

Discourses of Belonging: Language and Identities in Gay Asian American Drama

Astrid Haas

In her 1990 essay "Mother Tongue," Chinese American writer Amy Tan powerfully testifies to the central place language occupies in the Asian experience in the United States:

When I was growing up, my mother's "limited" English limited *my* perception of her. I was ashamed of her English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly, her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her.
(179)

According to discourse theory, it is language that most profoundly shapes people's perception of the world, providing otherwise unintelligible things with meaning by naming them and thus integrating them into the system of thought. As the key medium of communication, verbal utterances imply their speaker's claim to "truth" and authority and turn access to and participation in a given discourse into a highly political matter (see Foucault 27, 31-75, 107, 117). For immigrants to the United States, language has additional relevance. Speaking the native tongue of their ancestors on the one hand endows them with a profound sense of belonging to their specific national/ethnic communities of origin, which often provides crucial support in an Anglophone environment. The command of English on the other hand, as the above quote by Amy Tan also illustrates, is crucial to the very participation in mainstream

society that motivates most immigrants to come to the United States in the first place. As Frank Chin argues in the introduction to his seminal anthology of Asian American writing *Aiiiiieeee!*,

[L]anguage is the medium of culture and the people's sensibility.... Language coheres the people into a community by organizing and codifying the symbols of the people's common experience. Stunt the tongue and you have lopped off the culture and sensibility. On the simplest level, a man in any culture speaks for himself. Without a language of his own, he is no longer a man. (xxxv-xxxvi)

The relevance of language and verbal articulation against a socio-culturally imposed silence is doubled in the discourse on gay Asians in the United States.¹ The gay Asian experience is almost inaudible not only in white-dominated gay male American literature and culture, which largely reduce gay Asians and Asian Americans to fetishized exotic objects of white desire without a voice of their own (see Fung 181-84), but also in the various Asian communities in the United States and their literary articulations, in both of which homosexuality widely remains a taboo subject to this date (see Sohn 102-03; Takagi 25-26). Against this doubly imposed silence and reductive representation, Stephen Hong Sohn points out, gay Asian Americans have employed literature to construct "a space where they maintain control over representations of queerness and at the same time illuminate the complexities of queer identity" (101).

Issues of discourse and identity formation resonate particularly powerfully in the theater. In contrast to other literary genres, a play unfolds its meaning and effects beyond the written text in the live

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¹ I will use the term "gay" throughout this essay as denoting a sexual identity category based on patterns of same-sex sexual attraction, behavior, and/or self-identification. Even though the concept relates to people's actual emotional and bodily desires and experiences, it is a socio-cultural construct that does not connote a unitary meaning.

performance. On the stage, the discourses presented in a play are literally "voiced" to audiences, and the identities of the characters, while scripted in the text, are crucially shaped by the actors' bodies and actions. In this essay I will analyze the discursive construction of a host of social identities and the articulation of belonging from the vantage point of gay Asians in America, as they are presented in two contemporary Chinese American stage plays. The concept of discursive identity construction refers to the ways in which discourses mold socio-cultural notions of racial/ethnic, class, gender, national, sexual, and other social identities and hereby shape the ways humans make sense of their bodies and life experiences within a grid of these intersecting categories.² Paul Stephen Urn's *Mother Tongue* (1988) and Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* (1994) are probably the two most prominent works by Asian or Asian American playwrights to this date that centrally depict gay Asian experiences in the contemporary United States.³ Set among first- and second-generation gay Chinese and Filipino immigrants to the United States, both plays address the intersection of race, class, (dis)ability, and sexuality through a focus on language, speech, and discourse as both key means and metaphors of human interaction. Despite their similarities in terms of subject matter, the two pieces articulate at times widely different concerns and positions that indicate the complexity of the gay Asian American experience in the United States.

Language as Metaphor

Mother Tongue portrays the life of David Lee, a fictional middle-aged gay writer who was raised by his Chinese parents in the Philippines and now works as an English instructor at the University of Kansas. The play skillfully intertwines David's present life and work with flashback scenes of his childhood and youth. His reminiscences are prompted by the

² For a more detailed discussion of the discursive formation of social identities and the concept of intersectionality, see Crenshaw 114-17.

³ By far the best-known Asian American plays that address Asian same-sex intimacy are David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988) and Philip Kan Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die* (1988). Both works, however, are more centrally concerned with issues of gender and ethnicity than homosexuality (see Lee, *Performing* 98-120)

appearance of his mother Lilian—invisible and inaudible to anyone but David in the drama—who intervenes in his thoughts and actions. The titular "mother tongue" points to the two, interrelated central themes of the play: the role of language in and the impact of cultural and family ties on the formation of personal and collective identity. At the center of *A Language of Their Own* are Oscar and Ming, a middle-class gay couple of Chinese descent, and the changes in their partnership after Oscar's diagnosis with HIV. After their separation, both enter new relationships. While Ming's life with the white American Robert is characterized by the ups and downs of a "regular" love relationship, the bond between Oscar and Daniel, a Filipino student, is increasingly marked by Oscar's progressing illness. The title of the play takes up Frank Chin's dictum about the Asian American writer's need to possess "a language of his own," but replaces the homogenizing andro- and heterocentric pronoun with the pluralist, gender-neutral "their." This replacement underlines both the ethnic and sexual diversity of the Asian experience in America and the notion of building a community that embraces difference.

Both plays first and foremost employ language and the act of speaking as metaphors for human relationships. In *A Language of Their Own*, images of language and verbal utterance powerfully convey the trajectory of the depicted love relationships: falling in love and sharing a life with a partner are compared to language learning and formation; breaking up is likened to failed communication and loss of one's proper idiom (see also Poole 115). As Robert puts it in a monologue,

In the beginning of our relationship we learned each other's language
 ... in the course we invented new words
 Gave existing words new meaning
 Redefined and polished our language
 Making it a special one of our own. (217)

Once the relationship was wearing out, "words gradually lost their meaning and significance ... / Misunderstandings led to inevitable silence / In the end we spoke different languages" (217).⁴ And when

⁴ See also Clum 293. As Esther Kim Lee argues (205), language in the play exceeds the function of metaphor for intimacy and serves as the very

Oscar breaks up with him, Ming likens their estrangement to his own immigrant experience of losing his native Chinese tongue and identity in the process of Americanization:

It's like learning Chinese. Once I started speaking English I stopped learning how to speak and write Chinese. I dropped my culture for another.... And every now and then, you'll remember a few phrases, a few words, the names of a few Chinese dishes.... But the language escapes you because you let it go. It's like learning Chinese. Learning to be Chinese. (174)

Tellingly entitled with an expression from this passage, "Learning Chinese" (123), the first act of Yew's drama captures this process of loss that marks both a broken relationship and the immigrant's acculturation process.

In *Mother Tongue*, David makes a metaphorical link between the body and writing, when he invokes the image of a written text to describe his relationship with his longtime lover Clark. The couple's current period of separation, he argues, "calls for a footnote or a parenthetical remark, information which is helpful but which doesn't fit into the general body of the text" (74). *Mother Tongue* also uses the English grammar and composition topics that David teaches in his class as metaphors of his life and his relationship to his parents (32-36, 47-48, 50-51, 70-71, 87-88). In a lecture on punctuation, for instance, David conveys his strong but strained bond to his mother by using their names in a set of sentences through which he exemplifies the grammatical function of the semicolon. He argues that to link the two sentences "Lilian sings. David doesn't,"

the period [is] too divisive. It chops up what might have been one thought into two independent thoughts.... We *could* turn the

source of the bond between Oscar and Ming. While she has a point in arguing against reading the bond between the two men as being based (almost) solely upon their Chinese American identities, she ignores the crucial impact of Oscar's AIDS affliction when she claims that the loss of the shared idiom of intimacy is the cause, not the consequence, of the couple's break-up.

whole thing into a compound sentence by using a coordinate conjunction: "Lilian sings, *but* David doesn't." "*Whenever* Lilian sings, David doesn't." Or, for that matter, into a complex sentence by using any number of subordinate conjunctions: "*Although* Lilian sings, David doesn't." "*Because* Lilian sings, David doesn't." But what if subordination isn't what we want? (47-48; italics in original)

In another classroom scene, Lilian interferes in David's lesson on poetic meters, forcing David to engage with her views and desires by adding her own examples of the different poetic meters to the one he provides:

David: SPELLing, GRAMmar ... Old

Lilian: MARriage ...

Young Lilian: CHILdren ...

David: DisaGREE, disenGAGE ...

Young Lilian: DisreSPECT!

Old Lilian: DisoBEY!

David: [*wavering*] DisapPROVE? (50-51; spelling and all but the fourth ellipsis in the original).

Both plays closely intertwine the metaphorical usages of language and the act of speaking with their social function, as instruments to claim belonging and pronounce abjection. Language knowledge and usage are invoked as signifiers of various social identities and as a demarcation line between them. In an early scene of *Mother Tongue*, David muses about the possible meanings of his family name, Lee, seeking a connection between his name and personality. His revelation of the Chinese character "li," on which his name is based, captures David's identity as an assimilated immigrant to, and later in the play even a naturalized citizen of, the United States, who nevertheless struggles with the cultural "baggage" of his Chinese background. He points out that, in isolation, "the character is a mere particle. It has no dictionary meaning. However, in its most common combination with another character, 'syngli,' it means 'baggage' or 'luggage.' ... First, the physical luggage. And now, the cultural baggage" (14).

Ethnic and Cultural (Dis)Identifications

As Lisa Lowe remarks, the Asian immigrant experience in the United States is often framed "in terms of a 'loss' of the original culture in exchange for the 'new' American culture" (62). In Chinese American literature, "the question of the loss or transmission of 'original culture' is frequently represented in a family narrative, figured as a generational conflict" (62; see also 75). In *Mother Tongue* this conflict already begins with David's English-language school education and professional formation in Manila, which alienated him from his parents (11-12, 45). While Lilian regards English as a prerequisite for business success in the Philippines but otherwise clings to Chinese idioms and customs as the pillars of her cultural identity (22, 82; see also Liu 205), English for David represents a key to his self-realization as a writer and an openly gay man in the United States, for which he accepts the price of further alienation from his mother and cultural background. His intertwined linguistic, sexual, and American cultural identity formation passes from his desire to learn English in order to gain access to the conversations of adults (see 17) to his wish to write like the American immigrant novelists William Saroyan and Vladimir Nabokov, with whom he "fell madly in love" (45), and finally to his veritable "love affair" with the English language and Euro-American culture (46; see also Liu 205). He tellingly describes his relationship to English in terms of (hetero)sexual desire: "English is not my mother tongue, but it is now the language I love above all others. I have no rapport with native-born speakers who take her for granted, no respect for writers who misuse or abuse her, no tolerance for students who think they know her when they cannot even tell which end of her they're screwing" (63).

Through David's self-reflection on his position as a Chinese-born English instructor at a university in the U.S. Midwest, *Mother Tongue* also addresses the popular stereotype of Asian immigrants as "perpetual foreigners" with identical looks and limited English-speaking skills. "I bet I know what you're thinking," he addresses his students on the first day of class. "My God! What's a *chink* doing, teaching English in Kansas?" (12; italics in original). He then goes on to reverse the Western stereotypical perception of Asians as a homogenous group by telling his students that they "look all alike" to him (15). David's linguistic and cultural ability to "talk back" to these Euro-American Western clichés of Asian "otherness," however, is tightly connected to his Americanization,

which shows itself above all in his mastering English and losing his Chinese language abilities. Asked by a white student why he teaches English and not Mandarin, he replies,

I speak Fukienese, not Mandarin. I had tutors when I was young, but what Mandarin I remember is pathetic. As for Fukienese, the longer I stay away from home, the harder it is to make the sounds come out of my mouth. The tongue refuses to cooperate. These days, when my mother calls me on the phone, I talk to her in English.... I don't have the words in Chinese for all the things I was taught in English. My Fukienese is about as basic as you can get. I know how to order at Chinese restaurants, but that's hardly food for thought. The very term "food for thought" escapes me. I don't know how to say it in Fukienese, much less in Mandarin. So you see, except for the way I look, I am no more Chinese than you. (45)

In a similar vein, *A Language of Their Own* problematizes ethnic and national identities through images and practices of language use. Here, the conflict over "retaining" versus "losing" one's Chinese cultural origins is acted out between the first-generation immigrant Oscar and the American-born Ming. Seeking to defend his inhibitions against verbal expressiveness and open dispute, Oscar invokes a painful and formative childhood experience of foreign language acquisition:

My father used to beat me with his fists, when I didn't get the perfect grade in school. Once I failed English. I was ten. I didn't understand my tenses—couldn't get them right—got them all mixed up—past, present, perfect, continuous. That night, with a whip in his hand and the test paper in another, my father caned me. And in a consuming rage, he struck me in the left eye. The next day, I went to school half blind.... The pain didn't bother me. The embarrassed, silent looks from my friends did. Fighting and violence didn't solve a thing even if I got an A in my next English test. Now, I correct my father's English. Most of the time—deliberately. (127)

In his critique of his father's physical violence, Oscar fails to recognize not only that his pleasure in correcting his father's English constitutes a form of psychological violence that repeats the violence he claims to reject, but also that his own command of the American idiom and the discursive power and cultural integration it entails result from his father's strict regime. As his youthful blurring of the English tenses signifies the troubling history of Chinese immigrants in the United States, Oscar's anecdote interrogates the popular success story of Asians as the "model minority" in the United States.⁵ In marking Oscar's social "difference" not through his racial otherness but through his linguistic flaws, the silence of his classmates, and the mark of his father's beating (another form of verbal failure), the scene demonstrates that ethnicity is not a stable, naturally given entity but socio-culturally constructed through discursive practices. However, this incident at the same time reaffirms traditional notions of both gay and Asian differences from Euro-American heteronormativity in the way it pits the gay Oscar's rejection of physical violence against his heterosexual father's recurrence to it and the Americanized Oscar's English eloquence against his Chinese immigrant father's linguistic inabilities.

The construction of ethnicity also becomes evident in Oscar's and Ming's negotiations of their Chinese and U.S.-American identities. While he claims to be Chinese, Oscar denies the same right to his lover on the grounds of Ming's American birth and higher degree of assimilation to Euro-American cultural norms. Oscar especially disparages his partner's outspokenness and desire to hold hands in public as markers of ethnic otherness from Chinese cultural standards (130; see also Elam 103; Poole 115). Ming himself acknowledges his detachment from traditional Chinese culture:

⁵ The stereotype of the Asian American "model minority" is based on the observation that a higher percentage of Asians has achieved economic success and upward mobility and that Asian Americans are less inclined to rigorously criticize racial discrimination and the pressure to assimilate than other ethnic minority groups in the United States. Especially in its popular usage as a foil to the supposed political radicalism and educational and professional under-achievement of African Americans and Latinos, it has also become a cliché for the assumedly smart, assimilated, and non-political Asian (see Lowe 6,19, 68).

I cannot order anything in a Chinese restaurant. I know what the food looks like. What it tastes like. But I just don't know what the fuck it is. What it is called. Of course, it doesn't help if I try describing it in English to the waiters. All I get is a dish that is completely different from what I want, and vile looks. It's as if I have committed some kind of cultural rape, a racial sacrilege. And if I try to order with the pathetic string of elementary Cantonese words every Caucasian tourist in Chinatown knows, they mutter and defiantly speak broken English to me. My Chinese is unbearable to them. (130-31; see also 132-34)

Even more than David's difficulties in communicating in Fukienese and Mandarin in *Mother Tongue*, Ming's inability to claim belonging to the Chinese community in *A Language of Their Own* due to his broken Cantonese and his limited knowledge of Chinese cuisine once again reveal the way linguistic-cultural discourses construct ethnicities.

In an ironic twist, the names the two characters have adopted articulate their respective ethnic and national self-identifications: Oscar has chosen an English name, arguing that he had his original Chinese name "massacred all too frequently by strangers and friends," whereas Ming, as Oscar mockingly remarks, "has picked up a Chinese name because he wanted to be in touch with his cultural roots" (147; see also Elam 103). What appears to be a matter of individual, and in Oscar's case also pragmatic, choice turns out to express, upon closer examination, two different strategies of negotiating a Chinese American identity: Oscar, whose slight accent indicates that English is not his first language (122), asserts his Americanness by exhibiting the same ignorance of foreign languages that prevails in the dominant culture. His selection of a common English name underlines his claim to partake in all-American popular culture. Ming, on the other hand, seeks to accentuate his Chinese descent in a manner that establishes a respectable ethnic difference by choosing a Chinese name that in the Western world is associated with a dynasty of Chinese rulers and the highly-treasured craft objects created in the era of their reign.

Constructing Sexuality, Gender, and Nationhood

Both *Mother Tongue* and *A Language of Their Own* depict the Americanization of their protagonists as a result of a cultural and linguistic educational process that manifests itself most prominently in the appropriation of Standard English and Euro-American popular culture. As Ming admits in *A Language of Their Own*,

I don't know when I stopped learning how to speak Chinese. Must be in grade school. Everyone at school spoke English beautifully, and my English was always—well, unrefined, pidgin, tainted. The stuff Rex Harrison sang of in *My Fair Lady*. When I saw the movie, I felt I was Audrey Hepburn. More than anything else in the world, I wanted to be like her: delicate, refined, speaking perfectly, and wearing a Cecil Beaton original. Since no one at home spoke English fluently, I would spend countless hours watching TV every day. Repeating the same lines after Connie Chung and Mary Tyler Moore until I got the pronunciation, the rhythms, the expressions all down pat. My mother thought I was insane. But I finally did speak English just like everyone else, if not better. I think *My Fair Lady* was pivotal in my life. It taught me how to speak proper English, appreciate good clothes, and made me realize I was gay.
(131)

While the Asian American newscaster Connie Chung is evoked as a (possible) role model for an Asian adolescent who is eager to assimilate, the true ideal presented here is another one: Audrey Hepburn's screen performance as Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* (1964), the popular Hollywood film version of the eponymous musical based on George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*. The famous story of the flower girl who learns to speak standard English and to behave like a lady in *My Fair Lady* can be read as a tale of upward mobility through assimilation to the standard-setting social class. Ming's idolizing Hepburn's performance not only Americanizes Shaw's play, but also reinforces his own gay identity formation. As Michael Bronski points out, the theater, as a public venue that celebrates masquerade and role-playing, has a long tradition of addressing issues of sexuality and gender identities as well as of providing a safe haven and a site of identification for people who are considered (or consider themselves) different from the mainstream

(29-32). Not only is Eliza's social rise in *Pygmalion* connected to her change of clothes and ability to perform the "role" of an English lady, but as a stage character her own identity also emerges from a playscript and is fully realized only through the actress's performance and costume. The film *My Fair Lady* further places its American actors and production location behind the mask of acquired English accents and Victorian English set designs in order to provide a convincing representation of the original story. By intertwining Ming's endeavor to speak Standard (American) English with his achievement of gay self-awareness, *A Language of Their Own* once again signifies upon the stereotype of Asian Americans as a "model minority" that does not challenge the norms and values of U.S. mainstream society but realizes its American Dream through rigorous self-discipline and social assimilation.

David's and Lilian's identities in *Mother Tongue* are similarly steeped in American popular culture. Like Ming, Lilian confesses that she "really learned to speak English" by watching Hollywood musicals (18), and that her infatuation with American movies made her name herself and her children after famous American screen actors (9). Ironically, David, the only exception to Lilian's naming policy, would later become aware of his sexual orientation through his juvenile fascination with a Hollywood film that has been read as a model of gay American self-discovery, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). As Brett Farmer points out, "out of the seemingly banal tale of a young girl's trip through a fantasyland, queer spectators have interpreted a mytho-epic journey from heteronormative mundanity into queer difference" (par. 13). In *Mother Tongue*, David reveals that the family chauffeur blackmailed him to engage in oral sex after catching him stealing a volume of Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* book series on which the film is based (68-69). Like Ming, David further fully realizes his sexual difference through an act of verbal utterance. "I didn't know I was doing anything 'wrong,'" he says about these early sexual experiences, "until I was much older, when the Jesuits [at school] carefully taught us the names of all the 'mortal' sins" (69).

David's intertwined Americanization and gay identity formation culminate in two interconnected narratives, his own recounting how he took the oath of allegiance to the United States in the course of his naturalization ceremony and a monologue by his mother about her

family life in the Philippines (82-83). By interrupting David's speech, Lilian seeks to postpone its closure in a dual sense: she rejects his change of citizenship, as she blames an American soldier for the premature death of David's brother (85-87), and she refuses to acknowledge his affirmation of his homosexuality (40, 74).

Like David's identification with *The Wizard of Oz* and the fact that he now lives in Kansas, where the film story actually begins and ends (59), being naturalized on the day of Halloween symbolically marks the interconnectedness of his identities as a U.S. citizen and a Westernized gay man. Not only is Halloween one of the most American of holidays, but because of its association with masquerade and fancy dress it also has a particular appeal in gay circles. In an act that symbolizes the socio-cultural construction of both national and sexual identities, David physically performs his belonging to the United States and American gay culture. By dressing as a ghost for a gay Halloween party after his naturalization ceremony, he not only literally embodies the word used in several Chinese idioms for a white person (77-78, 80), but also visualizes the construction of homosexuality in one line of public discourse as invisible, dreaded "specter" of heterosexual society. However, while both Asian and U.S. discourses frame homosexuality's transgression of traditional sexual and gender roles as a threat to the social order (see Bronski 8-13, 25, 74-75; Sohn 101-03), *Mother Tongue* limits its critique of homophobic attitudes to exposing Catholic Filipinos' double standard of clandestinely tolerating premarital sex between men (69) as well as criticizing Lilian for constantly bothering David to get married and beget children (12,14, 16-17, 20, 22, 50, 82-83). The play hereby sets up a discursive dichotomy between a "progressive American" acceptance of homosexual orientation as a meaningful social identity and a "backwards Asian" rejection of homosexuality as a set of sinful, incidentally practiced acts.

Underscoring David's now dual difference from Chinese culture as an openly gay man and U.S. citizen, Lilian opens her conversation with David during the Halloween scene with the question "[w]hat are you hiding from me?" (80), and her son concludes his account of his naturalization ceremony with the appeal "Mother, please be happy for me" (83). While both sentences explicitly refer to David's becoming an American citizen, they implicitly also recall the secrecy often surrounding gay sexual orientation in a family environment and the

kind of utterances stereotypically beginning and ending a gay coming-out conversation. The act of coming out—the verbal acknowledgment of one's homosexual orientation—is often seen as the ultimate speech act of gay self-realization. The coming out of the gay Asian/Asian American in the United States pointedly illustrates how processes of ethnic, national, and sexual self-formation are carried out in the form of discursive practices. As Dana Takagi remarks, "in the popular dressing of Asian American identity, silence has functioned as a metaphor for the assimilative and positive imagery of the 'good' minorities." This silence, she emphasizes, "ought to be understood as an adaptive mechanism to a racially discriminatory culture rather than as an intrinsic part of Asian American culture.... 'Breaking the silence' about Asian Americans refers to crashing popular stereotypes about them, and shares with the gay act of 'coming out' the desire to define oneself rather than be defined by others" (26; see also Poole 110).⁶

In "breaking the silence" about the gay Asian American experience, *Mother Tongue* and *A Language of Their Own* interrogate the essentialist view of silence as an Asian ethnoracial identity trait⁷ as well as the homophobic social silencing of gay men. Particularly *A Language of Their Own* strategically uses language in lieu of gay sexual intimacy to address the gay Asian American experience without alienating audiences that are uncomfortable with the display of physical intimacy between men. Both language as metaphor for the love relationships in the drama and the language of the play itself, with its call-and-response patterns of speech and its shifts back and forth between a tone of longing

⁶ Takagi also points out the crucial differences between gay and heterosexual Asian American experiences, especially the fact that sexuality is more widely regarded as being socio-culturally constructed, whereas ethnicity is more commonly understood as a rather stable entity (26-28).

⁷ I use the term "ethnoracial" to refer to the dual identification of "Asian"/"Asian American" as both a racial identity category, especially in contexts of connecting (presumed) socio-cultural "otherness" to markers of physiological difference from Euro-Americans, and as a (pan-)ethnic concept, especially as a self-chosen identity political category in the Asian American movement of the 1960s and 1970s (see Lowe 19-29 on these phenomena) and as a more general umbrella term to refer to people of various ethnic and national origins from Central, South, and East Asia.

and one of aggression, powerfully articulate the wide range of feelings that shape the relationships among the four characters and thus paint a complex picture of Asian American gay sexuality and sexual identity.

Mother Tongue challenges traditional stereotypes of "Asian" and "gay" silences as well as the high value placed upon speaking out in Euro-American culture. The silence of David's father is attributed not to Asian heroic male stoicism, as tradition would have it, but presented as an effect of marriage (17). Similarly, Lilian's constant interventions into David's life subvert the ethnicized gender ideal of the quiet, passively enduring Asian woman. In fact, the play is as much a testimonial of Lilian's life—quite literally the "mother's tongue" speaking—as it is of David's.

These subversions of an essentialized "Asian silence" strikingly contrast with David's sexuality being surrounded by the absence or coding of verbal utterances. This absence affirms the traditional connection between homosexuality and silence—both the ways in which a society can silence the sexually "deviant" and the fact that the latter may keep silent for fear of social ostracism. To secure the blackmailing chauffeur's secrecy, the young David consents to gay sex and hereby discovers his own sexual orientation (68-69). His first friendship with an American gains a homoerotic undertone through a language riddle, which, once again, emphasizes the power of speech: "What is a four- letter word for intercourse? It ends with the letter 'k.' ... It's what we've been doing for the last ten minutes.... Social intercourse. Conversation. The verb 'to talk'" (56). And after the scene in which he remembers both the chauffeur and the soldier as well as his decision to follow his lover, an American businessman, to the United States, David has to call in sick with "a touch of glossitis, an inflammation of the tongue" that temporarily renders him unable to teach (71). As a gay man born during World War II, David furthermore profoundly mistrusts the ideology of coming out as a liberating force that has been prevalent in gay American political discourse since the late 1960s.⁸ He argues that coming out as gay

makes good copy for the media, and so the love that once dared not speak its name has fast become the love that won't shut up....

⁸ See Bronski on the gay political discourses in the United States since the 1960s (67-80).

I've never flaunted it, but it's no secret I'm gay. The way Clark and I live together, do everything together ... anyone who doesn't know we're gay is either blind or stupid. (73-74; second ellipsis in the original)

In *A Language of Their Own*, the "thirtysomething" Oscar (122) uses his close ties to Chinese tradition to explain his silence about his homosexuality in family contexts and his objection to showing signs of affection for his lover in public. About ten years younger and more Americanized than Oscar, Ming is subjected to "gay" silence by outside forces: his parents stopped speaking to him after he came out to them (135). While the play depicts both men's approaches to negotiating a gay Chinese American identity as legitimate, it scrutinizes the impact of the socially sanctioned silence upon the identities in question—Ming's forced (further) separation from his family and ethnic background on the one hand and Oscar's alienation from and subsequent break with his lover on the other.

In contrast with the normative force that socially sanctioned silence exerts upon Oscar and Ming, a scene toward the end of the drama demonstrates that silence can also achieve subversive power. Explaining how he will avoid possible murder charges for assisting Oscar in committing suicide, Oscar's partner Daniel argues that, when confronted by hospital authorities, "I'll say I can't read English or something.... Misread the prescription on the [valium] bottle" (218). To achieve his goal, Daniel, an eloquent, wealthy Filipino student at Harvard University, here strategically draws upon the popular stereotype of Asians in the United States as lower-class immigrants with limited English language skills. In so doing, he appropriates and re-signifies a discursive identity construction, and thus turns a (potentially) marginalized minority identity into a source of power.

Discursive Formations of Race, Class, and (Dis)ability

In addition to ethno-culturally marking behavioral differences through verbal discourse, *A Language of Their Own* also negotiates interracial desire, racial and class differences, and their mutual impact upon one another through images of verbal utterance. The first act of the play establishes Ming and Oscar's different educational and social class backgrounds, among others, through their distinct language uses:

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, juvenile expressions like "way cool" in his utterances. The couple's strong emotional bond is rendered manifest in the two men's literal coming to speak the same language, as they integrate each other's specific vocabulary into their communication (136).

The second act of the play evokes Robert and Ming's economic status as an upper-middle-class American couple through a linguistic reference, mentioning that the two men "take spontaneous exotic trips to faraway places where a word of English is never spoken" (209). However, the tendency of the white American Robert to interrupt Ming and to "refine" his taste according to Eurocentric upper-middle-class standards increasingly drives the couple apart (185, 189). Ming bitterly comments upon Robert's affair with the Vietnamese immigrant Pran in terms that emphasize Robert's even greater cultural and class difference from his new love interest: "Maybe you like to finish [Pran's] sentences too. Correct his English" (213). The term "finishing" here entails both Robert's cultural educational attempts and his intervention into his partner's speech, and hence into the discursive agency of Asians and Asian Americans in U.S. society.

What seems to be a rather clear ethnoracial and cultural inequality between a hegemonic white American and a subaltern Asian partner is challenged as soon as it is established. Both the Chinese American Ming and the Vietnamese Pran are subject to racialized processes of social othering, even when they, like Ming, hold U.S. citizenship. However, similar to Lilian's articulation of her sense of ethnic superiority as a Chinese woman to Filipino culture by referring to Filipinos as "primitive dogs" in *Mother Tongue* (11), in *A Language of Their Own* Ming frames Pran as a poor, uneducated, and dangerous alien by calling him a "Vietcong" and "boat person" (199, 211) and by mocking his English (213). While his motivation for labeling Pran is personal jealousy, Ming implicitly establishes his ethnic, national, and class difference from his rival in order to claim his own belonging to U.S. society, his own Asian ethnoracial identity notwithstanding. As Harry Elam points out, "Ming's cultural performance and venomous attack reinforce our recognition of 'Asian American' as an inherently constructed political category that can both reflect and elide difference" (106).

In an ironic twist that underlines the social construction of "Asianness" revealed by Ming's ethnic disidentification with his rival, the otherwise highly eloquent, American-born Ming turns out to be less articulate in conveying his feelings than the Vietnamese who struggles with the English tongue. "[Pran] talks to me," Robert tells Ming. "With the few fucking English words he knows! In his broken English unbearable to your ears! ... Not like you!" (214). In contrast to Ming's silence about his feelings for Robert as well as his incomprehensible Chinese, Pran's broken English permits a meaningful communication and human interaction, even though it marks its speaker as an ethnic and national "other." "Broken English"—the apt title of the second act of Yew's drama (178)—can furthermore be read as a master trope for the relationships of the four men in this part of the play. While Ming and Robert's bond is torn by jealousy, adultery, and fear of commitment, it is finally mended again, whereas Oscar and Daniel's stable relationship is slowly but irreversibly broken by Oscar's illness and subsequent death from AIDS.

Even more than ethnicity or class, it is AIDS that reveals the dual capacity of language to signify both identity and disidentification in *A Language of Their Own*. As Steven Drukman observes, "the acronym informing Yew's drama the most is AIDS, and [the play] demonstrates how the plague has inflected the language of love as it has infected the people we love" (58).⁹ After Oscar is diagnosed with HIV, the word "AIDS" increasingly defines his and Ming's conversations and marks the growing emotional distance between the two lovers. Ming's fear of confronting Oscar's illness as well as his own possible HIV infection manifests itself aptly in his reluctance to hear and himself pronounce the key words: "I don't know why you keep volleying, ramming the words AIDS and HIV positive down my throat," Ming says to Oscar, dressing his inhibition against the suddenly crucial role of HIV/AIDS in his life in a powerful image of physical violence against his respiratory and speech apparatus (139; see also 137-40).

Oscar summarizes the impact of his illness upon his life and especially his break-up with Ming through an image of speech, as a "change of labels. From lovers to friends" (123). He similarly articulates

⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the subject of HIV/AIDS in Yew's play, see Haas 209-22.

his new medical and social status as an HIV-positive man, once again, in terms of a discourse of belonging. Speaking about a support group for the HIV-positive he has joined, Oscar asserts that "there was a new vocabulary, a new language, discussions on T-cells, AZT and PCP" (154- 55; see also Poole 115). Interacting with the characters' framing of their ethnic, national, cultural, and class identities through images of language and the act of speaking, Oscar's HIV here appears not only as a carrier of a lethal illness, but also of a new, distinct identity that is subject to discursive construction and signifies social belonging through its proper verbal idiom.

Paul Stephen Lim's play *Mother Tongue* and Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* self-confidently address the intersectionality of sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, culture, nationality, and (dis)ability from a vantage point that presents gay Asian American men as a viable normative center. The plays hereby claim a space of agency for gay and Asian experiences in the United States. However, as Yew admits in an interview with Steven Drukman, "while sharing a language can make you feel like you belong, it can also be used against you at a moment's notice" (Drukman 60). Both his and Lim's plays critically interrogate the ways language functions to erect barriers of social exclusion, based on disability, ethnic, racial, or class differences, within and beyond the scope of Asian and Asian American gay identities.

Mother Tongue presents language as a signifier of intimate human relationships as well as of ethnic, national, and sexual identities. Especially in articulating David's intertwined identity formations from a Chinese boy in the Philippines toward a gay man and an assimilated American citizen through uses of language(s), the play takes a critical look at the ways verbal discourse generates and metaphorically represents belonging and alienation alike. *A Language of Their Own* explores how friends or lovers can bridge ethnic and HIV status differences and create a community by creating a verbal and physical "language of their own," which not only redresses Frank Chin's earlier cited call for the Asian American male writer's need for a proper idiom, but also invokes Virginia Woolf's famous link between privacy and discursive agency in her discussion of the situation of Western women writers in her 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own*. Yet, at various instances in Yew's drama, language becomes both the agent and outward

manifestation of crises, ruptures, and struggles for identities as well as disidentifications, both personal and social.

As the two dramas establish the multiple social identities and affiliations of their characters through the way in which they claim or disclaim speech competence and cultural literacy, *A Language of Their Own* and *Mother Tongue* emphasize the social construction and mutual interaction of all kinds of identities through discourse. Both plays further engage language and language imagery to problematize essentialist links between ethnic, national, and sexual identities on the one hand and linguistic abilities as well as discursive practices of silence and speech on the other. The two pieces, however, conclude ambiguously: while *Mother Tongue* ends with David's (ongoing) struggle with the unresolved conflict with his mother and the severely strained relationship with his longtime partner and *A Language of Their Own* ends with Ming and Daniel's attempt to cope with Oscar's death from AIDS and Daniel's own HIV infection, the two plays crucially question the power of language and its capacity of providing life with meaning that the two plays seemed to uphold earlier on.

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