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Skin We Wrought:

Critical Dancemaking, Autoethnography, and Asian American Identity

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Waeli Wang

Thesis Committee:
Associate Professor Jennifer Fisher, PhD, Chair
Assistant Professor Charlotte Griffin
Professor Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, PhD

2019

DEDICATION

To

My nieces Murphy Lee & Kaelyn Hee.

My sister Emily Lee, brother Frank Lee, and extended family who are in this with me.

My mother Ai-Chih Su and father Yih-Shyng Wang for bringing our family to a place where your children have the freedom to pursue their own versions of the American Dream.

My partner Grant Speich who has always supported me in all of my pursuits.

Those who have contributed to my life experiences, shaping my artistry and activism.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Skin We Wrought:

Critical Dancemaking, Autoethnography, and Asian American Identity

By

Waeli Wang

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2019

Associate Professor Jennifer Fisher, PhD, Chair

This research is focused on the current cultural Asian American experience through personal, familial, social, and artistic contexts, how the historical impact of racism towards Asian Americans has influenced me as an artist, and how I'm interpreting those histories and current social attitudes through a critical-theoretic art-making model. I explore what my identity is within the Asian American experience, cross-racial intersections in Brooklyn through an experience that I name the *catalyst incident*, and how my art-making reflects and represents historical and contemporary representations of Asianness. Through a collaborative process, I created a multi-disciplinary performance work interweaving contemporary dance and experimental filmmaking based on my autoethnographic and cross-racial historical findings. The culminating thirty-minute work entitled, *Skin We Wrought*, investigates themes of silence, assimilation, resilience, and community through a series of vignettes performed in the Experimental Media Performance Lab at UC Irvine. In this intersectional art-making study, I find that negotiating identity remains an important and complex issue. Pervasive stereotypes continue to shape my life and the lives of others, and art has the power to make change.

INTRODUCTION

New York. Brooklyn. Clinton Hill. Corner of Fulton and Washington.

The air has a cold that bites your nose and lips as soon as you get off of the subway car underground. You're wearing a camel color wool coat with deep pockets that you can sink your hands into on this winter night. You walk up the steps of the Clinton-Washington stop, shuffling behind those in front of you. It was a normal day, nothing special; you're thinking about getting back to your warm apartment and out of the cold. There are plenty of people exiting the stop at the same time onto the dim sidewalk with only street lamps and twenty-four hour bodega storefronts illuminating the night. Many colored awnings loom over the pavement as people quickstep home after their commutes. Directly outside the stop in between the lamppost and some trash receptacles are two Black men who look middle-aged, standing with ease, even in the cold. There were typically people talking, hanging out, and milling about outside the subway exit near the corner bodega. You don't think much of it, until you turn the corner and one of the men says behind you—

Man #1: Have a good night.

You keep your head down and keep walking. They continue their conversation as you are walking further away from them—

Man #2: Did she say anything back?

Man #1: No (mumbles something else that is inaudible to you)...

Man #2: [To you] You better go back to CHINA! Or KOREA!

You stop in your tracks. Your throat constricts and a spark of heat hits the follicles of the hair on your skull. There are people still exiting the subway stop, enough people that if something happens, hopefully one person will intervene. You have taken maybe fifteen paces since Man #1

said something, far enough away that if they come toward you, you could outrun them. You are shivering, not because of the cold, but because you are terrified of this confrontation. Although you have heard your share of racist comments before, you have always buried your words in the past because the world around you taught you to keep your mouth shut. Despite fear, you turn and say—

You: EXCUSE ME?

Man #2: YOU HEARD ME.

You: I am American, born and raised. Don't say that racist shit to me.

Man #2: In Bed-Stuy we greet each other...

You: I live here...

Man #2: You better MOVE. You might just MOVE.

You: Yes, maybe.

Man #1: Nah, nah... don't...

Man #2: (Keeps yelling as he starts walking away).

Your voice has been shaking throughout all of this, but you were both so busy interrupting each other, trying to get a word in over the other, that you persist through the internal earthquake that is making it impossible to quiet your tremble. There is another Black man standing just off of the sidewalk curb, whom you hadn't noticed before. He has a slice of pizza in his hand from the shop directly behind you and is leaning on a pink recycling bin in front of him.

Offsides Man: Don't argue, don't argue.

You: I'm trying to educate.

Offsides Man: It doesn't work that way. But good luck with that.

You: Thanks.

End dialogue.

This night is where my research begins. This is the dialogue that has haunted me ever since. What did the Offsides Man mean by, “It doesn’t work that way”? In what way(s) does it work? This research stems from my need to understand what happened that night, why it happened the way it did, where our perspectives come from, and ultimately, who I am.

—

Less than a year later, I removed myself from Brooklyn to attend graduate school, do this research, and gain some perspective into the wider social implications that this event was pointing to. This became a *catalyst incident* that inspired my need to understand my questions surrounding the complexities of race and identity. Through stories of where I am from, where I was in Brooklyn, and the artistic work I make from this research, I begin to understand my experience within a critical-theoretic art-making framework. A critical-theoretic art-making model “defines art as a system of critical reflection, a relativist and liberatory activity rendering invisible assumptions, values, and norms newly visible in order to alter the status quo, as well as transform and critique unjust social relations” (Rolling 33).

I want to understand what my identity is within the Asian American experience and how my artistry echoes and embodies contemporary representations of Asianness. Although I name this research Asian American, it is a label that I have long rejected because I feel the burden of the Asian American single story. Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie elucidates the danger of essentializing identity because it “creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete... It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar” (Adichie). I put forth my stories to fill in the gaps of the Asian American collective memory.

I use the *catalyst incident* as a departure point for my research. The first chapter of this thesis includes an autoethnography to reconstruct memories of my youth, elucidating who I am and where I came from. I draw from my first memories of racist acts committed around me, by me, and against me. The second chapter examines historical and recent intersections between Asian Americans and Black Americans in Brooklyn, to better understand the context of where I was the night of the *catalyst incident*. In chapter three, I move to the art-making process to discuss my research choreographically and filmically, reflecting upon the choices I made and why I made them for this project.

CHAPTER 1

GROWING UP WHITE

Where are you from?

I'm from Boulder, Colorado.

Where are you *really* from?

My family is from Taiwan.

This dialogue is often born from the way I look and the assumption that I could not possibly be American. Asians in America are often cast as perpetual foreigners regardless of citizenship. “The perpetual foreigner stereotype posits that members of ethnic minorities will always be seen as the ‘other’ in the White Anglo-Saxon dominant society of the United States” (Huynh 133). The people that question where I’m really from and what my “race” is make me feel as scholar and activist Frank H. Wu says in his award winning book *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*, “that I am not one of ‘us’ but one of ‘them.’ I do not belong as an equal. My heart must be somewhere else rather than here. I am a visitor at best, an intruder at worst. I must know my place, and it is not here” (Wu 80). This is perhaps what the man on the corner the night of the *catalyst incident* thought as he yelled, “Go back to China!” pointing towards my outsider status in order to insult me after I apparently snubbed his friend.

Inherent in the perpetual foreigner syndrome is the omission of Asians as a part of the larger American narrative, which is typically focused on the black-and-white paradigm. “The utmost split of our society has been a color line between black and white” (Wu 33). There is often a lack of any further shades or hues allowed in conversations on race when it comes race relations in the United States. The black-and-white paradigm omits *yellow*, among many people of color, leaving Asian Americans out of the dialogue.

I use the term *yellow* in connection with Asianness throughout this research because like Kat Chow writes in her piece for National Public Radio's *Code Switch*, "Though it's a slur – in fact, because it's a slur – it's the type of word that could force people to face [the United States'] long storied history of racism and resistance directly, every time they hear it." Racism is deeply entrenched in the history of the United States. To call out racist acts and to reclaim marginalized voices is how I believe we move forward in this country and how I can move through and get beyond the *catalyst incident*.

I was born in Colorado to a family of immigrants from Taiwan. I'm the only one born in America; my half-brother and half-sister were born and raised until adolescence in Taiwan before immigrating to the States. In my family, the idea of relocating for a better life started with my grandparents. On both sides, my grandparents fled China in 1949 and in 1950 to Taiwan before my parents were born. My parents made the same decision to uproot our family to give their children better opportunities as their parents had done for them. The transnational passage was common from China to Taiwan to the United States through family-sponsored immigration.

My parents and siblings were able to come here via my "second uncle" on my mother's side—family members are named for birth order in Chinese culture and he was the second boy born to my maternal grandparents. "Asian immigrants are highly regulated by immigration laws, but the emphasis of U.S. laws in admitting family sponsored immigrants and professional, highly skilled individuals has meant that the majority of new arrivals come to join family already here and bring a different set of educational and professional skills than earlier immigrants" (Lee 286). All of my mother's family came to the States for a time or for permanent residence with my family, ending up in Colorado. My parents are still living next to the mountains there, now enjoying their retirement.

I trace where my family came from and how we got here as a part of understanding my identity, who I am and who I was in the *catalyst incident*. Part of me is rooted in the culture of my family, at home in Colorado, where I grew up in one of the only Asian families in the affluent city of Boulder. I didn't comprehend that my upbringing or family was so different than my peers while growing up. Coming to the realization that I have lived a life full of racist acts committed against me came much later. When I began unearthing personal racialized experiences through this research, there were so many stories to choose from. I now understand that my Asianness heavily influences who I am and I constantly wrestle with my conflicting identities.

I long to know why we name our identities and how my own is significant. As an art maker, accepting which parts of me reacted to the *catalyst incident* is important to my artistic process. I draw on autoethnography to understand. "Autoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name and interpret personal and cultural experience. With autoethnography, we use our experience to engage with ourselves, others, culture(s), politics, and social research" (Adams 1). I look inwards to share parts of myself in order to include more Asian American voices in the story of the United States. I agree with Wu as he writes on race relations, "...we should start by including all of us" (Wu 36).

Discoveries I make within in the duality of my identity emerges, as they do for anthropologist Dorinne Kondo, from "a complex negotiation, taking place within specific but shifting contexts, where power and meaning, 'personal' and 'political,' are inseparable. Identity is not a fixed 'thing,' it is negotiated, open, shifting, ambiguous, the result of culturally available meaning and the open-ended, power-laden enactments of those meanings in everyday situations"

(Kondo 24). I did not come into this world with my identity premade. I am a sum of experiences that have happened over time, in different places, with many people.

The questions that I have don't truly have answers. I begin by unearthing stories of my younger self through a more socially aware lens in order to comprehend racist acts I've experienced and how specific formative memories mold who I am today.

Playing Along

I learned early on to follow the tide. What kid doesn't want to be included?

The classroom is dim with sunlight coming in through a couple of higher windows with the thick metal shades that seem to only be in elementary schools. I am in first grade, ready to go out to recess with half of my classmates already outside, a girly-girl in the 90's with curly-permed hair, loose baby teeth, and corduroy dresses worn over turtlenecks. I remember a couple of my classmates who were still in the room when the chant began, "Chinese, Japanese, Siamese," while pulling at the corners of our eyelids upwards, downwards, and in opposite directions. I partook in this racist nursery rhyme. This is my first recollection of racist behavior, specifically towards Asians.

What was I doing? What were any of us doing? Where did we learn this? Why did I, the only Asian American in the class, take a part in this chant? Do kids still do this today?

After doing a search on the Internet and finding videos on YouTube, the best that I can come up with is that it was a sort of nursery rhyme. And we were also doing it "wrong." Apparently, the lyrics were, "Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these," while pointing to your chest or pulling out your shirt to imply large breasts. We did the "clean" version at my elementary school. Not only is the rhyme racist but sexist as well. It honestly hurt too much to

dig any further into this, watching videos of people being idiots, drunks, and/or racists for all of ten minutes was all I could muster. The videos I saw were uploaded in the past ten years. I know that this doesn't dictate when a video was made, but the fact that it was still uploaded for the general public to see, some with upwards of 80,000 views, reinforces oppressive behaviors.

I feel a churning in the pit of my stomach as I reflect and write about this now. It is gross that any of us sang the rhyme and that it is still pervasive today. Although I might have sensed it was wrong at the time, I was complicit and unknowing, or too young, or possibly unwilling to say that what we were doing was disrespectful. I think back to my younger self and can feel the flush of pink rising to the girly-girl's cheeks before swallowing her Asianness and choosing the group over her own dignity.

I could not have defined it as racist behavior at the time. It was simply another thing that I did to feel included. I didn't tell my parents about this or any other racist incidents that occurred during my adolescence. We repressed these stories and my family did our best to assimilate quickly and quietly to American standards. However, my experience was different. Because I was born in the States, born to the privileges of an American, I felt as though I was an insider early on. Whereas my parents and siblings constantly grappled with their outsider status, immigrant selves, accents, cultural uncertainty, a journey that I was unable to share with them.

—

Inevitably Asian

Today, I am still backed into contradictory stereotypes surrounding the model minority myth and in being a perpetual foreigner. The model minority myth outlines a racial stereotype that people of Asian heritage are “hardworking, intelligent, interested in economic prestige and educational attainment, and uninterested in racial-identity politics” (Trytten). Asian Americans

are somehow stereotyped in a way that is supposedly positive. When the model minority myth becomes intertwined with the perpetual foreigner syndrome, I often get a combination platter of phrases from strangers, the most common of which is, “You speak English so well.” This phrase is an insult hiding behind the guise of a compliment. How can you presume that I don’t speak English well because I’m *yellow*?

During elementary school, each year I had to test out of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes though I had spoken English since age three. I often felt annoyed because they would always do it during computer time. I loved computer time, learning how to type through various games. I would sit impatiently in the library and wait for an adult from the ESL program, who would have to crouch-sit in a tiny plastic school chair next to me. Then I would have to converse with them to prove I spoke English, possibly write something, and be on my merry way. Unsurprisingly, I never had to take any ESL classes. The testing out was a performative ritual where I had to prove my Americanness, year after year.

Every time I open my mouth to speak, an American, more specifically a Coloradan, voice comes out. My parents have accents that I do not have. I chose to imitate my white teachers, peers, and friends, to adapt their whiteness to my *yellow* body. That’s what assimilation means in the United States, right? Become white? I became so white that I embodied the model minority myth. “Asian Americans are now the poster children of American success and are sometimes even called ‘honorary whites’” (Lee 373). It works in my favor until it doesn’t, and I do myself a disservice by not owning my Asianness.

The unchanging pattern as an Asian living in the United States is to fall into the stereotypical Asian traits. Overachiever, dutiful child, live only to study, make money, stay quiet. While I do fall into some of these traits, my identity is comprised of so much more. Yet, I have

been given stereotypical traits to fulfill by societal racist norms. I relate to what playwright David Henry Hwang says in his work, *Yellow Face*, in the portrayal of the Asian American experience, “Years ago, I discovered a face—one I could live better and more fully than anything I’d ever tried. But as the years went by, my face became my mask. And I became just another actor—running around in yellow face” (69). I built this same *yellow* mask along with a white one. I switched between the two and was never able to fully inhabit one or the other.

—

These experiences are to say that I am still coming to terms with who I am. I start with my first memories of racist acts to demonstrate that this is how I have lived in this world since the beginning. Trying to play white or play into Asian stereotypes, sometimes both. I feel the contours of one identity that rubs against the other in uncomfortable, painful ways. The truth is that I feel disconnected to my ancestral, cultural roots, and traditions because I was the only one born in the States in my family of five. I was an outsider in a family of outsiders.

When it comes to labels, I have decided to call myself Asian American, as a person and art-maker, because I share the Asian American experience. By reading plays, memoirs, graphic novels, and poetry by Asian Americans about their experiences and identities—*Yellow Face* (Hwang), *Farewell to Manzanar* (Wakatsuki Houston), *The Best We Could Do* (Bui), *American Born Chinese* (Yang), *I Wore My Blackest Hair* (Duan), and a great deal more—I know I am Asian American and belong. I see reflections of myself in their works as the list continues to grow. I found reassurance through their stories telling me that I am not alone. I include myself with those who confront their fragmented identities, willingly bring stories to the table, and sing loud our experiences.

CHAPTER 2

BROOKLYN:

BLACK AND ASIAN AMERICAN INTERSECTIONS

The reason I moved to New York was to further pursue artistic endeavors and broaden my view of the world. I was excited to move to an incredibly diverse place, having lived among the white masses of elitist Boulderites for my entire life. I was not, however, thinking about the potentially difficult racial landscape in which I was placing myself.

The layered complexities of racial intersection and race itself are boundless. I want to know what I inherited, as I walked through the streets of Brooklyn and deepen my cultural understanding and empathy after the *catalyst incident*. What was the racial landscape between Black and Asian Americans like in Brooklyn? How did the cultural context of the place I had transplanted myself in influence the events of that night? In response to the ethnically charged Los Angeles Riots and boycotts in Brooklyn of the early 1990s, scholar Edward Taehan Chang summarizes the relationship between Koreans and African Americans—

[T]he apparent conflict between Korean and African Americans emerged as one of the most visible and explosive issues of urban America. To understand the nature of Korean and African American relations we must examine the economic, cultural, and ideological factors. Equally important, we must understand how Korean and African Americans perceive each other, and situate the role of race and class in Korean and African American relations. (67)

I am not Korean, but I do identify with the panethnic Asian American experience. The man who yelled at me to “Go back to China... Or Korea,” was not concerned about where I was “really”

from. Consciously or unconsciously, he was contributing to the fraught past of Black-Korean relationships in Brooklyn and to the larger racialized American narrative.

Chang's desire to understand the nature of Asian Americans and Black cultural crossings is one that I share. I focus on intersections in Brooklyn but I know that it is only a small study of racialization between Black and Asian communities in the United States. I examine two key Brooklyn events that may have shaped my *catalyst incident*—the 1990 Red Apple Boycott and the more recent 2014 shooting of Akai Gurley—to illuminate a small part of the complexities of Black and Asian American intersections in Brooklyn.

—

1990 Red Apple Boycott

In 1990, the Red Apple Boycott was a pivotal protest against Korean-owned markets by the Black community in Brooklyn. The sequence of events that set into motion the Red Apple Boycott, also known as the Family Red Apple Boycott or Flatbush Boycotts, are highly contested. Professor of Political Science and Asian American Studies Claire Jean Kim recaps the initial conflict in *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City*: “The boycott began after the Korean manager of the Family Red Apple store, Bong Ok Jang, allegedly beat a Haitian woman customer, Ghislaine Felissaint, during an argument at the cash register” (3). What exactly happened in the Red Apple store that led to the protest is disputed between the Asian American and Black communities. As Kim says, “the parties to the conflict constructed fundamentally different narratives about the same encounter” to gain social, cultural, political, and economic equity (117). What happened in Brooklyn was deeply tied to the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 as a fragment of the Black-Korean conflict that was occurring across the country.

For Kim, the Black-Korean conflict accounts emerged in the media through a “narrow lens” that emphasized the psychological response and drive of both parties (4). It is a problematic and reductive stance from which a simplistic version of the Black-Korean conflict is born. Kim points out that the newspapers pitted Korean Americans and African Americans against each other in a “story [that] involves a group of aspiring newcomers caught in the crossfire of ancient feuding, a group of malcontents acting out of malice and rage, and a group of colorblind observers noting events from a distance” (Kim 221). In fact, it was much more complicated.

Kim upends the media’s reductive account by studying the Red Apple Boycott through considerations of “racial power, racial ordering, and resistance” (8). Kim seeks to expose “the workings of racial power in contemporary America” by examining interviews and primary documents related to the Red Apple Boycott in the mainstream press coverage and also including Black, and Korean news outlets (222). Starting with the idea that racism is the crux of American history, Kim notes that there are dyadic axes on which racial power and ordering use the categories of “superior / inferior and that of the insider / foreigner. Blacks and Whites constitute the major anchors (bottom and top, respectively) of this order, and incoming immigrants and other groups get positioned relative to these two loci” (10). I propose that the Black Man who called out my *yellowness*, my perpetual foreignness, in our interaction, enlisted racial ordering during the *catalyst incident*. Feeling rejected by me, he sought to categorize me as “inferior” and a “foreigner.”

Many leaders of the Red Apple Boycott saw the boycott as “a struggle for racial justice, not a racist campaign” (Kim 130). However, the organization of Black and Korean leaders in the Brooklyn community focused their aggressions toward each other for the duration of the boycotts, and some “depict[ed] Korean merchants as foreigners clearly reiterat[ing] the practices

of civic ostracism that shape the racial positioning of Asian Americans” (Kim 132). Racial ordering has led to ideas of the outsider and perpetual foreigner status forced upon Asian Americans through events like the Red Apple Boycott.

After reading excerpts of Kim’s *Bitter Fruit*, I can see how racial ordering is a product of a longer oppressive history in which race is a social construct that ensures the social, economic, and political gains of Whites over non-Whites. “[S]cholars have shown that racial distinctions have not always existed, that they were constructed during a particular historical epoch (starting with the conquest of America) to justify and reinforce a system of privilege of those of European descent (deemed ‘Whites’), and that they have carried across time and place” (Kim 8). The enduring, fabricated, oppressive systems are pervasive and the consequence is a blunt division between communities.

While educating myself on the complex Black and Korean conflicts in the Brooklyn boycotts and Los Angeles Riots, broadening my knowledge of my panethnic Asian American experience, I have become frustrated with the lack of solidarity between Blacks and Asian Americans. Their historical oppressions reflect parallel legacies of suffering from colonialism, because they dilute the efforts of people of color in the “American racial war” within the “White power structure” (Kim 155). Why is it that people of color fight against each other, rather than lift each other up to gain social, cultural, political, and economic equity?

—

2014 Shooting of Akai Gurley

More recently, the Black and Asian American communities have come into conflict over a police shooting in 2014. As scholar Wen Liu describes the incident: “Chinese American policeman, Peter Liang, shot and killed an unarmed Black man, Akai Gurley, in a stairway alley

in Brooklyn, New York, and became the first officer to be indicted since [Black Lives Matter's] call for police accountability began" (423). The lack of convictions in fatal shootings of Black men by white officers created the necessity for organizations like Black Lives Matter (BLM) to rise.

Many point to the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri in response to the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, only a few months before Akai Gurley's death, as BLM's call to action. As reported in *The New York Times* by Richard Pérez-Peña: "Nobody knows just how many people are killed by the police nationwide... Yet a detailed review of news reports, official statements and websites that try to keep track of such things indicates that in the year since an officer fatally shot Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., on Aug. 9, 2014, 1,000 or more people died at the hands of law enforcement officers acting in the line of duty." The jury convicted Liang after a long deliberation in 2016, one of the only convictions in a slew of 1,000 or more deaths caused by policing in the United States. According to scholar Justin Leroy, "Liang has the distinction of being one of approximately a dozen police officers convicted of murder or manslaughter for killing a civilian while on duty since 2005... the only NYPD officer convicted in an on-duty shooting in well over a decade" (279). This is not for lack of the rampant killing of Black men across the nation that has given rise to organizations like Black Lives Matter (BLM) as a response to perceived anti-Black racism. *The New York Times* reporter, Rick Rojas outlines an obvious "strained relationship between the police and African-Americans across the country, after a string of incidents in which unarmed black men were killed by officers, many of whom were never charged."

After the verdict, demonstrations by the Brooklyn Chinese American community erupted in protest of Liang's conviction. The tragedy of Gurley's death has deepened the divide between

Black and Asian American communities, reviving longstanding animosities. Opinion writer for *The New York Times*, Jay Caspian Kang suggests, “Many Asian-Americans felt that Liang had been offered up as a sacrificial lamb to appease the ongoing protests against police violence.” At a rally in support of Liang, protest signs read: “No Selective Justice!,” “Tragedy Not Crime,” “No Scapegoating,” “One Tragedy Two Victims!” The Chinese American community was outraged, “believ[ing] that [Liang] had been targeted for prosecution because of his race” (Rojas). This argument was met with resistance by BLM counter protesters and others. About one pro-police rally in support of Liang, scholar Wen Liu describes—

[The] intense confrontations occurred between the multiracial BLM activists and the Chinese American protestors. The BLM activists reported that racial slurs were exchanged between some Chinese American protestors and counterprotestors, where both anti-Blackness and anti-Chineseness were violently expressed. A BLM activist who witnessed the confrontation said, “I feel like we have *retreated back in time*... Black and Asian folks hating each other, and the white men just walk free” (emphasis added). (441)

Was the quoted Black Lives Matter activist referring to the Red Apple Boycott? It’s clear that Black and Asian American hostilities have a long history that I walked into.

—

The historical hostilities between the Black and Asian American communities became a personal one in the *catalyst incident*. I experienced a crossing of cultures in my *catalyst incident* in Brooklyn but I know it relates to the larger national discourse on race. I relate to op-ed writer Jay Caspian Kang’s statement that, “I had long lost faith in storybook solidarity, but I had never expected to see the divide between blacks and Asian-Americans laid out so starkly.” I never

expected for another person of color to tell me to “go back to where I came from.” Because of that experience, I turn to professors Roseanne Liu and Savannah Shange’s model of “*thick solidarity*—that is, a kind of solidarity that mobilizes empathy in ways that do not gloss over difference, but rather pushes into the specificity, irreducibility, and incommensurability of racialized experiences” (190). I want to get to a place of *thick solidarity*, to listen better, do better.

CHAPTER 3

I AM FROM THE SKIN WE WROUGHT

Through a critical-theoretic art-making model, I created a work entitled *Skin We Wrought* that draws upon the *catalyst incident* and my complex relationship to Asian American identity to bring forth invisible stories. I unpack my experiences to make visceral choreographic and cinematic vignettes exploring themes of silence, assimilation, resilience, and community. This work was made in collaboration with my beautiful cast of eleven dancer-artist-citizens who brought forth their own stories, investigating identity, vulnerability, and strength within the art-making process. It was important to me to integrate the voices of my cast, illuminating stories outside of my own, to create an artistic world in which we live together. *Skin We Wrought* occurs in choreographed fragments utilizing a contemporary dance movement vocabulary and experimental film segments. These film segments are designed to emulate my hyphenated identity, existing as triptychs, interludes, and environmental landscapes to situate our selves in.

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Where I'm From

In order to engage dancers in studies on identity, one of the most important aspects of *Skin We Wrought* grew into sections I call “Where I’m From.” I initially had the dancers write, “Where I’m From” poems, a methodology of poetry writing devised by writer and teacher George Ella Lyon. Each line begins with the words “I am from” to delve into any aspect of self within the poem. Lyon, in collaboration with activist-writer Julie Landsman, developed this poetry writing technique “in response to the rhetoric of xenophobia and isolationism that is becoming rampant in our country” (Lyon). In an effort to illuminate unheard voices, Lyon and Landsman expanded the project to create a network of “I Am From” creations for everyone to

share. “Remember, you are the expert on you. No one else sees the world as you do; no one else has your material to draw on” (Lyon). This process was revealing, welcoming the cast and myself to share pieces of our selves in the work.

From the initial poetry, I asked the dancers to create choreographic phrases based on what they wrote. The process was fluid and the dancers could change their poetry at any point, drawing on what inspired them in the moment—whether they were looking at their own family roots and ancestry, searching for aesthetic moments of their lives, or acknowledging vulnerability and love as strengths. The danced phrases generated in our first rehearsals were recorded to be part of the preshow film triptych and then built into a collective dance section.

During rehearsals, I was interested in embodied active listening and how individuality could contribute to the whole during this process of elegiac art-making. We read aloud our poetry in the studio and shared choreographic phrases. In the first rehearsals, I asked each dancer to perform their choreography alone and then asked the rest of the dancers to improvise a sketch of what the solo dance felt like to them, echoing back each other’s stories to experience each piece of choreography in their own bodies and “walk a mile in their shoes.” This choreographic methodology was based on scholar Della Pollock’s “listening out loud” critical performance practice (88). Pollock specializes in performance and cultural studies, working in a way that brings out “the great intimacies that may be achieved in small acts of listening” (103). After reading Pollock’s “Memory, Remembering, and Histories of Change: A Performance Praxis” I interpreted and applied her “listening out loud” technique within a choreographic framework to forge a greater sense of community and empathy with the dancers. With the “Where I’m From” choreographic phrases and the improvised echoes, we created the larger interwoven dance segment that revealed fragments of our identities.

Skin We Wrought

Skin We Wrought opens with the “Where I’m From” prelude film triptych that stretches from wall-to-wall in the Experimental Media Performance Lab at the University of California, Irvine as the audience members enter. It shows close-ups of the faces of my cast in black and white, sometimes still, sometimes speaking, and then the whole body in motion. It is set to an original poetic soundscape crafted by MFA Sound Designer Hunter Moody, which builds into a cacophony of voices. With the overlapping voices in the sound environment and intercutting of different cast members on screen, I sought to create a world of complex intersectional identities in this film triptych.

The “Where I’m From” triptych dissolves into nighttime images of the street corner where the *catalyst incident* occurred. I felt uneasy shooting this footage in my old Brooklyn neighborhood. I was using my intrusive camera gaze on the corner, transforming myself from an anonymous figure into an unwelcome presence. In the moments I was recording the *catalyst incident* corner, I felt like a perpetrator and a sense of irony in the role reversal. Writer and philosopher, Susan Sontag expresses in her series of essays *On Photography*, “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves” (14). The corner functions in a similar way for me as I see the corner through my own experiences and it works as an important component of my research. Sontag further describes, “A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (16). This film section works as a recollection of the *catalyst incident* moment within this work. I fade in with wide shots observing the subway exit of the Clinton-Washington stop. I then cut to zoomed-in portions of the images, detailing the intricate environment of the corner. The busy, demanding soundscape layered over the film

trptych situates the audience in Brooklyn. As the film fades away, the first movement section begins, bathed in a chemical orange glow built by MFA Lighting Designer Morgan Embry.

The first dance section of the show is a recreation of a piece that has been with me for a couple of years. It was the solo I created as my audition for UCI while I was still living in Brooklyn, set to Alice Smith's cover of "I Put a Spell on You." Legend has it that when the original artist, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, dreamt up this song, he was a little tipsy and this song spilled out. The idea that what he sang was a freeing of something previously repressed in his subconscious is what I draw inspiration from. I mirror the idea of setting free what has remained dormant in my mind, body, and spirit through the choreography I set to "I Put a Spell on You." The stories that I have written here, shared since the *catalyst incident*, were all silenced before, hidden in my own subconscious. I reconstructed the solo with a group of five with each dancer flowing in and out of the space until they come together and break free from a rigid position into a turning waltz step. The escape from a lifetime of my own repressed memories is condensed into the moment of corporeal liberation.

A single-screen film interlude follows, featuring a close-up, a self-portrait harshly lit with a single sidelight that produces a shadow cutting straight down the middle of my face. The self-portrait is intercut with fleeting shots of dance in a black box setting. The film acts as a transition from the "I Put a Spell on You" section to a piece set to the band Verger's "Next to Nothing." This dance section became about my grandmother's death after I received new information previously withheld, many years after the fact. The news made me feel vulnerable and connected to her legacy, and I wanted to pay respect to my grandmother's sacrifices. This section emulates the silence of a woman, an Asian woman who made the transcontinental passage for her family and subsequently, to be with her family. While in the studio working with the dancers, I

struggled to tell them my personal departure points for this section. I think the cast may have sensed my reluctance towards the subject matter and its weight. They graciously took on the heavy emotional aspects of this section by working gently, breathing together, and filled the studio with life. The movement is assembled as a series of interruptions, bodies crossing through each other and coming into contact as they move dynamically through space. To embody deep emotion, the dancers collapse and persist, coming to a point of stillness at which point they all take a deep inhalation together, a breath that fills my lungs too when I witness this action.

The transition from the choreography concerning my grandmother is initiated by a high-pitched ringing sound, for the cast to begin the “Where I’m From” dance set to “Shrine Tooth” by Forest Swords. The ringing sound is a representation of how isolated I felt when I learned more about my grandmother’s death. How I also felt in the moments before I spoke up in the *catalyst incident*. I employ the high-pitched frequency as a motif within *Skin We Wrought* to let the audience in on how disoriented I felt in those experiences.

The “Where I’m From” dance section is concluded by one dancer repeating her choreographic phrase until the music subsides and the screen lights up with painted film. The film is comprised of yellow paintbrush calligraphy strokes on 16mm clear leader film onto which I wrote my name over and over in Chinese and English. The images don’t look like my name or writing but the essence is reclaiming my name. In front of the screen of calligraphy, I perform a poem I wrote in my Critical Issues class at UCI with Dr. Jennifer Fisher. Dr. Fisher’s prompt was to tell a five-minute story that needs to be told.

America will you love me?

I grew up here. I fought for you. I wore your colors.

Red, white, and blue. But you keep pushing me away. *America*.

As I get older and grow stronger, I realize that I don't really need you any longer.

This partnership and trust that we had disintegrates into the spacious skies and amber waves of grain that you promised. Empty promises.

The ~~American~~ Dream that my parents had when they came to you.

Built a house on property that didn't belong to them or to you. You stole that land. And they bought it from you.

Always asking for us to buy things from you.

We keep building your damn country when you keep taking from us. Take our culture, take our food, take our lives. What about making something together? What about making all of us better?

My parents came here to give us better opportunities. Give us better lives. Is this what you call better?

You pick apart our heritage for the things you "like" and then tell us to go back to where we came from. Perpetual foreigner. Go back. Go back. Go back.

My parents spent 25 years and counting learning your language, assimilating to your standards. Differences are not of value to you but an inconvenience.

Mom, I'm sorry for always correcting your English. I thought I was being helpful but instead, I was only pointing out the fact that you weren't from here. That you didn't belong here.

Made you feel less than. I didn't mean to.

~~America~~, am I not Asian enough for you? Am I not ~~American~~ enough for you? What do you want from me? To fit into the stereotypes that have been constructed for me?

Don't strip away my identity just because you don't understand me. I'm not a blank slate that you can paint your preconceived misperceptions onto me.

There is this fury that burns deep inside of me. An anger that can only be reconciled by... what? An apology?

~~America~~, what can I do so you will love me?

I had initially read the poem including all of the instances of the word "America." My peer and dear friend, Lauren Etter, suggested that I omit it when read aloud. I then added strikethroughs to the written version of this poem to emphasize my relationship to my country. As I exit after reading, the screen crossfades from the calligraphy film into a daytime shot of the same street corner of the *catalyst incident*. It's just a corner. Merely a station where people make their daily commutes, buy small items from the bodega, and live their lives.

The next section was my way of coping with the current socio-political status quo and an effort to upend it. Set to the indie rock group Low's composition, "Quorum," I wanted the movement to feel like a wave that sweeps you up without warning. The song ends with the lines, "It started up as nothing/ To let *them* (emphasis added) win the war/ So fast and quick we ran," words that I connected with throughout the choreographic process. Within the lyrics, the quorum is "them." For me, "they" represent the dominant culture, a looming presence, the patriarchy that constantly wins all wars by forcing "the other" to conform to the existing state of affairs that keeps whiteness in power. This piece responds to my own poetry in a way, sourcing material from my anger towards America and my own Americanness that stamped out my Asian self. At the end of "Quorum" the dancers are left in a horizontal line across the stage.

This next transition grew from an exercise that I did in rehearsal. I asked the cast a series of questions such as: Has race shaped your identity? Are you the first in your family to attend

university? Do you think vulnerability is a strength? Are you proud of your heritage? Do you speak up when necessary? Based on the dancers' yes or no answers, they would step forwards or backwards, taking more steps if they chose to, or remain in place. Inspired by a viral video on privilege and racial inequality in America, the exercise became choreography with the dancers embodying aspects of their identity through the steps that they take. After the dancers stand in different places in space where they end up in response to the questions, they slowly melt away offstage to make way for a duet.

The two dancers intertwine and arrange themselves in relation to each other, listening, understanding, and responding to each other's movements. There are elements of weight sharing and partnering in this dance set to "Dust Swirling into Your Shape" by Hammock. Within this duet, I examine the relationship between my mother and myself. I connect it to my Asian and American selves, each pulling at each other, working together and apart. I had shared different memories of my mother with my dancers. My mother was always in the kitchen, working to make beautiful meals that we shared at night. I thought of all of the times that we sat next to each other on long car rides, not saying a word. The times that she did not understand who I was becoming, frustrated with her Americanized child. I remembered why I get the opportunity to be here and make art. It is all because of my mother... and her mother. I asked these dancers to think through their own relationships with their mothers and through the movement-making process, motifs of growing, changing connections were formulated in this duet.

The rest of the cast joins the duet dancers to lift each other up, one by one, harnessing their strength as a group in the final dance section. My aim for the finale was for it to feel like a moment of relief, finding connections in their clustering. The dancers build a community with a sense that we cannot do this alone. It is the responsibility of everyone to make a better world, to

stand in thick solidarity with each other. Lifting each other up does not mean that others need to be pushed down. We are together.

The dancers unfurl from their clump to form another horizontal line across the stage while holding hands. They sit to watch the final triptych of home movies. The shots are of my nieces and my younger self. We play, dance, kick, cry, held by our kin. We are the same. Asian girls born in America.

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When I look at the structure of *Skin We Wrought* now, I see that I was building outwards from my inner self. The beginning of the piece is self-reflective, looking at my own experiences. I then expand to my family and community. Afterwards, the work moves into questioning our constructed society and status quo before closing with the home movies triptych that honors those who I make this work for, my mother and my nieces. I hope that through this art-making I am contributing to the Asian American collective voice and to the field of Asian American dance. Dance scholar Yutian Wong defines Asian American dance as “a framework for understanding the diverse movement practices and aesthetic concerns in which Asian Americans engage as choreographers and performers” in her book *Contemporary Directions in Asian American Dance* (21). In creating *Skin We Wrought*, I unpack my yellowness, ancestral heritage, and cross-racial experience in Brooklyn to discover the complexities of identity and better understand my own.

CONCLUSION

As I walked away from the *catalyst incident*, I was hyperventilating the whole way home. Taking in much more air than I was breathing out, I felt light-headed as I climbed the stairs to my fourth floor walk up. I remember staring at my weathered deep brown boots trudging step-by-step, feeling heavy from my waist down and sky high from my chest up, my middle section in knots. One hand on the black wrought iron railing of the stairs, the other hand pressing against the peeling walls to push myself up many steps. I opened my apartment door inward and collapsed onto my bed, crumpling, heaving, and sobbing. My partner and my roommate stood by the bedroom doorframe and asked me what happened. I didn't answer them. I was having this almost out of body experience and wanted to catalogue what had happened. I sat up slowly and pulled out my computer to record what I name now, the *catalyst incident*. I posted the incident to social media as an outlet for whatever I was feeling that night. Probably wanting some sympathy from others, hopefully illuminating what it's like to be an Asian American woman living in the United States.

The following morning, after reading my experience online, my brother found an excuse to walk to my apartment. We stood outside in the cold. He told me to "let it go." I felt sick. Let it go? I thought about his daughter, my niece, who will grow up to walk on these same Brooklyn sidewalks. Will she receive the same treatment?

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I make this work for them—my nieces, my family, and Asian Americans who fly in the face of oppression. The physiological reaction that I had in the moments after the *catalyst incident* is connected to a legacy of oppression of unheard voices. I refuse to simply "let it go." Through my research on this project using autoethnographic methods, historical context, and

critical-theoretic art-making, I was able to work through what happened on the corner as a response to the *catalyst incident* itself and as a response to my own reaction. How does it work? I don't know, but this research is a small sliver of how I am still coming to understand my Asian American experience and how I move through this world.

Much of my research process has been sitting alone and thinking on past experiences. Every reading, every bit of dance, every piece of research brought up tear-filled moments. The embodied memories of a racist-filled past and the knowing that there will be more racist moments in the future constantly weighs heavy on my chest. After a particularly trying day, my same friend, Lauren Etter, sent me a revelatory quote from writer Doreen Caven, "Prepare to be called a bully for interrupting societally approved behavior that is oppressive to others." I will continue to interrupt, upend, decenter, and disrupt oppressive behaviors, even though it is a difficult undertaking. The work does not end here.

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APPENDIX:

THESIS CONCERT ARCHIVAL VIDEO ACCESS

For access to archival video of the dance concert, *Skin We Wrought*, please contact the author at waeliwang@gmail.com.