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Paul Stephen Lim

Interview by

KING-KOK CHEUNG

I saw Paul Stephen Lim's play *Mother Tongue* when it was staged by the East West Players in 1988. I was so impressed by its use of English composition lessons to introduce flashbacks and to advance the plot, its suspenseful revelation of the mother's tragic story, and its bold treatment of homoerotic material that I wrote the playwright to express my admiration. Rereading the play recently, I was also struck by how much it resonates with current debates in Asian American literary circles over claiming an "American" or a "diasporic" identity. The protagonist, David Lee, was born in Manila but was denied Filipino citizenship because his parents are Chinese. His decision to become a naturalized American citizen sparks a heated confrontation with his mother, whose other son was killed by American soldiers at the end of World War II.

The protagonist's predicament concerning nationality parallels that of the playwright, who says that he never feels "at home" anywhere. Lim was born in Manila of Chinese parents in 1944. He emigrated to the United States in 1968 but did not become an American citizen until 1982. He earned his

B.A. and M.A. in English at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, where he is currently an associate professor of English. He is the author of a collection of short stories, *Some Arrivals, but Mostly Departures* (1982), and eleven plays. *Compersonas*, his first play, was judged best original script in the 1976 American College Theatre Festival. *Woeman* (1978) and *Flesh, Flash and Frank Harris* (1980) were both produced off Broadway in New York, *Points of Departure* (1978) and *Mother Tongue* (1988) at the East West Players in Los Angeles, and *Homerica* (1985) in Leicester, England (for publication information, see the selected bibliography). *Figures in Clay* was given a staged reading at the 1990 Modern Language Association convention in Chicago. *Report to the River* (1997), his latest play, won top prize in the playwrighting competition at the Edward Albee Theatre Conference (June, 1999). Lim is also the founder, artistic director, and producing coordinator for the English Alternative Theatre (EAT), a group whose primary objective is to nurture the work of his playwrighting students. In 1996, at the Kennedy Center/American College Theater Festival (KC/ACTF) festival in St. Louis, Lim was awarded a gold medallion from the Kennedy Center for his work with student playwrights.

The following interview began in June 1997 when I taught a graduate seminar for the Multicultural Literary Institute in the English Department at the University of Kansas, Lawrence; it was later completed by email exchanges after my return to Los Angeles. Getting to know Lim better was my bonus for visiting the University of Kansas. He was full of stories about his own family members, local Lawrence residents, other writers and artists, and his (male) dog, Imelda, who actually figures in *Figures in Clay*. But I came away with the feeling that his talent has been insufficiently recognized in Asian American cultural circles, partly because he is "hidden" in Lawrence, and partly because many of his plays do not revolve around Asian (American) characters. What he said of

Taiwanese American director Ang Lee is also true of himself: "The world is . . . his oyster."

KKC What was it like for someone of Chinese descent to grow up in the Philippines? Now that you are an American citizen, do you consider yourself Chinese American or Filipino American?

PSL Because they were (and continue to be) a minority group that controlled the economy of the Philippines, the Overseas Chinese were feared, hated, and reviled when I was growing up in Manila from the forties through the mid-sixties. However, as a member of this minority group, I was taught that we were superior to the Filipinos, not just economically, but also intellectually, culturally, etc. Thus, I was not encouraged to develop friendships with people other than other very boring (in my opinion) Overseas Chinese. Here, in America, I consider myself Asian American in general (to include my Philippine background) but Chinese American in particular. There are no Philippine restaurants in Lawrence, Kansas, and I do miss some of the Philippine foods I grew up with. But, if I had to choose between Philippine cuisine and Chinese cuisine, the latter would win out . . . and we are what we eat.

KKC What was your education like in the Philippines? What did you like and dislike the most?

PSL All through elementary school, I went to an English-language Jesuit school in the morning and then to a Chinese school in the afternoon to learn Mandarin. I hated the Chinese school because it made me feel like even more of an outsider. As for the choice of the English-language schools I went to, my parents wanted the best for me. In those days, for boys from good families, *the best* meant either the Jesuits or the Christian Brothers. So I had the Jesuits for elementary

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school, the Christian Brothers for high school, then back to the Jesuits for the first two years of college, before I would drop out of school altogether. My teachers told me early that I had a gift for writing, and they all encouraged me to develop the gift. In high school, I not only edited the high school paper and yearbook but also started to contribute "human interest" articles to the local newspapers and magazines.

KKC Did you decide to be a writer then? Was your family supportive?

PSL I was twelve or thirteen when I began to dream of a life as a writer. My parents had no idea what I was doing in school. I was getting very good grades in all my classes, and that was all that mattered to them. They thought they were getting their money's worth, and of course they were. My parents had no great interest in art or literature. Their spoken English was merely serviceable. And so, ironically, as I began to grow as a writer in the English language, so would my alienation from my parents and the rest of the Overseas Chinese community in the Philippines, which was largely a merchant class interested only in commerce, not art.

KKC Both Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* and your own *Mother Tongue* describe the pervasiveness of U.S. cultural imperialism in the Philippines. Were you enamored of American pop culture?

PSL Oh, yes. Absolutely. We sang all the songs, read all the books and magazines, saw all the movies and TV shows. Something many of us did up through our early teenage years was to write our favorite American movie stars care of their movie studios in Hollywood, asking for their autographed pictures. Among my childhood treasures were the pictures I received from Doris Day, Jeffrey Hunter, Audrey Hepburn, Troy Donahue, Jean Simmons, James Dean, etc.

Paul Stephen Lim

KKC When and why did you come to the United States? Do you remember your first impression of this country? Any big surprises?

PSL Pure and simple, I wanted to go to the source of the language I wrote and dreamed in, to where the art was being created. In the Philippines, we had to wait weeks, sometimes months and years, before we would get a chance to read the books and magazines, to see the movies and plays, that were "current." I wanted to have it all, and quickly.

I did not know what it actually meant, the idea of the Philippines being a colony of the United States, until I arrived in the United States. Once I was in America, I found it difficult to shake off "the colonial mentality." Yet the moon was not bigger in America. Not everything was better in America. The biggest surprise for me was that not all white people were teachers or artists or intellectuals. To this day, it makes me uncomfortable to deal with white people who are not bright or well educated, who are in fact quite ignorant and stupid.

KKC Now that you have spent almost three decades in the United States, do you feel at home in your adopted country, or do you still feel "homeless"?

PSL Quite truthfully, I never really feel "at home" anywhere. When I am lecturing in the classroom at the University of Kansas, I sometimes find myself addressing the students as "You Americans" instead of "We Americans." I frequently talk about "Us Chinese" but never about "Us Filipinos." Carlos Bulosan says, "Home is where the heart is." My heart is in America.

KKC Looking back, do you feel you were lucky to grow up in the Philippines, where there seemed to be a greater tolerance for homosexuality than in China?

PSL I have no way of comparing the two cultures because I did not grow up in China. In the Philippines, even though

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"the *bakla*," the homosexual, was very visible in the society, he/she was still very much the stereotypical object of fun and sometimes ridicule, as in Western society. The *bakla* was the flamboyant, effeminate homosexual, usually a courtier, a hairstylist, a florist, an antique dealer, etc. Macho teenage boys who participated in homosexual sex were not thought to be *bakla*. Because of the high premium that the Roman Catholic Church placed on the virginity of women, it became permissible for the boys to "play" with each other until it was time for them to get married. Homosexuality was merely a phase that many boys went through because "good girls" were not available for sex. As for the Overseas Chinese, I'm not sure if there was tolerance or intolerance for homosexuality. The subject was never discussed in my household, and thus I don't know what attitudes toward homosexuality there might have been. Occasionally I would hear some of my elders referring to someone as being "half ram, half ewe." That was the term used to describe the homosexual, but, to my childhood ears, the term was not used with scorn or derision.

KKC As you said, gay people are often stereotyped as effeminate, and so are Asian American men in the United States. Do you agree with David Henry Hwang that Asian men are perceived as effeminate even in the American gay quarter?

PSL In America, stoicism is often confused with weakness and passivity, so there is a great deal of truth in David Henry Hwang's identification of the Butterfly syndrome in many East-West relationships. Also, rightly or wrongly, perhaps because America is such a *big* country, most Americans prefer to have *big* things—big houses, big yards, big cars, big breasts, big penises. While I have never seen their respective appendages, it wouldn't surprise me greatly if Bruce Lee were "bigger" than Bruce Willis or Jack Nicholson "smaller" than Jackie Chan.

mother about his sexual orientation. Is it because the mother is Chinese or Christian or both? Is silence really better?

PSL David Lee in that play would have difficulty talking to his mother about anything that truly mattered to him. He has been so alienated from his parents by his Western-style education that he really has nothing to say to her or to discuss with her. The subject of his sexual orientation simply would not come up, just as he would not discuss art and literature with her. This isn't a question of David being "dishonest." In this case, "honesty" would serve no purpose whatsoever, and silence is golden.

KKC The mother in the play, who is a devout Christian, nevertheless observes traditional Chinese rituals at her husband's funeral. Is such religious hybridity common in the Philippines?

PSL Yes, but I'm not sure this is unique to the Chinese in the Philippines, who want the best of three worlds, the Buddhist, the Confucian and the Christian. Don't the Japanese do the same with Buddhism, Shintoism, and Christianity? The Filipinos call such people *segunatistas*, people who want "to be sure" they are included among the winning team, whatever that team might be.

KKC What about yourself? Do you have any religion?

PSL When I was young, I fell in love with the rituals of the Roman Catholic Church, but Pope John XXIII changed all that. While I no longer belong to any particular church or religion, I continue to believe in goodness and doing good.

KKC You once said that *Mother Tongue* is all fact, but it is also all fiction. At the climax of the play, David Lee learns that his brother Nelson was burned to death when some drunken American soldier threw a grenade at him at the end of World War II. Did you make that up?

Paul Stephen Linn

KKC Have you encountered any racism or homophobia at Lawrence?

PSL Lawrence, Kansas, is no different from the rest of America, and I'm sure racism and homophobia exist here. But, to my knowledge, I have not been the specific target of such hatred. This may be due to the fact that I live in a fairly protected academic environment, surrounded by people who are fairly enlightened. If any of my colleagues or students are in fact racist and/or homophobic, they simply wouldn't be open about it, for fear of being considered politically incorrect or, worse, having lawsuits brought against them.

KKC When I saw *Mother Tongue* back in 1988, I was struck by its bold articulation of a gay Asian American identity, especially considering that you were writing in the Midwest. How did the audience—both in California and in Kansas—respond to the homosexual material in the play?

PSL My recollection is that the audiences in Los Angeles and Kansas seemed more interested in my depiction of the behavior of the American military in Asia during World War II and the Vietnam War. The only time there was a discussion of the homosexual material came after the staged reading of the play this past summer at the University of Hawai'i in Manoa. I was not present at the reading or the discussion, but the director, Chris Millado, emailed me that the audience was very uneasy about the professor in the play even daring to contemplate a sexual relationship with one of his students. In this case, I think the audience was merely responding to the issue of sexual harassment. Race and gender had nothing to do with it, I think. This same audience would have been equally upset with David Mamet's *Oleanna*, wherein a white male professor is accused of harassing a white female student.

KKC David Lee in *Mother Tongue* finds it difficult to tell his

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PSL With some of my plays, when I'm asked if they are "autobiographical," my glib reply is, "All of it, and none of it." The story of how Nelson died is one I grew up with, sorrowfully. I have a scar on my right knee that my mother tells me is from the blast of the grenade that blew Nelson to bits. I would be dead, too, if a servant's body had not shielded me from the blast. In real life, the name of the brother who died was Arthur. Ironically, my mother had named him after the son of General MacArthur. My mother had heard on the radio that the general had a son named Arthur MacArthur.

KKC Can you give an example of how you convert the raw material of life into a scene in the play?

PSL I worked as a copywriter in Manila for seven years, first for J. Walter Thompson Co., then for Philippine Advertising Counselors. The advertising campaigns used in *Mother Tongue* and *Figures in Clay* for Pond's cold cream, Philippine Standard [the Philippine version of American Standard, the company that manufactures toilets], and Philippine Air Lines were real advertising campaigns that I had worked on and that had been used by those clients. I "borrowed" these for the plays because they helped show David's wit and expertise and also because some of the key words used in those advertising campaigns actually helped advance the plot. For example, the use of the phrase *the old guard* versus *the new guard* becomes crucial in revealing the relationships in *Figures in Clay*. I prepared the advertising campaign for Universal Travel and Tours in *Mother Tongue* as though it were for a real client. I had fun doing it.

KKC *Figures in Clay* revolves around an interracial and intergenerational triangle stalked by AIDS. Is there any particular message you wish to convey through that play?

PSL The three men in *Figures in Clay* are at a crossroads physically, psychologically, spiritually, and at least two of

them don't seem to know which road to take. Thus, they are in limbo, in stasis, inert. It is a terrible situation for anyone to be in. Anyone who has ever had unsafe sex can only wait and hope that the tests will come up negative. This is the only time in life when being negative is good. Being positive leads to death.

KKC You said they are at a "crossroads." What are their options?

PSL I'll try to answer the question, albeit in a roundabout fashion. In *Figures in Clay*, one of the characters talks about the "dilemma" one faces when one is halfway through reading a book one isn't particularly enjoying. To give up on the book is to admit that the time already spent on the book has been wasted. To carry on reading could ultimately prove rewarding, or not. In this sense, analogously, the men in the play are at a "crossroads" in their relationship.

KKC What inspires you to write? Do you feel a sense of social purpose, or is it art for art's sake? Or the pursuit of "truth"?

PSL All the above. I take writing very seriously. Even when I am punning or being frivolous, I am serious. I firmly believe that everything in life is political.

KKC How do you feel about the label *Asian American writer/playwright*? What kind of audience do you have in mind when you write? Do you feel a split between mainstream and ethnic audiences?

PSL I just said that all life is political. To call oneself an Asian American writer means that the writer wants to be identified as such because of his or her politics. My ethnic heritage and background makes me an Asian American writer, but my material is not always Asian American. Being Asian American is just part of what I am. It is not the sum total of me. My politics go beyond being Asian American or being gay.

KKC Can you tell us more about your politics? What concerns you most right now?

PSL Among other things, *Report to the River* concerns itself with the “river” that separates the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, in our society. If I were to make a list of the things that truly make me angry, it would be filled with all the terrible divisions in life that separate us, especially in areas dealing with race, gender, and social class.

KKC There are few Asian (American) characters in your plays except in *Mother Tongue*, *Points of Departure*, *Homeric*, and *Figures in Clay*. Is that because Asian American topics are too close to home?

PSL If the material calls for the characters to be Asian, then they are. Because I am living in the heartland of white America, where I have few contacts with other Asians, especially in the arts, I don’t find myself thinking about Asian or Asian American themes as frequently as I might if, for example, I were living in Hawai’i or California.

KKC How do you go about writing a play? Do you start with a plot or characters? Do you already know how the play will end when you begin writing?

PSL It varies from play to play. But most of my plays got written because there were stories in my mind that would not rest or go away. For the most part, I know how my plays are going to end, but sometimes there are surprises, even for me. The play I just finished writing this summer, *Report to the River*, took me somewhere completely unintended and unexpected. I had no idea it would end that way, but it did, and I’m pleased.

KKC Isn’t *Report to the River* based on a true event?

PSL Yes. But, unlike Truman Capote’s use of real events in

In *Cold Blood*, the true facts I was working with actually led me somewhere else, so that the true facts in the play became less important than the fiction I was creating.

KKC I want to know more about the fact and your fiction. You use *Rashomon*-esque techniques very effectively in this play. The different versions of “what happened” in *Report to the River* also remind me of Maxine Hong Kingston’s depiction of what happened to her No Name Aunt. Why do you create these versions? In your own mind, which of them is “true”?

PSL I am very much a fan of Kurosawa. Even more than *Rashomon*, my favorite Kurosawa film is *High and Low*, based on the novel by Patricia Highsmith. The four versions of how the boy died in *Report to the River* are based on the actual case, wherein the man accused and convicted of killing the boy gave four different versions of how the boy died. According to the psychiatrists and clinical psychologists who testified in court, the man was suffering from a mental disorder called *fixed delusions*. He would forget all previous versions of the story he had told as soon as he fixated on a new version. After studying all the court transcripts and interviewing the man for over sixteen hours, I still didn’t know which of the four versions to believe, and so I decided to change the fourth version, to make a quantum leap from a “satanic killing” by the “Antichrist” as represented by the letter A that had been carved on the boy’s chest to other things that might also have been symbolized by that letter A, such as America itself. For me, the play is not just a “murder mystery.” I hope I don’t sound too pretentious when I say that the play is a mirror I am holding up to America. My play *Homeric* also did this.

KKC Be pretentious. What kind of mirror are you holding up to America?

PSL *Homeric* was written in 1977, and I meant it to be an epic overview—like the *Odyssey*—of the American family—past, present, and probable future. Being Chinese, and having been raised to believe in the sanctity of the family and the clan, I was unhappy with what the Republicans are now calling the breakdown of family values in America. I'm a Democrat, and I identified the problem long before anyone had ever heard of Dan Quayle. As for *Report to the River*, I think it goes without saying that the play shows us our insatiable obsession with crime and violence—as a society, we cannot seem to get enough of O. J. Simpson, JonBenet Ramsey, Andrew Cunanan, etc. These are our new media heroes.

KKC The theme of violent death recurs in your work, for example, *Compromises*, *Mother Tongue*, *Report to the River*. Do you know why you are drawn to this particular theme?

PSL I hadn't realized it was a recurring element in my work. You are the first to point it out. I've always thought of myself as being fairly sanguine and pacific by nature. It's odd, however, that the word *sanguine* now means "cheerful" and "optimistic" when its original meaning was somehow related to "blood." I have never hit anyone physically, only verbally, which is not to say that you cannot draw blood verbally. Be that as it may, perhaps all this physical "repression" seeks violent and bloody release in my creative life.

KKC Who are your favorite writers, and which have the strongest influence on your writing?

PSL I was a voracious reader as a child. In one week, I'd have read *The Wizard of Oz* and *Crime and Punishment*. Among prose writers, I greatly admire Graham Greene, William Faulkner, William Saroyan, John Fowles, James Baldwin, John Cheever. Among dramatists, Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Chekhov. Almost everything by Tennessee Williams and

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Arthur Miller. And the early work of Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter.

KKC What about among writers of Asian descent?

PSL Carlos Bulosan, Nick Joaquin, Li-Young Lee.

KKC I also wonder whether Freud has been a strong influence because so many of your works attribute the protagonist's angst to his unresolved relationship with his parents, especially his mother?

PSL Like it or not, Freud is now part of the Judeo-Christian culture. When I was in high school, I seriously thought about going to medical school and on to psychiatry, but it wasn't meant to be.

KKC I went to your talk about father-son relationships in the films of Ang Lee. Yet there are hardly any father-son relationships in your own work except in "Flight" [in *Some Arrivals*]. Would you care to say anything about your own relationship with your father?

PSL After my mother lost her first two children, she took over my upbringing, and that upbringing did not allow very much contact with my father by way of normal father-son activities through sports and the like. My father allowed my mother to live in her paranoia and to raise me the way she did. He retreated into silence; and my greatest regret in life is that I never really knew him, never really had a genuine conversation with him. Oddly enough, when I look at myself in the mirror these days, it is his image (and maybe also his spirit) I see staring back at me.

KKC In the same talk you also mentioned how happy you were to come across Ang Lee's films, to see real Asians instead of stereotypes such as Charlie Chan or Fu Manchu. Do you think that is something you yourself have done and want to do, to create some believable Asian (American) characters?

Paul Stephen Lim

PSL Ang Lee is an artist. With *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Ice Storm*, he is going beyond the Asian and the Asian American. The world is now his oyster, as it should be, and I am so happy for him. And for "us," too.

KKC Tell us something about EAT. In what sense is it alternative theater?

PSL In addition to producing plays by my playwrighting students in the English Department at the University of Kansas, the English Alternative Theatre [EAT] produces plays that are not particularly "commercial." These are mostly plays by people of color, plays by women, plays by gays and lesbians. We are also alternative in the sense that we have no permanent home or venue. We are gypsies, and we frequently use alternative, nontheatrical spaces for our performances.

KKC Tell us the difference between writing a story and writing a play. Which do you find the most exciting or challenging?

PSL In prose fiction, a writer can readily enter the mind or consciousness of a character and report truthfully what that particular character is thinking or feeling. This is not easily achieved in the theater. Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech is a good example. Here, Shakespeare is forced to use a prosaic device, not a theatrical device. If Hamlet is merely thinking these thoughts, we would not be able to hear the words inside his head. On the other hand, we do not ordinarily go around speaking out loud to ourselves in this fashion, so the device seems awkward, artificial. I used to derive great pleasure from writing short stories, but these days I find it more challenging to tell the same stories on a stage.

KKC How do you feel about writing and performing plays in the heartland of America?

PSL Working in Lawrence, Kansas, is both a plus and a

minus. The plus is that there is no great pressure to succeed commercially. Ultimately, I work to please myself and can only hope that what pleases me will also please others. The minus is that, for the same amount of work, so few people get to see the final product here. For example, if *Report to the River* were being performed in Los Angeles or New York City instead of Lawrence, Kansas, the production would be reviewed by the *Los Angeles Times* or the *New York Times* instead of the *Lawrence Journal-World*, and more people would know about the play, and maybe more people would see the play, and maybe more people would be moved intellectually or touched emotionally by my work.

KKC The protagonist in "Flight" often watches his own life as though he were a character in a story or a movie; he allows his emotions to surface only "in the dark of movie houses or between the pages of books" [1982, 16]. As a playwright and director, do you sometimes feel a similar estrangement from or objectification of yourself?

PSL Yes. Even when I am an active participant in a scene, I am always watching myself watching.

KKC Yet you say you cry every time you think about the need to euthanize your pet, Imelda, who has cancer. . . .

PSL Truthfully, I am quite embarrassed to be feeling this way about a dog. There must be something very wrong with me that I cannot or do not allow myself to feel this way about people I know. By the way, it will interest you to know that, two days ago, I drove to a pet shop in Topeka and bought a fifteen-week-old female keeshond. Her name is MyKee. I did this in the hope that Imelda will teach the new puppy how to behave in this house, that maybe Imelda will pass on some of his own good nature to the new puppy, that maybe the puppy will give Imelda a new lease (leash?) on life, but the truth is I did it for me. When the time comes and Imelda has to be

euthanized, I think it will be easier on me if there is already another puppy in the house. My friends are more confused than ever that Imelda is a "he" and that MyKee is a "she." Gender be damned, I say.

KKC What would you say to someone who wishes to become a playwright? Any words of wisdom?

PSL You will have the best of times, the worst of times. Also, seriously, there is little money to be made writing for the theater; so be prepared to find some other way to pay the bills while you are writing.

Selected Works by Paul Stephen Lim

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Introduction

KING-KOK CHEUNG

My work as an activist . . . is inextricable from what I write.
—Janice Mirikitani

The whole enterprise of writing for me is spiritual.
—Li-Young Lee

You write because you have no choice.
—Wendy Law-Yone

What does it mean to be an Asian American writer? Is it the same as being a writer of Asian descent? Or just a writer? As the epigraphs to this introduction demonstrate, the authors interviewed in this collection have remarkably different literary compulsions. Even more varied are their styles, their sensibilities, and the settings of their stories, which include Burma, Brazil, England, India, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Sudan, Thailand, and Vietnam as well as California, Hawai'i, Kansas, and New York. Yet in this country these authors are all designated as *Asian American writers* by academics, publishers, the media—and in this volume.

Like most artists of color, authors of Asian ancestry in the