community space that was affected by global forces, namely the political relationship and antagonisms between Japan and the United States. Interested in revitalizing this politicized space through a site-specific performance, Woman, Monkey, and Kabuki Joe re-focused history to pay homage to forgotten Nippon Kan performers. The production relied on a benign nostalgia that neutralized the fear of ghosts from past wars.

Both Keong and I are Chinese who perform Japanese art forms. I have played taiko (Japanese drums) for the past 10 years. Keong dances butoh. These genres were created in Japan after World War II. Both have circulated on international stages and influenced contemporary performances outside of Japan. In Malaysia, Keong rarely interacts with Japanese, yet for Woman, Monkey, and Kabuki Joe we staged a version of history that incorporates an interracial relationship between a Japanese American ghost and a Chinese American traveler. Our performance prompted an acknowledgement of inter-Asian relations and animosities during World War II in a contemporary time and space where pan-Asian identity, solidarity, and affiliation has become commonplace.

Photographs and oral histories, often our only primary sources, only par-
tially document the events at Nippon Kan. In talking about the spirit of the Acropolis, Argyro Loukaki noted that only those with “the power, the money, and the talent” could interpret and reveal the essential qualities of the genius loci (Loukaki 1997). Creating a performance for a space, like constructing a history about a place, is an act of power and transgression. By including Chinese performing butoh and taiko in Nippon Kan, we imposed a particular interpretation of the past for the present that in time affects the future.

(\textit{The Program Notes morph again and again.})

\textbf{Program Notes}

\textbf{FORBIDDEN CIRCLES, FOR VOICE, SHAKUHACHI, SHAMISEN, KOTO, AND TAIKO}

Premiered at the Fukuoka Gendai Hōgaku Festival, Japan
13 October 2002

There are boundaries in our lives that we internalize; limits we fear because they disrupt what we know. Transgressions nonetheless expand possibilities. As a composer, my work crosses confines, as if at night I had run into a stranger’s home. I am a Chinese American composer yet I write for Japanese instruments. The music for \textit{Forbidden Circles} is for hōgaku ensemble yet the score is recently composed. The text is from a gay male perspective yet a female vocalist performs the songs. The Japanese poet Mutsuo Takahashi inspired the lyrics, yet his ideas are translated to and sung in English. The contradictions abound yet provide the conceptual grounding for \textit{Forbidden Circles}.

\textbf{VOICEOVER:} In the car, on the way to the airport, Frank, Michi, and I were lost in thought. Perhaps Frank’s dog Michi was only resting from her romp with the spirits of Nippon Kan. Similarly exhausted, my thoughts wandered from my music for \textit{Forbidden Circles} into my family history. My grandparents, like many families throughout Asia during World War II, were affected by the Japanese imperialist aggression of the early 20th century. In 1938, my father’s parents fled China, leaving behind their daughter, my aunt, who was then a young girl. While in the Philippines, they opened the first Chinese school in Cagayan de Oro. When Japanese soldiers invaded, they fled to the mountains.
Byron Au Yong

where my father was born in October 1941. Before my grandparents left their school, they set fire to photographs of fellow teachers and their students. They did not want to endanger their friends and colleagues. After World War II, they returned to Cagayan and raised a family as overseas Chinese.

My parents left the Philippines in the mid-1960s, for the symbolic freedom and peace of America. I was born in Pittsburgh in the 1970s, at the end of the American war in Vietnam. As the first in my family to be born in the United States, I continually question my privileges as a citizen by birthright.

Growing up in Bellevue, an American suburb outside of Seattle, I had been terrified of a classmate named Moto. Because he was the only student of Japanese ancestry in our school, I was sure that somehow he was related to the aggression that had dislocated my grandparents from China and made migration part of my family history. Yet in the airport walking to my flight back to Los Angeles, instead of old photographs of my grandparents and their Chinese community in the Philippines, I carried a carefully wrapped package of copies of photographs of Japanese Americans who performed in Nippon Kan in the 1930s.

Monica Sone wrote in her childhood memoir, Nisei Daughter, about her fears and feelings after Japan attacked the United States in 1941:

"An old wound opened up again, and I found myself shrinking inwardly from my Japanese blood, the blood of an enemy. I knew instinctively that the fact that I was an American by birthright was not going to help me escape the consequences of this unhappy war." (1953:145–46)

War continues when we let wounds continue to bleed. Given the power to artistically represent and provide meaning to Nippon Kan, I recognize political and family history but imagine a world that acknowledges the ghost moments in our lives, those quiet times that seem unworthy of remembering, but which nonetheless remind us that we are alive. Sitting in a car on the way to the airport, spending time with Frank and Michi, pausing to read an inscription above a doorway—these moments are when wounds heal.

Tama Tokuda, a dancer who performed as a teenager in Nippon Kan in the 1930s, wrote to me after attending Woman, Monkey, and Kabuki Joe: “Once upon a time, Nippon Kan sparkled with life. Your presentation captures those echoes from the past. We who are locked in the present must always see the past and future veiled in fantasy” (2002).

I remember when I interviewed this elderly woman in her 80s. She showed me dresses her mother had hand sewn for her performances. They were made of scrap fabrics from Japan, stitched together to form glorious costumes for the stage. These artifacts from her former life onstage are hidden in the bottom drawer of her dresser like I hide certain memories from my past.

As collaborators from different disciplines, the cast and crew of Woman, Monkey, and Kabuki Joe challenged each other to understand how distinct sensibilities can coexist and ultimately merge. Our production resonated with Tokuda, another displaced artist whom we were simultaneously representing and imagining. In her quiet appreciation of our performance, Tokuda acknowledged how Keong and I produced our contemporary struggles as Malaysian Chinese and Chinese American by “veiling” the past and future in a reworking of history where the racial antagonism between Japanese and Chinese during war became a sentimental construction of ghosts. Similarly in this text, I veil the difficulties of collaboration to romanticize our intercultural production as a success. “During the creation of the work, certain rehearsals required an outside mediator and many sessions ended with unresolved tensions. My
words cover the sadness of knowing that *Woman, Monkey, and Kabuki Joe* will never be performed again. Like the performers who wrote their names on the backstage walls of Nippon Kan, I write this text to be remembered and in my nostalgia I exclude the pain.

(The PIANIST runs his hands down his chest, along the seams of a hand-sewn costume that appeared onstage at Nippon Kan 70 years ago. The kuroko give the PIANIST a lantern and cover his head with a veil.)

Notes

2. Pianississississimo (pppppp) was used by Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky in his *Symphony No. 6 in B Minor “Pathétique,”* op. 74, Mvnt I, m. 160.
4. I was excited to find images of these events with the help of Sadie Yamasaki at the Seattle Buddhist Church archives, Bob Fisher at the Wing Luke Asian Museum collections department, and Dana Hoshide, Tom Ikeda, and Alice Ito at Densho: Japanese American Legacy Project, Seattle, Washington.
5. From *Asoka Revue* program notes, circa 1930s, in the Wing Luke Asian Museum collections department.
8. The Issei are the first generation to leave Japan to make America their home; the Nisei are second-generation Japanese in America, U.S. citizens by birth.
9. Translation: Nanjing, Italy, Beijing, Moscow, Spain, Hainan, Paris, Boston, Xian, Germany, Mexico, Guangzhou, Seattle, England, Shanghai, Austria, Argentina, Xiamen, Brazil.
11. Translation: Philippines, Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia, Holland, Fuzhou, New York, Thailand, Korea, Macao, Cuba, Kowloon, Vietnam, Malaysia, Hong Kong.
12. In kabuki, onnagata are the actors who specialize in female roles.

13. Some of the signatures are from community members who helped out during performances, according to Tama Tokuda interviewed in April 2002. Since reopening in the 1980s, Nippon Kan’s backstage walls are also signed by recent performers.

14. Woman, Monkey, and Kabuki Joe was produced by the Northwest Asian American Theatre (NWAAT), which as of January 2003, because of financial difficulties and lack of community support, no longer produces work. The building that houses Nippon Kan is for sale and NWAAT no longer manages the hall. Having a stage that belongs to a community, whether that community is Japanese American in the early 20th century or Asian American in the early 21st century, is crucial. Mainstream theatres such as the Seattle Repertory Theatre are producing plays written by Asian American playwrights and hiring Asian American actors. For me, attending Asian American performance in a mainstream theatre differs from attending a performance in an Asian American theatre. To illustrate, I offer my experience of two different productions of Chay Yew’s Red: the first staged at Intiman Theatre in Seattle, the second at East West Players in Los Angeles. The Intiman production was incredibly slick, with actors and set pieces that seemed to be from a catalogue of Chinese artifacts. In contrast, East West Players Red was performed with minimal scenery allowing the audience to focus on the interrelations between the characters. Moreover, I was more comfortable in the East West Players audience, feeling that I was on my turf; whereas at the Intiman production I self-consciously felt that my Chinese body and history were on display even though I was in the audience. My Asian American date highlighted this by saying that he was my accessory for the evening as we simultaneously decorated the audience of Intiman.

15. The collaborative process, which included Saiko Kobayashi, Andrew Kim, and Jessika Kenney, was often hampered by arguments as varying aesthetics, from mythical ambiguity to literal narrative, and working styles, from dance to puppetry, were negotiated among the headstrong artists.

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Lai, Him Mark, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung

Loukaki, Argyro
Student Essay Contest Winner

Byron Au Yong, an urban American composer, crosses aesthetic and cultural boundaries by weaving folk and avantgarde music into distinctively dramatic works. Examples include Two by Four, premiered by the On Ensemble in Los Angeles, and Salt Lips Touching, performed at the Jeonju Sanjo Festival in South Korea. Au Yong has received awards from the American Composers Forum, Durfee Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts. He has a BA/B.Mus. from the University of Washington, an MA from UCLA, and is finishing an MFA at Tisch School of the Arts/New York University in the Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program.

The MA and PhD programs in Culture and Performance at UCLA’s Department of World Arts and Cultures emphasize interdisciplinary and intercultural research on performance and creativity. The geo-cultural expertise of the faculty, comprised of world-class artists and scholars, includes sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas (including the study of Native American, Latin American, African American, and Asian American arts and cultures). Thinking about performance is stimulated through a blend of scholarly documentation and the creative processes of making art. Areas of concentration include dance and gesture; folklore and oral tradition; visual culture and theories of representation; ritual and healing; material culture and museum studies; vernacular architecture; postcolonial theory; queer theory; popular culture; and ethnographic video.