

**UCLA**

**Departmental Honors Theses**

**Title**

Performing Asian American for the End of the World: Reimagining the Inscrutable as Resistance in Asian/American Theatre

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4qz2s53g>

**Author**

Sakuma, Evan

**Publication Date**

2022-04-22

Undergraduate

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

PERFORMING ASIAN AMERICANS FOR THE END OF THE WORLD:  
REIMAGINING THE INSCUTABLE AS RESISTANCE IN ASIAN/AMERICAN THEATRE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

EVAN JAMES TADASHI SAKUMA

ADVISOR: SUMMER KIM LEE

CONSULTANTS: MITCHUM HUEHLS; LUCY MAE SAN PABLO BURNS

LOS ANGELES, CA

22 APRIL 2022

## ABSTRACT

PERFORMING ASIAN AMERICANS FOR THE END OF THE WORLD:  
REIMAGINING THE INSCUTABLE AS RESISTANCE IN ASIAN/AMERICAN THEATRE  
BY EVAN JAMES TADASHI SAKUMA

This project interrogates Asian/American performances that act as sites of refusal. Starting with the theatrical works of Nathan Ramos and Chay Yew, I read these texts paying close attention to stage directions and other forms of subtext. Utilizing Summer Kim Lee's concept of asociality, I subsume these acts of submissiveness and inscrutability as resistance for the texts' queer characters. Honing in on their performance of babbling/bumblng/bubbling, I reimagine these nonsensical forms as acts of resistance that seek to reframe the harmful ways Asian/American stereotypes are read. From tracing the origins of babble to subsuming theories of the literary rant, this paper provides a glimpse into a unique methodology for analyzing the subtext of Asian/American literature. From there I pivot to Asian/American performance outside the stage. Focusing on the phenomenon birthed out of the pandemic known as the Auntie Sewing Squad (ASS) created by Kristia Wong, my work recontextualizes the otherwise mundane task of mask making as radical performance acts of caregiving. Reframing the labor as revolutionary care work, I uplift the mutual aid of the ASS as a finite subculture of care that superseded governmental aid and resisted hegemonic ideologies of love. Together, my case studies show that in the face of world-ending epidemics from AIDS to COVID-19, how Asian/American performances continue to resist, cultivate, and thrive.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Outside of traditional citations, I must have a way to archive my innermost thanks to those who have been part of my journey. How can I possibly begin to write about the performance of care without revealing the stagehands of my own mind's production?*

*First and foremost, my mentors that have planted seeds of inspiration in me since my first days in community college. I am forever a lancer to Professors Tookook Thongthiraj, Bryan Gonzalez, and Yuliana Samson who provided me with the foundation to take on research within the humanities.*

*At UCLA, my roots in research were fortified by the staff of UCLA's Academic Advancement program, particularly Dr. Alice Ho, Carolina San Juan, and Miriam Santana were my pillars. Because of them, I was successfully became a Mellon Mays Fellow under the tutelage of Mitchum Huehls.*

*Mellon Cohorts 12, 13, and our grad mentors Maga and Drew have since inspired me to take my research to new heights. Since then, I have also received invaluable mentorship from Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, Yogita Goyal, and Matthew Tanico.*

*Finally words fail, to encapsulate my love for my friends, cousins, aunts, uncles, and uncles—my family. Who continue to reorient my own eyes to make myself with more care than I did before.*

*All of the aforementioned individuals have participated in a performance of care that has imprinted on my mind. As I continue to produce work imbued with the echoes of my ancestors, know that every success is merely a reflection of the love I am so fortunate to accept.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	5
Literary Review.....	7
Asociality on Stage .....	12
Performing Amateur Asian-ness.....	16
Theatre Made Practical.....	18
Conclusion.....	23
Annotated Bibliography.....	25

*“In the beginning of our relationship, we learned each other’s language / Mouthing unintelligible gaggles and sounds / Unable to articulate / Clumsily tripping on words / Falling into abject frustration / But once we found the common language / Each action and deed, every word and sentence was... A radiant discovery.” (216 Chay Yew, A Language of Their Own)*

## **Introduction**

Asociality is a state of refusing social interaction; it hints at an individual’s desire to stay meek, silent, agreeable. As the epitomized model minority, Asian-American bodies are made out to be the ideal practitioners of asociality within the discourse perpetuated in United States media (Petersen, 1966). Supposedly, it is this silence and agreeableness that enables Asians to overcome racial discrimination and achieve financial mobility. This essay challenges this notion by offering a new mode of legibility for Asian Americans that I am coining “asociality as care.” Although the very concept of asociality seemingly resists care by constricting expression and feeling, when focusing on queer Asian-American bodies in theatre, I find that their commitment to queer expression while also existing within the asocial reframes their acts of reservation as acts of self-care and resistance.

While many scholars in performance studies and queer theory have developed frameworks that offer agency to marginalized subjects, in this essay, I employ asociality as care as an original analytic lens to offer a different interpretation of queer Asian Americans through theatrical texts. By analyzing gendered and racialized performances as refusals rather than acts of passivity, I expand the limits to the ways Asian-Americanness is analyzed in American theatre. In this way, my research makes headway into an untapped way of reimagining Asian asociality as an active choice rather than a state of abjection.

My research looks specifically at Nathan Ramos's *As We Babble On*— a modern Asian-American play which relies on the performance of literature to liberate racialized bodies from homogenized cultural and sexual identities. Ramos's work follows a 29-year-old Korean-American man named Benji in present-day New York. His inability to ground his queer identity within his cultural identity leads to heightened performance anxiety in the play which prevents him from pursuing his career as a cartoonist and accepting love from his non-Asian lover, Joel. As the play progresses, Benji actively seeks to invalidate his own sexual identity as an East Asian queer through self-deprecation and assumed fetishization. Through the deployment of asociality, however, Benji is able to begin taking the steps towards crafting a health relationship with Joel and launching his successful cartoonist career.

By centering my work on the performances by queer bodies of color, I complicate the complacency of the model minority. Through theatre, acts of solitude become performances in themselves which can help explain conceptual and pragmatic questions arising at the intersection of culture and performance. Ultimately, I argue that the actor, as a laboring body, creates a new legible landscape through their performance that is as much diplomatic as it is selfish.

## Literature Review

My literature review takes into consideration key texts on queer-of-color theory, performance theory, and the history of queer Asian/Americans.

I should clarify at the outset that this project will not use Euro-American queer theory to conduct an analysis of the characters, plot, or performative aspects of the plays. Instead, I will use the critical race theory framework known as queer-of-color critique. Unlike Euro-American queer theory, this framework stems from women-of-color feminists like Audre Lorde and combats the inherent limitations in nationalist and identity-based forms of political collectivity. In the late 1990s, performance studies scholar Jose Muñoz wrote *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), which expands on Lorde's work, highlighting the ways that White normativity causes violence within colonized bodies that do not abide by their racial or sexual norms. He also argues that performativity, namely queer theatre, operates as a tool for enacting political and intrapersonal change.

In the early twenty-first century, Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004) develops Muñoz's ideas further. In particular, Ferguson emphasizes the harm that materialism and liberalism can do to queer bodies searching for home. Living in a constant state of limbo makes the grounding of personhood through culture impossible. Honing this concept a few years later, Ferguson, alongside Grace Hong, outline the version of queer-of-color critique that I will be using in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization* (2011). For them, racialized bodies can be liberated from homogenized cultural and sexual identities; they not only acknowledge but also celebrate the layers of such collective identities as parts of a person's being that refuse to be static. This framework is vital to the analysis of my texts as it places the characters in a space where their



identities can be analyzed outside Euro-centric construction of queerness so these performances may be read as political.

Complimenting this queer-of-color critique framework, my work will also draw on theories of Asian/American performativity. In particular, performance theorist Lucy Burns discusses the intensive labor that goes into participating in theatrics in her book, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stage of Empire* (2013). She frames the arts as a form of political resistance used in the Philippines and in the States to preserve Pilipino culture. For example, dancing in Taxi halls in the States became a way to emasculate the colonizer because Pilipino were more adept at dancing. Conversely, as Muñoz cautions, performative art remains political and can always be weaponized for further colonization. Burns uses the example of the musical *Miss Saigon* which, despite providing Pilipino with jobs, inevitably strengthened pre-existing stereotypes and empowered a White savior narrative that has since become over-sexualized. In this way, Burns clearly defines the dual-edged nature of theatre when used by the colonizer as opposed to the colonized. By applying this concept to my primary texts, I can begin to categorize the various forms of performativity into two groups based on whether they further the queer narrative of the colonizer or they strengthen a queer narrative of resistance for the colonized.

Pivoting to a more historical lens, I look at the work of Eric Wat, a community activist and professor at Cal State Long Beach, for insight on the history of queer Asian/American community building. In his book, *The Making of a Gay Asian Community: An Oral History of Pre-AIDS Los Angeles* (2002), in which he details the adverse effects World War II had on Asian bodies and how it consigned them to submissiveness. Even during the queer revolution following Stonewall, many Asians had to hide in the shadows for over a decade only occasionally going to gay bars. Similar to the Red Scare, a new fearmongering tactic known as the Lavender Scare was

used to create fear around homosexuality. Organizations were put in place, even at intellectual spaces like Harvard University, which sought to label and remove all homosexual students and faculty members throughout the early 1920s. This is probably because up until 1952 homosexuality was labeled a mental illness by American Psychiatric Association. Unfortunately, even after this myth was dispelled by researcher Evelyn Hooker, Asians stayed as invisible as possible so they could dissociate themselves from rambunctious queer stereotypes. To show how deeply this need to distance oneself from queer stereotypes was: when they started protesting for queer rights, organizers would wear fancy suits and dresses in accordance with their genders assigned at birth to “perform” within the binary so they could be taken seriously.

In “Amerasia Journal, Volume 21, Number 3” edited by Russell Leong (1995), the shame queerness brought Asians was further showcased by a series of first-hand accounts from gay Asians living through America’s queer liberation movement. The stories accounted for both Asians native to their countries and Asians who were born and raised in America. The connecting thread through all of the narratives seemed to be how Asian/Americans differ from Asians when it comes to queer identities. For example, people in Thailand who are females that feel attraction to other females reject the term “lesbian” because of the term’s Western connotations. Similar to the previous book, this journal gave mere snapshots into the lives of queer Asians. Unlike the former, however, the book was able to give invaluable insight in regard to how the Western lens can taint the view of Asian/Americans. Indigenous people in Asia seem to disregard all labels of queerness that Westerners provide. This idea of rejecting Western culture and taking pride in the culture cultivated in the East can easily be applied when analyzing the work of Chay Yew and Nathan Ramos.

While the texts thus far melded well with my research topic, there is a text I'm still trying to grapple with if and how it could help further my theorizing. The key text I am referring to is Richard Delgado's *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (2013). The main takeaway from this theory is how race is a socially constructed concept which is perpetuated by humans to create strata. Oftentimes the strata set light skinned individuals above foreign people of color and even indigenous folks. While this idea was foundational for the creation of Queer-of-Color critique, I found it to be less applicable to my own research since my work seeks to liberate **racialized** bodies through the performance of asociality. Still, I will keep this theory in the back of my mind as I continue to flesh out my literature review since this is essentially another part of my methodology that could end up affecting the way I theorize.

Finally, I wanted to address the idea of the "queer Asian." The femininity and submissiveness expected of Asians largely contributes to the alignment of Asians, regardless of gender identification, to queerness. Perhaps it is the lack of western masculine features (i.e. height, large hands and feet), but for some reason Asians are seen as queer/lesser men. In Richard Fung's article, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," (1991) he exercises the idea that pornography enables White gay American men to explore their sexuality by providing multiple representations of queerness. In contrast to this freedom are colored bodies that become subjected to racialized profiling. In the same vein as the Fanonian concept of the Black man's identity being eclipsed by his penis, gay Asian/American bodies are also immured; however, rather than be reduced to a penis like a Black man, Asian/Americans are rendered penis-less by a persistent visual void.

All of these texts help me to provocatively engage the discourse of queer-of-color critique, using performance to call into question the limits of theory in a White supremacist

cisheteronormative patriarchal world. As I continue to map the characters in each play, I am starting to realize arguments against racializing one's own body, emasculating oneself through sustained asociality, and other forms of self-sabotage become muddied by the prolonged performance anxiety all the queer Asians experience.

### Asociality on the Stage

The queer-of-color critique framework reveals and validates intersectional issues facing the Asian queer. It provides reason behind the dissonance that occurs when needing to perform queerness alongside Asian asociality. The following excerpt is from Nathan Ramos' *As We Babble On* (2018) spoken by the queer Korean cartoonist Benji during an interlude, or aside, from the main narrative. On the stage, the actor presents as an isolated and unfeeling queer Asian who has turned from his sleeping lover, Joel, towards the audience; yet the spoken dialogue reveals a dynamic Benji who comes equipped with a fear, a hope, a longing.

“Does he want me for my clarity of mind,  
 my words that weave like wind on willows  
 or my quiet mischief at midnight?  
 or is it my silken smooth skin, an export of the east  
 the almond of my eyes, a metaphorical bind of the feet  
 a hand over the polite, slight, trite giggles that escape my half moon mouth  
 as I rack my brain, whirl my synapse to search for the logic that links my hand with his  
 he mutters my name in his sleep” (66)

Benji's poetic soliloquy intimately reveals to the audience his fear of fetishization while simultaneously admitting a hunger to sustain whatever desire Joel has for him. In doing this, however, Benji resorts to tactics of self-destruction as he actively tries to search for other explanations outside of his own performance as a gay Asian to be the reason why Joel is showing him affection. In the stillness of the soliloquy, Benji considers the inherent expectation for

Asians, regardless of gender and sexual identification, to align themselves with femininity and submissiveness. In opposition to conventionally attractive western masculine features, Benji reduces himself to his Asian features like his hairless skin and his almond-shaped eyes. He supposes that, unlike a typical gay White male (GWM), queer Asians are unable to be sexually desired unless as an object of fetish (Fung, 1991). In this way, Benji's intersectional identity as both a gay man and an Asian American contributed to his anxiety as a lover to such a degree that he needed to rely on a soliloquy as a means to work through his nerves asocially.

Earlier in the play, Benji also displays concerns over the intimacy he is receiving from Joel. As Benji attempts the walk of shame after their first night together, Joel catches Benji and questions why he was trying to sneak out. To Joel's surprise, Benji tells him that he "wanted to leave before I could see the regret" (41). Because Benji was unwilling to find himself, a gay Asian man, capable of receiving love outside of fetish, he continues to degrade himself for a second and then third time before finally asking if Joel was a rice queen, or a GWM who exclusively dates Asian males (Bao, 2012). In spite of Joel's constant reassurance debunking Benji's endless excuses, it is clear, based on the soliloquy performed later, that this social interaction between Benji and Joel was a fruitless engagement that failed to instill any confidence in Benji. To internalize that changed mindset, Benji needed to utilize asocial devices.

In addition to the chosen diction and the soliloquy, another deployment of asociality as care is present in the stage directions for the scene. As Benji is lamenting his intersectional woes, panels from his attempted comic books are projected on the scrim behind the actor. With the spotlight remaining on Benji, he continues his cathartic release towards the audience refusing to look upstage towards his unsuccessful comic strips. When analyzing the musical *Care Divas*, Allan Punzalan Issac reads into the nuances of staging aesthetics. He insists that the lighting

complimenting the final three scenes are telling a story within themselves which reflect the stages of grief the main characters in the musical feel over the death of a lover. Similarly, I hold that the use of the blocking and the scrim projections are intentional choices by the author to reveal a change this Benji is undergoing. (Issac, 2016). Through asociality, Benji is permitted to refuse the active process of producing his comic panels. Instead, he is allowed to work through his thoughts about his relationship with Joel without being weighed down by the labor he does for a living. Although this act of asociality provides Benji the space to find clarity within his love life, interestingly the comic strips panels are depicting him and Joel with Benji's image in deep contemplation. Therefore, the panel is projected to underscore how in vanquishing his own insecurities, Benji will be able to imagine past this stage of self-doubt both in his relationship life and his professional one.

Still, within this loneliness Benji is offered agency through an ability to transform audiences and himself. In Joel's state of sleep, unable to hear Benji's wishful whispers, Benji's words would essentially be considered useless babble. However, taking from Dina Al-Kassim's *On Pain of Speech: Fantasies of the First Order and the Literary Rant*, I argue that babble can be productive in the transformation of the self and others. Within her book, Al-Kassim holds that Foucault's idea of speaking truth to power is simply not possible for certain marginalized groups the act of speaking truth is gatekept behind instituted power and political authority. Instead, she offers an alternative: ranting. Though ranting fails at accomplishing communication, it is a promising failure which at the very least stands for a possible future of something else. It is within the "something else" that hope and resilience can be birthed. Applying this to my own work, I subsume babbling into the act of ranting. While Joel is asleep, readers must then ponder who the receiver of the babble is. In the case of theatre, it would be the audience that is, for the

time being, transformed into Benji's lovers. Even though Benji's babble falls upon deaf ears on-stage, it is helping the audience to reimagine a queer body that has been racialized and fetishized.



### **Performing Amateur Asian-ness**

The performance of asociality by queer Asian Americans extends far beyond the realm of classical theatre. This experimental section attempts to bridge the application of asociality as care within theatre to the deployment of it in the real world. Performance theorist Lucy Burns expands our understanding of performance in her book, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stage of Empire* (2013). She frames the amateur arts as a form of political resistance and holds that the mere act of dancing in Taxi halls was in fact doubling as an unstructured retaliation by Pilipinos against their American colonizers. This performance, then, becomes a refusal of care which transformed dancing into an equalizer that allowed Pilipinos to cultivate notions of their own self-worth.

Outside the stage, asociality as care is most prominently seen in the labor of queer sex workers. In addition to sex work being seen as a tasteless profession, there is also the label as queer which makes the process of dehumanization all the easier for patrons. Martin Manalansan discusses this phenomenon affecting queer Pilipino men and transgender women who must create weapons of care in order to survive (Manalansan, 2008).

The Pilipino transsexuals found at the intersection of cultural and sexual persecution is provided wings when accepted as a queer performer. Rather than play into their supposed othering, one should validate their positionality by viewing sex work as a type of performance. It is here, when these bodies seemingly are stripped down to mere tools for biological desires that asociality as care is able to exercise a resistance that would otherwise be impossible. Through the simple act of refusing to smile after providing their services, these queer performers are able to shift the power dynamic back in their favor as they not only are financially sustained, but also are

empowered to maintain part of themselves that would have otherwise been lost in the repeated self-subjugation to lewd labor for unforgiving patrons.

**Theatre Made Practical**

Kristina Wong, perhaps better known now by her off-Broadway alias ‘the Sweatshop Overlord,’ is an Asian-American comedian, actor, and elected representative of Koreatown in Los Angeles, but perhaps most importantly of all, she is an amateur seamstress during the COVID-19 pandemic era. In the confinement forced upon her during COVID-19, accompanied only by a Hello Kitty sewing machine and numbing isolation, she birthed the Auntie Sewing Squad (ASS). This was a group of Aunties, Uncles, and Unties, who, as Wong downplays it in her book, “made masks *and* got words on paper” (*The Auntie Sewing Squad Guide to Mask Making, Radical Care, and Radical Justice*, x). In truth, Wong and the rest of her comrades used their pandemic-induced emptiness to come to terms with the loss of an imagined power, and, in the clarity of their current reality, they mobilized, turning any material they had into masks for over 350,000 people in hospitals as well as Native Americans on reservations, farm workers, and migrants seeking asylum. What was it about Wong, as storyteller, seamstress, and artist that enabled her and her squad to imagine, mobilize, and provide with a haste and care that even our government lacks? This section hopes to answer this question by pivoting from a traditional understanding of “reading theatre” and going beyond the stage to analyze the Auntie Sewing Squad as a performance of care. This is a type of care without the creation of debt or credit—it is a labor of love which can be understood as a form of justice. In the process of reading ASS as a type of performance, I will draw parallels between thing- making, breaks from binaries, amateurism, and a need for radical love.

Cancer. A universal world-halter. When Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was diagnosed in 1996 with metastatic breast cancer she became hastily acquainted with a type of intimacy that she had never known before. This, of course, was a closeness with death, which for her, was also with

nothingness. While some may find this tango with finality intimidating, Sedgwick recalls in her essay, “Making Things, Practicing Emptiness,” that this urgency, “built itself more and more into the center of my understanding, and particularly my practice of art” (70). Although her breast cancer turned out to be indolent, the ripples that were made in her thing-making created lasting alterations to her practice. Specifically, Sedgwick embraced the beauty of fragmented textiles. Up until the point she was faced with cancer, Sedgwick had been a purist with collecting and appreciating kimono textiles. She had never considered using them for anything else but clothing because her attachment to the fabric derived from “self-ornamentation” (71). Thinking death was imminent, Sedgwick detached herself from such an acute notion of tactile beauty. In the expanse of her art practice, she allowed her work to shift from preserving the individual to creating for the collective.

Covid-19. A universal world-halter, too. However, rather than being an experience for a single person and their loved ones, the isolation brought about by the pandemic was felt worldwide. As hundreds of thousands of people fell ill across the world and as the death toll began to slowly creep upwards, Aunties like Wong were feeling this weight in their pockets of isolation and familiarizing themselves with the idea of tragedy on such a large scale. Rolls of toilet paper, hand sanitizers, and disposable masks flew off the shelves as people tried to barricade themselves off from humanity, shielding themselves from grief—; this resulted in the isolationist. Furthered by the government’s incompetence, so many vulnerable communities realized that in order for survival they would have to adopt the framework of isolationists and fend for themselves. Perhaps in line with Sedgwick’s own language, people experienced a kind of nothingness, a numbness, a nonbeing. It was this mass destruction of personhood that became

the catalyst for radical mutual aid groups like the ASS who started their own efforts to fight against the structural failures of the U.S.

The ASS has always maintained an intimacy with death, which is to say, with its own nonbeing and nonexistence, and was actually designed as such—the ouroboros of radical care movements, if you may. Listed in the ASS core values at number one, they state, “We seek to be obsolete, not profitable. We have no aspirations of becoming a nonprofit organization, *because we don't want to need to exist*. We have stepped in because the United States government has failed to protect the most vulnerable” (22, Wong). Since they admit to a temporary nature, the movement to overcome fears of flickering out, producing mediocre work, and directly scrutinizing the Trump administration. In this way, they were able to use their fabric and sewing abilities to queer everyone’s idea of care work and organized aid.

While not Asian, and born into a Jewish family, Sedgwick has taken great inspiration from Japanese art forms as well as from Tibetan Buddhism. In her essay on textile art, she speaks specifically to the marbling technique of suminagashi and the tie-dye-esque technique called shibori. With suminagashi, she explains how the artform creates living art whose final look may evade the artist’s intentions entirely. This is because the ink used is so much like water that after the strokes are placed on paper, the art is still being created without human intervention. While the water-like ink is shifting, Sedgwick chooses to focus on the texture of the piece. Sedgwick writes,

“Even more immediately than other perceptual systems, it seems, the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap or enfold, and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the

textured object” (90). She extends this analysis of texture to shibori as well which she understands to be fractal in nature. By juxtaposing the textures of these two artforms, Sedgwick underscores the illusion of control and introduces thinking in dimensionality rather than in a binary. When these two ideas are learned, practiced, and embodied, Sedgwick is able to take her material, and to an extent herself on a journey of radical transformation.

This distance from the individual is also echoed by the Buddhist teachings practiced by Sedgwick. In particular, the emphasis on nondualism tells us we do not live in a world with binaries, there is no us and them; we, as observer, are connected to the objects we observe and one does not have total control over the other. Sedgwick makes connections between nondualism and her literary education in deconstructionism, stating, “My shorthand for this relation at the time was “Deconstruction is the theory, Buddhism is the practice.”” (75) Her lived experience with this relation allowed her to queer things like the English language’s active/passive voice and blur the lines between the art making/crafting. Practicing outside the dualisms and grounding these practices in the physical and the material have helped Sedgwick to continue to be radical in her ways of thinking.

In opposition to the image of the meek, inscrutable Asian, the ASS is a group consisting of loud, unapologetic Asian women seeking justice. It would seem that, like magic, these women came out of the woodworks swinging their measuring tapes and snapping their scissors in the air. Auntie Rebecca Solnit argues that it has something to do with their positionality as Asian Aunties. She is quoted, “I had thought about aunts a lot, but it was the Auntie Sewing Squad that taught me how varied and potent versions of aunthood and auntiehood are and how familiar and specific the term *auntie* was to many of its Asian American members” (172). This label of “Auntie” gave these women solace knowing that they were part of a larger Auntie

collective which extended past bloodlines. Furthermore, the role of Aunties inherently goes against binaries and labels. Within many Asian households the term “Auntie” is used as a form of endearment for someone who is older, not necessarily a blood relative, but always a caretaker.

Another Auntie, Māhelani Flournoy, recalls her experience in the ASS as a rebirth, a true radical transformation. Before the pandemic she had a child, Aiden, who unfortunately was born with a fatal brain disorder that required he have an in-house nurse 24/7; she soon developed a depression particular to parents of dying children. When the pandemic came and her son became one of the most vulnerable groups of individuals, she fell into a deeper depressive mood. In a frantic search to focus on anything but the state of her life, she turned to the ASS after hearing about a shortage of PPE equipment (154). It was there, among other Aunties, each who were individually struggling with the fractals of their life, that they realized their role in the overarching struggle. Yes, they were brought together as caretakers of separate families, but they are also a family themselves. Their masks distributed to thousands of faces they would never see, Aunties’ love seeping its way like watercolor into the cracks of everyone’s lives, changing the texture of our nation. Deconstruction is the theory, radical love is the practice.

## Conclusion

This essay engages the discourse of queer-of-color critique, using queer Asian performance (or lack thereof) to put forth an original analytic lens: asociality as care. Through the analysis of Ramos' play, *As We Babble On*, asociality was shown to be a tactic that was deployed in several ways in theatre from the dialogue to the staging. The play emphasized the queer desires held by gay Asians, like Benji; yet these desires are incompatible with the self-doubt sustained by the unrest at the intersection of one's racial and sexual being. Asociality provided Benji with the space to honor his intersectionality. Upon doing this act of self-care within the play, Benji overcame his fears of fetishization and allowed himself to be the recipient of queer love.

From classic theatre to the amateur stage, I also experimented with expanding my lens to theorize on asocial acts deployed by real-world queer Asian laborers as if they were perpetual performers. Their movements, their silence, their refusals all became modes of legibility for understanding how they might also be practitioners of asociality as care in their daily lives. I have found, highlighted within the reservations of queer Asian sex workers, that it is in the exact moment when these queer bodies become inscrutable to the patron, when there is a disconnect in their performance resulting in an assumed incomprehensibility, that their performances become most consequential.

I plan to continue to utilize this theory in my approach to other queer Asian-American theatre pieces. Currently, I am working towards using asociality as care to analyze Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own* (1997). In continuing to use asociality as care, I am recognizing a similar thread of arguments within the play for racializing one's own body and emasculating oneself through others' queer eyes. I want to understand why these forms of self-sabotage are so



universal and how asociality as care may remedy the prolonged performance anxiety of queer Asian laborers.

I want to note that in the writing of this essay, I have been directed to cross-analyze my theorizing with the recent work of Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (2021). Yao theorizes on the idea of unfeeling as means of survival and refusal for Asian Americans during the nineteenth-century. While I see the similarities between asociality, an act of refusal of feelings and social interaction, and unfeeling, I posit that my work retains its novelty because of my specific deployment of theatre. Furthermore, I find that the more writers continuing to put forth such theoretical concepts help to contribute towards a healthier academic milieu for Asian Americans and scholars everywhere.

To conclude, my research does not seek to romanticize the toxic queer dynamics that have become part of the queer Asian-American experience such as fetishization and self-emasculatation. Many of these dynamics are problematic and subject the Asian queer body to unnecessary, strenuous labor. Instead, understand that it is through the lens of asociality as care that a queer imagination can be birthed. This allows for the reimagination of siloed bodies as intentional and necessary for the nurturing of the self. Even in the silence of theatre, may there be disruption and transformation.

## Annotated Bibliography of Core Texts

Ahuja, N. "Intimate Atmospheres: Queer Theory in a Time of Extinctions." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2-3, 2015, pp. 365–385., doi:10.1215/10642684-2843227.

"Intimate Atmosphere" reimagines the queer body in relation to a changing climate-- both environmental and political. While I felt the theoretical conversation surrounding climate and the Anthropocene went over my head, I found value in understanding the constructions of the queer "inhuman" from a neoliberal ecological perspective. Because one of my primary texts deal with the characters enduring the AIDS epidemic, I want to now take this reading and apply it to the sick, un-reproductive bodies of queer Asian Americans.

Al-Kassim, Dina. *On Pain of Speech: Fantasies of the First Order and the Literary Rant*. Univ. of California Press, 2010.

I found Al-Kassim's literary rant an ideology that was hard to grapple with at first (and perhaps even now). If I am understanding it correctly, because "speaking truth to power" is a luxury that is not afforded to every oppressed person, the art of literary rant offers a haphazard counter-discourse. The rant is a labor that is not necessarily parrhesia, but this "work of unworking" is what can provide a voice to the voiceless.

Burns, Lucy San Pablo. *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stage of Empire*. New York City University Press, 2013.

Performance theorist Lucy Burns discusses in her book the intensive labor that goes into participating in theatrics. She frames the arts as a form of political resistance used in the Philippines and in the States to preserve Pilipino culture. For example, dancing in Taxi

halls in the States became a way to emasculate the colonizer because Pilipino were more adept at dancing.

Eng, David L., and Shinhee Han. *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*. Duke University Press, 2018. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11smqsk](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11smqsk).

This book helps to deploy critical race theory alongside psychoanalytic theory within the context of Asia America. I found that because he situates queer Asian bodies in a modern “colorblind” America where queer liberation is less so fought for as it is defended, that it successfully reconfigured my ideology of approaches to “care” for modern queer Asians.

This will definitely prove helpful when looking at *As We Babble On*.

Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations In Black : toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Ferguson uses the Queer if Color Critique to emphasize the harm that materialism and liberalism can do to queer bodies searching for home. Living in a constant state of limbo makes the grounding of personhood through culture impossible.

Hom, Alice Y. “Stories from the Homefront: Perspectives of Asian American Parents with Lesbian Daughters and Gay Sons”. *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* (1st ed.), 1995. Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203760512>

Alice Y. Hom’s “Stories from the Homefront: Perspectives of Asian American Parents with Lesbian Daughters and Gay Sons” distorts the assumption that queer culture is a western export by discussing the ways in which these first-generation immigrants understood queerness in their homeland. Lucy Nguyen, a Vietnamese mother with two gay sons, explains that “I think I’m a lesbian. You know, I’ll be honest. When I was young in Vietnam society was so strict. Yet, I had a really close friend, I loved her” (39).

Isaac, Allan Punzalan. "In a Precarious Time and Place: The Refusal to Wallow and Other Migratory Temporal Investments in *Care Divas*, the Musical." *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 19 no. 1, 2016, p. 5-24. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/jaas.2016.0007.

Allan Punzalan Isaac uses the musical *Care Divas* as a lens in which one can begin to understand the bodies of transnational Pilipinos who are inextricably linked (financially and emotionally) to the Philippines. I personally found it especially helpful because it informed me how I can go about taking texts from theatre and analyzing it through a race/labor-informed lens.

Lee, Atticus. "Sexual Deviants Need Not Apply: LGBTQ Oppression in the 1965 Immigration Amendments." *The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965*, Oct. 2015, pp. 248–270., doi:10.1017/cbo9781316018828.009.

As Atticus Lee writes in his article, "Sexual Deviants Need Not Apply," sexual deviants, and by extension homosexuals, were thought to "weaken the moral of the nation's fiber and sapped societal resources" (253). Captivated by the fear of remaining alien, many Asian immigrants conformed to this mold as a means for survival in order to be legitimized.

Manalansan, Martin F. *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2007.

Manalansan uses this book to give a voice to the subaltern-- Pilipino Americans found at the intersection of cultural and sexual persecution. Rather than play into this supposed othering, the author uses the book to humanize gay and trans Pilipino bodies by telling their real narratives without centering homophobia. I found the section "AIDs and the Everyday" to be particularly of interest to me, not only providing a point of contact with

the material in Chay Yew's *A Language of their Own*, but also allowing me to see the multi-faceted sufferings and sanctuaries of queer Pilipinos.

Manalansan, Martin F. "Queering the Chain of Care Paradigm." Martin F. Manalansan IV | S&F Online | Borders on Belonging: Gender and Immigration, [sfonline.barnard.edu/immigration/manalansan\\_01.htm](http://sfonline.barnard.edu/immigration/manalansan_01.htm).

This article offers a productive view of gender (relational, contextualized, and multi-scalar) which combats heteronormative framing of global migration, calling into question the chain of care migration paradigm. Most interesting still, Manalansan uses the discourse surrounding the documentary film *Paper Dolls* to ponder the restrictions that gender may have on care/work. At first glance it seems like the queer Filipino care workers lack ability and authenticity because of a biological severance to the "naturally womanly role of caring." However, Manalansan complicates this narrative by showing how queer performance is a form of "care work," one that provides a "care of self." I think these concepts are truly applicable to the work one does in a theatre setting; using performance as a way to not only work, but also to sustain one's own spirit.

Manalansan, Martin F. "Queer Intersections: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies." *International Migration Review*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2006, pp. 224–249., doi:10.1111/j.1747-7379.2006.00009.x.

To slightly shift perspective, Martin F. Manalansan explains it in his article "Queer Intersection: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies," a lack of queer imagination could have been the result of "migration literature that address the issue of gender but ironically reify normative notions of both gender and sexuality" (237). While Manalansan may have been using Pilipina bodies in his example, we can extend his

theorizing to other queer bodies.

Ramos, Nathan. *As We Babble On*. 2018.

Ramos's work follows a 29-year-old Korean-American man named Benji in present-day New York. His inability to ground his queer identity within his cultural identity leads to heightened performance anxiety in the play which prevents him from pursuing his career as a cartoonist and accepting love from his non-Asian lover, Joel.

Ty, Eleanor. *Asianfail. Narratives of Disenchantment and the Model Minority*. University of Illinois Press, 2017.

Asian Fail does a successful job setting up the context behind the model minority and Asian North American expectations regarding mental health/happiness in the introduction. Most useful to me was Chapter 2, "Que(e)rying the American Dream...", in which Ty discusses the ways anti-miscegenation laws and immigration legislation maintained a need for heterosexuality—legality was tied to no sexual deviance.

Wat, Eric C. *The Making of a Gay Asian Community: an Oral History of Pre-AIDS Los Angeles*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002.

In his book Wat details the adverse effects World War II had on Asian bodies and how it co-signed them to submissiveness. Even during the queer revolution following Stonewall, many Asians had to hide in the shadows for over a decade only occasionally going to gay bars. Similar to the Red Scare, a new fearmongering tactic known as the Lavender Scare was used to create fear around homosexuality.

Yew, Chay. *Porcelain, and: a Language of Their Own: Two Plays*. Grove Press, 1997.

This play follows two East Asian-American bodies, Oscar and Ming, who rely on each other to validate their own sexual identities during the AIDS epidemic in 1980s New York. As these two characters fall out of love and start relationships with non-East-Asian individuals, audiences can recognize that the budding identity is emasculated. Oscar and Ming's initial relationship establishes a grounding for an otherwise enigmatic, taboo American identity.