Buck Buck Buckgaw and Sankyoufocoming: Cultural Nationalism and Panethnic Identity in “Chickencoop Chinaman” and “R&L”

By Takeo Rivera

Published by: SJAAS
Stable URL: http://www.aas.stanford.edu/journal/trivera09.htm

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In Scene 1 of my play “R&L,” Tom Fukunaga, the central character of the piece, calls out in soliloquy:

Asian America,
We miss you—
We are the nascent children of sea salt legacies
ladled, spoonfed contradictions since our birth….
Is there more to you than bul go gi
on the streets of Koreatown
More to you than the boba
between my molars, God—
Asian America
Give me at least a damn song,
our Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing
a hymn, a battlecry
A feeling that you’re still here
and that we’re not crazy.
That we’re not still switching our R’s
and our L’s.
That we’re not switching our directions,
Asian America,
please,
Find us again.

Fukunaga’s anxiety is not unlike that of Sau-Ling Wong’s in “Denationalization Reconsidered.” His angst is rooted in the fact that his sense of Asian America has been reduced to commodities of a transnational economy, an Asia-Pacific, that does little to combat the continued Asian American stereotype of the “perpetual foreigner”—just as Wong cautions against the excesses of transnationalism due to its potential to dehistoricize the grander Asian American political struggle. Tom Fukunaga longs for a “hymn, a battlecry,” a mode of direct resistance. In fact, what Fukunaga is invoking is the sense of Asian American nationalism that came to dominate Asian American cultural criticism in the 1960’s and 1970’s.
In the contemporary discourse of ethnic studies at large, works of cultural nationalism have often (and sometimes rightfully so) been quickly dismissed as being essentialist, misogynistic, or homophobic, playing to masculine militant constructions of identity that have tended to adopt these biases. Rather, a transnational frame has come to dominate the Asian American studies of today, pressuring Asian American cultural criticism to “denationalize,” according to Sau-Ling Wong. But can’t such a denationalizing movement have troubling consequences on the Asian American identity at large, an identity forged from analogous political impulses as “Chicano” and “Afrikan?” The cultural nationalism of the Asian American movement of old may have been problematic in its simplistic and often essentialist constructions of identity, but this does not mean that it is not without its applicability: namely, Asian American cultural nationalism as a form of counterhegemonic, panethnic identity construction. To explore the potential for cultural nationalism, I examine two texts: my own R&L of 2008, as well as Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman* of 1971. While Chin’s piece uses cultural nationalism—though a particularly masculine and heteronormative version of one at that—to address the unstable “schizophrenic” notion of being Asian in American society, my piece employs cultural nationalism to reenergize a notion of Asian Americanness in a community marked by ethnic fragmentation and political inactivity, much of which is consequent of transnationalism. However, neither play discounts the transnational; in their attempts to explore or consolidate an Asian American identity, each invokes cultural nationalism and transnational impulses alike to confront the dominant racial identity crises of their respective eras. Each piece exhibits that cultural nationalism and transnationalism not only can coexist, but reinforce each other, while resisting the potential problematics of denationalizing.
1. Contextualizing the Asian American Identity Crisis

Before analyzing these plays, however, it is first important to further contextualize the debate by describing the interrelated transnational shifts that have occurred in Asian American identity, demographics, and cultural criticism. As a starting point, it is useful to refer to Stuart Hall’s two notions of identity construction. Hall’s first notion is that of the “one shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’” (393) that is primarily past-based, and largely essentialist. This notion of identity requires some form of “excavation” in order to learn the true form of this identity, involving “the act of imaginative rediscovery” (ibid). Hall’s second notion is that of “what we have become,” a future-based notion that relies not on the past, but on the “‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (394). The essentialist and fluid notions of identity are not necessarily mutually exclusive; but he explains how the second notion is that which is most useful to understanding the traumas of colonization, a force that makes the colonized subject view herself as the “other.”

Both notions are in play in the Asian American identity, but the former notion is problematized by the fact that Asian Americans between ethnicities do not share one clear-cut common cultural origin. To state the obvious, Chinese and Hmong speak different languages, Japanese and Filipinos have extraordinarily different histories. Thus, an “Asian American” identity—as opposed to say, a “Vietnamese American” identity—is necessarily panethnic. The “Asian American” identity has had political roots of the 60’s social movements, and that, according to William Wei, “in defining their own identity and culture, Asian Americans bring together previously isolated and ineffective struggles against the oppression of Asian communities into a coherent pan-Asian movement for social change” (1). The Asian American identity has been from its outset political and culturally nationalist since, according to Yen Le
Espiritu, “at least in its origin, pan-Asian ethnicity was the product of material, political, and social processes rather than cultural bonds. Asian Americans came together because they recognized that pan-Asian alliance was important, even essential, for the protection and advancement of their interests” (164). Referring to the previous conceptual framework, Hall’s second notion of identity has played a stronger role in Asian American identity construction than the first. That is not to say, however, that an Asian American culture has not internally developed; Espiritu goes on to write that following the political origins of the Asian American movement, the panethnic culture of the Asian American movement sustained itself through its political and social practices.

Cultural nationalism thrived in an environment such as this, since the simple common factor of the present geographic commonality of America (as opposed to past geography) is critical to the Asian American definition. However, it is inaccurate to say that the transnational impulse that has come to dominate the cultural criticism of contemporary Asian American studies was absent in this period. In fact, a transnational imaginary helped community sustenance particularly in the early stages, such as the influence of Maoism among Asian American leftist activists, though political issues remain the main unifying factor for Asian Americans (Chan 173). Furthermore, David Palumbo-Liu notes that it is problematic to assume that cultural nationalism has merely been employed to contain a sense of Asian American culture, arguing that “the question behind cultural nationalism is… not the availability of a ‘nation’ to secure ‘culture,’ but rather the historical materiality of a culture produced in a psychic space wherein a particular and contingent formation of the nation appears in relation to multiple identifications which are themselves driven by specific contingencies”(308). An Asian American cultural nationalist identity, according to Palumbo-Liu, has more of an origin than that
of political intentionality; it has corresponded to the material realities of multiple identifications, even (if not especially) transnational ones. Indeed, “the historical reality of Asian America has been produced by a number of factors,” continues Palumbo-Liu, “including but not limited to the ongoing influence of Asian national identity, America’s continued identification of Asians as not Americans, and transnational capital’s persistent merging and delinking of the interests of ‘Asia’ and ‘America’ at precise moments…. Likewise, the referent for ‘cultural nationalism’ is now increasingly linked to a particular transnational identity”(310). The Asian American identity, and the cultural nationalism that had come to reinforce it, has more dimensions than of the mere “ossification of identity politics” described by Sau-Ling Wong (3).

However, the challenges to producing an Asian American identity in the 60’s and 70’s are quite different than those of the contemporary period. David Palumbo-Liu tackles the temporally specific identity crises that have accompanied both the beginnings of the Asian American movement and the contemporary transnational/digital age. Palumbo-Liu argues that there has been a “psychoanalytic modality” shift from the crisis of “schizophrenia” to that of the “transnational” (292). By “schizophrenia,” Palumbo-Liu refers to the pathologizing of the Asian American dual consciousness between “Asian” and “American” identities, but also indicates that “the separation between ‘Asia,’ ‘America,’ and ‘Asian America’ is itself a psychic rationalization that, in seeking to simplify complex forms of identification and disidentification, blinds us both to the precise politics of separation” (308).

In contrast, the “transnational” crisis arises from the economic prestige of the “Asia-Pacific” as a kind of postmodern, late-capitalist utopia that has “leapfrogged” ahead of the United States, and thus represents the final frontier of the westward gaze of Manifest Destiny. “It may be,” writes Palumbo-Liu, “that Asian Americans are (once again) what America at once
secretly admires and fears” (338), in effect, not just a model minority but a yellow peril that threatens white supremacy. The accompanying mobility of middle-class Asian Americans in this transnational economic paradigm, however, threatens the ultimate relevance of ethnic identification altogether, that “Asians may not be distinct from Americans in this manifest utopia of transnational economic development” (357). While the “schizophrenic” period is marked by a complex negotiation between multiple and plural identities, the “transnational” period is marked by the potential for the cosmopolitan erasure of ethnicity. With the pressure to denationalize, and perhaps even de-ethnicize, Asian Americans may find Asian American cultural nationalism, and by extension Asian American identity itself, to be a quixotic relic of the past. It does seem unlikely that the social relevance of ethnicity will dissolve in the light of the Asia-Pacific global economy consciousness, as an Asian body is still an Asian body positioned in complex systems of power and privilege, and the fluidity of its meaning does not mean the erasure of it. Nevertheless, the pressure to denationalize the Asian American narrative, and the Asian American identity, remains in this contemporary transnational period.

Frank Chin’s “The Chickencoop Chinaman” is an illustration of this kind of cultural nationalism, “a local enactment of cultural nation [that] provided the indispensable grounds for progressive political work” (Palumbo-Liu 307) that expresses its brand of Asian Americanness in the period of “schizophrenia.” While Chin’s brand of cultural nationalism is certainly misogynistic and homophobic, it nevertheless points to the capacity for cultural nationalism to empower and perform a counterhegemonic identity.

2. The Chickencoop Chinaman: Search for Father China in White Man’s America

Frank Chin, one of the most influential yet controversial figures of Asian American literature, penned The Chickencoop Chinaman for a playwriting contest by the East West Players
and won. Eventually, the piece, now considered one of the seminal works of contemporary Asian American drama, was the first play written by an Asian American produced in the American Place Theatre in New York in 1972 (Huang 24). To this day, Chin’s “call for the redemption of Asian American masculinity has fueled… the imagination of many new Asian American writers, and has also helped inform the current notions of an emerging Asian American canon,” yet he remains somewhat of an “embarrassment” to Asian American critics due to the misogyny and ferocity of his works (Lee 61-62). For better or for worse, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* epitomizes these aspects about his style.

The play focuses primarily on Tam Lum, a Chinese American wordsmith and filmmaker who sets out to film a documentary about a Black boxer he admires named “Ovaltine.” In his short journey, Tam takes part in several intense discussions about race and the Asian American condition, and throughout the play, Chin calls out for a reclamation of Asian American masculinity as a form of empowerment. This message is conveyed in a myriad of ways, particularly through the euphemistic search for a nonexistent father figure, but also through the degradation of Asian femininity.

Both Josephine Lee and Xiaoling Shi invoke Freud in analyzing the masculine themes of *The Chickencoop Chinaman*. Josephine Lee points to “the Freudian paradigm of castration anxiety” (67), the intense fear of the Asian American male to be castrated, robbed of his manhood. Shi indicates that, in the tradition of Freud, Lacan, and Jung, the father can be understood metaphorically as the inventor of “the history and culture for all human beings; because of this, the absence of the father means the void of a particular history and culture” (2). The dual notions of castration and the absence of a father figure both describe a general anxiety of emasculation in *Chinaman*. For example, Lee, an assertive Eurasian woman who lives with
her young son Robbie and Tam’s best friend Kenji, has slept with a multitude of men and has birthed many children by them, but she does not stay with any of these lovers, including Tom, an assimilationist “ornamental oriental” whom Tam despises. Also, Tam explains to Robbie the story of his father, but refuses to describe him as his father, because he perceives him only as a passive, weak dishwasher who had to rely on Tam for his English language skills. Robbie, in turn, acts eerily adultlike and defiant of older male figures, resulting from the absence of a father figure from his life. In effect, all of the characters are fatherless and thus, in the psychoanalytic sense, “castrated.” Furthermore, since Chin establishes a paradigm of fatherhood-as-culture, the absence of a Chinese father represents the absence of Chineseness in general.

However, Chin’s masculine theme is implicitly panethnic. While he writes largely in terms of the absence of a strong Chinese father figure, the message is meant to be applicable across Asian American groups. Kenji, a Japanese American man, is meant to be another figure in dialogue with the concepts at stake. At no point is Kenji’s Japananeseness made as a point of difference with Tam; on the contrary, it is a point of unity with Tam, though a gendered one. This is illustrated when Tam and Kenji (problematically) enact the Helen Keller-as-model-minority caricature, in which they mockingly express that the Helen Keller narrative of success in spite of great social obstacles parallels the symbolic usage of Asian Americans as minorities who can do precisely that. In this scene, Tam cries out, “Listen to the voice of the Great White Motha, come to show you the light, Chinks and Japs, I say Listen, Children! Whooo I feel the power” (11)! Tam includes “Chinks and Japs” in the same form of subordination. It is perhaps needless to say that the degradation of a blind-and-deaf woman in order to establish this solidarity is problematic, as of course such a mockery immediately excludes the blind, the deaf, and to a certain extent women from this coalition of the empowered oppressed (not to mention
that historically, Keller’s political leanings were in actuality quite radical). Nevertheless, Chin’s point of unity is panethnic and political, drawing upon shared sociopolitical circumstances as opposed to a single Japanese or Chinese identification. Both Tam and Kenji have been robbed of their manhood and their culture equally; though for Chin, manhood and culture are one in the same.

Since they are so alienated from their culture, all of the Asian American characters of Chinaman, according to Karen Shimakawa, are abject bodies. They are degraded, incapable of fitting into any of the dominant racial paradigms. So what is the option for the Asian American, the abject body performing his identity onstage without a sense of masculinity? For Chin, the answer is the appropriation of other masculinities. In particular, Tam attempts to co-opt two forms: white American and Black American, since “for Chin Asian Americanness, as abject, simply does not directly figure in the subject/object relation of white/black race relations in U.S. American verbal discourse” (92). Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald, in her introduction to the 1981 republished edition of The Chickencoop Chinaman, describes “language as a medium of culture” (xviii), and thus, Tam’s racial performance is largely accomplished through his language. Faced with their abjection, both Tam and Kenji appropriate a “powerful linguistic identity… that was decidedly not Asian American” (Shimakawa 93). However, since neither is actually an Asian American masculinity, both white and Black masculinities ultimately end up being insufficient. White masculinity, embodied by the Lone Ranger in a dream sequence, ends up being a senile white racist who shoots Tam in the hand (for which Tam thanks him, as an exhibition of Asian feminine subservience to the white man), and is in love with Helen Keller; thus, white masculinity no longer appears viable as a kind of bricolage of empowerment.
Black masculinity is articulated in more detail. Tam and Kenji had grown up in Oakland together and retain much of the speech of African American Vernacular English, and they “exchange five” to congratulate themselves. Tam, with his gift of gab and impeccable wit, could be read as a trickster, a common narrative trope in African American folklore. Furthermore, the main story premise of the play revolves around the search of a black father figure—Charley Popcorn—to substitute for the absent Asian one. Daryl Maeda argues Chin writes performances that exhibit “blackness as a model of racial resistance and identity,” but also that “emulating blackness provided a way to recuperate Asian American masculinity” (1081). In addition, Maeda argues that Chin’s appropriation of blackness parallels the Asian American movement’s performance of blackness in order to develop its own identity. The activists of the Asian American movement “inserted Asian Americans into a racial paradigm, arguing that Asian Americans constituted a racialized bloc subject to the same racism that afflicted blacks” (ibid). The appropriation of blackness has both panethnic and racially coalesional implications. The performance of blackness in this period, most epitomized by the Black Panthers, had the imagery not of multiple ethnicities, but a single people resisting racism in an anti-colonial tradition, necessitating panethnicity to fit the model. Furthermore, the performance of blackness is done in a way to identify with the black struggle rather than subvert it. Asian American activists, writes Maeda, “agreed with two fundamental premises: first, that Asians of all ethnicities in the United States shared a common racial oppression, and second, that building a multiethnic, racially based coalition would provide an effective basis for resisting racism” (ibid).

Nevertheless, even blackness ultimately fails to reconstitute the abject Asian body in *Chinaman*. It turns out that Charley Popcorn is not actually Ovaltine’s father, a fact that deeply upsets Tam, and he, like the Lone Ranger, is bigoted towards Asians. With neither white nor
black masculinity adequate for the Asian American male, Chin points to the largely imaginary Chinese masculinity. This is a transnational imaginary, a lost masculinity somewhere across the ocean and also in the railroad narrative of a century before. In his final monologue, Tam muses, “Now and then, I feel them old days children, the way I feel the prowl of the dogs in the night and the bugs in the leaves and the thunder in the Sierra Nevadas however far they are. The way my grandmother had an ear for trains. Listen, children, I gotta go. Ride Buck Buck Bagaw with me… Listen in the kitchen for the Chickencoop Chinaman slowin on home” (66). Tam is nostalgically awaiting the resurrection of the heroic “Chinaman” who had journeyed from China to become an inseparable part of the history of the American West. Here, unlike many other Asian American activists who avoided Asia as a point of reference to avoid the American “perpetual foreigner” stigma, Chin is reinstating “Asia as a point of reference” (Palumbo-Liu 304). Here, Chin’s message is both cultural nationalist and transnational, ethnically specific and panethnic, all at once. He invokes Stuart Hall’s first notion of identity to reinforce the second, using cultural nationalism to invoke a transnational past of China that applies to all Asians who have been similarly racialized in America. Chin’s is a profound articulation of the cultural nationalism that resists Palumbo-Liu’s “schizophrenia,” a nationalism that grapples with the multiple conflicting identities.

Of course, as Josephine Lee eloquently argues, Chin’s articulation of that identity not only comes with, but is largely brought about through, the degradation of women. Equating masculine resuscitation with ethnic resuscitation can inevitably have misogynistic consequences, as it does in Chinaman. “The violent misogyny of the play enacts itself through a project of ‘lack’ onto that which is marked as female” (73) writes Lee, noting that Lee (the character) is a threat to this masculinity due to her sexual experience and her whiteness, which imaginatively
makes her more of an agent than the submissive Asian woman. Thus, Lee is one of the forces that must be neutralized, and is done so by Kenji’s proclamation that he will impregnate her.

Indeed, the cultural nationalism that Chin sets forth, while panethnic and coalitional, excludes women from its masculine militant vision.

However, while this misogyny can by no means be excused, it should not be overlooked that Chin’s cultural nationalism still serves as an early example of a panethnic and coalitional identity that undermines white racism. Cultural nationalism itself can be reinscribed to constitute the entirety of a community. For example, in “Queer Aztlán: the Re-formation of the Chicano Tribe,” Cherríe Moraga criticizes the homophobia and sexism of the Chicano movement, but wishes to retain and revise cultural nationalism:

The nationalism I seek is one that decolonizes the brown and female body as it decolonizes the brown and female earth. It is a new nationalism in which la Chicana Indígena stands at the center, and heterosexism and homophobia are no longer the cultural order of the day. I cling to the word “nation” because without the specific naming of the nation, the nation will be lost (as when feminism is reduced to humanism, the woman is subsumed). Let us retain our radical naming but expand it to meet a broader and wiser revolution (150).

“R&L” tries to do precisely that for the Asian American politic: expanding the nation of cultural nationalism, but retaining its radical elements, and employing it in a very different era of Asian American identity crisis.

3. R&L: Reproduction of Asian America in a Transnationalized World

“R&L,” written in 2008, speaks to an Asian American community that is experiencing the fruition of changing demographic trends that have been occurring since 1965, as well as an
Asian American community affected by discourses of transnationalism. In this era, the
production of a panethnic Asian American identity has been increasingly difficult with the
changing demographic trends of the Asian American community. With 1965 immigration
reform, Asian immigration has skyrocketed, as has the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of
Asian Americans, with the dramatic influx of Asian immigrants from many Asian countries
except Japan (Hing 117). Espiritu remarks:

The removal of racial barriers in the economic sector and the preference for highly
educated labor in immigration legislation have increased the rank of the educated
professionals, thus fragmenting Asian Americans more clearly than in the past along
class lines. The post-1965 immigration has also brought new ethnic constituencies into
the pan-Asian fold, many of which are unfamiliar or indifferent to the pan-Asian
concept…. Post-1965 Asian immigrants and the American-born (or American-raised)
Asians do not share a common history, sensibility, or political outlook. Without shared
worldviews, collective modes of interpretation, and common class interests, the prospects
of a viable pan-Asian ethnicity appear bleak (173).

In other words, the notion of an Asian American identity, particularly as it had been consolidated
in the 60’s and 70’s, may have less and less resonance with “newer” Asian Americans.

“R&L” addresses the Asian American community in this “transnational” period, but even
more specifically identifying itself as a post-9/11 meditation on being Asian in America.
Stylistically borrowing from Ntozake Shange, “R&L” is not so much a conventional play as a
“choreopoem,” consisting of multiple multivocal addresses to the audience. These characters
include immigrants who have established themselves after the “schizophrenic” period that Chin
explores, such as the middle-class Korean mother Ju, the Chinese delivery boy Washington, and
the gay Vietnamese disk jockey Patrick; as well as more familiar “Asian American” figures like Helen, the aged Nisei radical activist who literally embodies the cultural nationalist tradition.

The piece is very direct in its delivery, invoking a panethnic and coalitional cultural nationalism whose militancy is similar to that of *The Chickencoop Chinaman*. However, while the issue of Asian male emasculation is addressed, “R&L” is decidedly more inclusive in addressing the diverse struggles of the Asian American community, portraying empowered women and gay men alongside straight male counterparts. The character Tiff, for example, a straight Asian American woman with a preference for white men, aggressively exposes the hypocrisy of Asian American men’s discomfort with this preference, noting that the Asian male fetishizes her as much as the white male does, and that Asian men have no right to claim her as theirs: “We’re the perfect idols and white boys are/ intruding on your territory, huh?/ As if I’m your territory./ Yeah, fuck you, assholes./ Asian boys, white boys, not to mention you black boys/ who wanna ‘give it a try’/ Yeah, fuck ALL of you” (Rivera 18-19). Shortly afterward, a discussion between two Asian male characters, Filipino American hip-hop-influenced rice rocket enthusiast Pete and his more mainstream Japanese American friend Tom, ensues. The dialogue between Pete and Tom is, in effect, a reinterpreted dialogue between Tam and Tom in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, except this time the fast-talking masculine male, Pete, is unflatteringly exposed as a sexist homophobe insecure about his own manhood. Similar to Tam’s accusations of Tom in *Chinaman*, Pete accuses the Tom of *R&L* of being “dickless” and “ruining it for the rest of us” for their chances with Asian women, situating himself as the more masculine by performing black masculinity. Tom, however, mocks Pete, asking why he acts Black. Pete replies that he’s “Pinoy to the core, homes,” and that he is “reppin’ OAKLAND,” to which Tom
replies, “No, you’re ‘repping’ Piedmont” (21-22). The scene as a whole is inadvertently\(^1\) a direct reply to Chin’s themes, complicating the question of Asian emasculation by giving voice to the Asian female that is othered by Chin’s Asian masculinity, and by troubling the wholesale appropriation of blackness to assert masculinity.

While I attempt to problematize the assertion of Asian masculinity, however, I attempt to divorce it from the symbiotic linkage to cultural nationalism that Chin had assigned to it. The central thrust of *R&L*, established in Helen’s opening monologue, is that the Asian American community has lost its way, no longer embracing the militancy of the Asian American movement of the 60’s and 70’s. Helen accuses the audience of apathy, nostalgically lamenting the lost days “when ‘Asian American meant something, eh?/ When we linked arms in the struggle,/ with blacks and Hispanics and poor whites,/ we were all brothers and sisters united/ for a better world/ rather than a better paycheck” (4). Like Tam in *Chinaman*, Helen unearths an idealized past, a strategic essentialism that characterizes Hall’s first notion of identity—a past sense of “Asianness”—in order to remedy the current issues of Hall’s second—the alienation of Asian Americans from their own political struggle. The underlying answer to this question lies largely in Espiritu’s expression of the “bleakness” of Asian American political identity with the advent of more transnational Asian capital and transformed demographics; the apathy that Helen points to could be attributed to precisely this factor. Indeed, the transnational condition so described by Palumbo-Liu, the potential “erasure” of ethnicity, takes on a new urgency with Helen.

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\(^1\) This is a particularly ironic coincidence, as Rivera had not read *The Chickencoop Chinaman* at the time of writing *R&L*, drawing more upon an internalized understanding of Asian American identity formations, according to a personal interview.
In the final scene of *R&L*, Helen takes the stage again, and after describing her experience of emotionally negotiating the Hiroshima bombing and the slaughter of Vietnamese, she turns to the World Trade Center attacks: “But as I stared into the TV/ I began to wonder about us all,/ this was a moment for all of us/ on this soil…/ we who/ would always be foreign/ this would be a moment when all of us/ would have to choose,/ like the test they had the men take in Manzanar,/ the question:/ are we Americans?” (61-62). Helen asks the question of whether or not Asians in America are willing to reclaim the “American” identity, and in doing so, claim the capacity to be agents in society. However, Helen proceeds to anoint every character in the play as part of her identity (62), including the characters more associated with transnational flows and less identification with America; euphemistically, one could read that she does not reject the changes to the Asian American community that have come with transnationalism. Her call for a new Asian American nationalism does not run in opposition to the present transnational realities. As in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, cultural nationalism and transnationalism have an interdependent relationship in *R&L*, but they operate differently. In *R&L*, it is the “American” half of “Asian American” that is in danger, in contrast to *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, in which the “Asian” half that is in danger. The cultural nationalism of *R&L* provides an activist imaginary for a transnational present, while the cultural nationalism of *The Chickencoop Chinaman* provides a transnational imaginary for an activist present. Both nationalisms are to varying degrees essentialist, but the political organizing potential of such an aesthetic tactic should not be ignored.

4. Conclusion: A Transnational Nationalism?

Sau-Ling Wong is right to indicate an anxiety over denationalizing cultural criticism, as denationalizing could easily lead to dehistoricizing, the loss of Hall’s first form of identity.
However, the denationalizing of text is not a necessary consequence of the transnational, diasporic frame of analysis. Comparative analysis of both *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *R&L* reveal that transnational consciousness plays no small role in the consolidation of a cultural nationalism. Furthermore, *R&L* shows the capacity for cultural nationalism to expand beyond the misogynistic, heteronormative notion of nation that Chin establishes in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*.

The value of cultural nationalism can be implicitly found in James Moy’s comparative analysis of Philip Gotanda’s *Yankee Dawg You Die* and David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*. While Moy applauds the complex articulations of race and power in these works, Moy argues that these pieces actually reinscribe and reinforce orientalist tropes, even though their intention was to do the opposite. Moy explains that these pieces have gained widespread white acceptance because they do not confront the audience directly enough, since while the dialogue is subversive, the characters themselves are disfigured and discredited. “Until more overtly aggressive strategies are employed,” writes Moy, “it seems Chinese America must remain an exotic Orientalist fetish, a willing souvenir for America’s dreams of empire” (129). Certainly, both *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *R&L* are “overtly aggressive.”

Because of its confrontational nature, the transformative capacity of cultural nationalism should not be underestimated. During the one-week run of *R&L* at Stanford University in April 2008, I was humbled to have received an outpouring of support for the work from members of the university community. One Asian American freshman approached me, saying that the play encapsulated what he was feeling about his own sense of Asian American identity, and now had a sudden desire to “do something about it,” to empower himself and his community in some way. Several African American students sent emails of support, expressing a newfound solidarity with
the Asian American condition. Cultural nationalism, as a political-aesthetic approach, cannot
avoid criticisms of essentialism, but it can still adapt to the political landscape and expand its
borders, both geographically and sociologically. Perhaps cultural nationalism even possesses the
capacity to empower. There is, after all, more than one Asian American out there negotiating her
identity, listening for a train whistle, and lamenting quietly to herself, “Asian America, we miss
you.”
Works Cited


