The following essays were inspired by talks delivered at the 2015 Association for Asian American Studies annual conference, where we commemorated the fifty years since the 1965 founding of East West Players (EWP) in Los Angeles. Currently led by artistic director Tim Dang, EWP is known as the first and longest-running Asian American theatre company. It has played a crucial part in the training of Asian American actors and the formation of other Asian American theatres across the nation and in the development of new plays and productions that articulate and challenge how “Asian America” is understood and represented. Through reflecting upon the past, present, and future of EWP, our essays contemplate the most significant questions about Asian American theatre practice: how theatre engages the multiple and even contradictory aspects of what is “Asian American,” the panethnic racial category that is consistently challenged by the diverse cultural practices, communities, and identities it purports to describe. EWP’s history illustrates the multiple dimensions of how Asian American theatre can challenge the limited prescriptions, labels, and packaging so often used in talking about race both inside and outside the theatre.

Founded by a group of Los Angeles–based theatre artists (which, according to EWP’s Web site, included EWP’s first artistic director, Mako [Makato Iwamatsu], Rae Creevey, Beulah Quo, Soon-Tek Oh, James Hong, Pat Li, June Kim, Guy Lee, and Yet Lock), EWP openly challenged prevailing racial stereotypes in film and media such as the demonic “yellow peril,” the hyperfeminine “butterfly,” and the compliant “model minority.” Its mission of furthering opportunities for Asian American actors was maintained not only through actor training programs but also through productions that showcased Asian American performers in a much broader range of roles than had been available to them. To this end, EWP has regularly staged popular works that have not generally featured Asian American leads: musicals such as Godspell, A Chorus Line, The Fantasticks, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, Sweeney Todd, Pippin, Chess, and The Who’s Tommy; classics such as Gogol’s The Inspector General,

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Brecht’s *In the Jungle of Cities*, and Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*; and contemporary plays such as Peter Shaffer’s *Equus*, Beth Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart*, Robert Harling’s *Steel Magnolias*, Terrence McNally’s *Master Class*, and Yasmina Reza’s *Art*. Having an all–Asian American cast showcases the talent and range of individual actors and insists that the skilled performer can convincingly perform characters across the limitations inherent in the social category of race. This central part of EWP’s mission has subsequently inspired other Asian American theatre companies such as the National Asian American Theatre Company in New York City and Mu Performing Arts in Minneapolis–St. Paul, which, in addition to works by Asian American playwrights, also regularly produce musicals and plays originally staged with non-Asian casts.

Sadly, despite the demonstrated success of these productions, there is a continued lack of opportunities for Asian Americans in mainstream Hollywood films and on Broadway stages. There are also continued instances of “yellowface”: the use of non-Asian actors to play Asian and Asian American characters. Christine Mok’s essay addresses how the attention to discriminatory casting practices inspires continued activism around the issue of casting. One of the most recent advocacy groups, the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC), was founded in 2011 and has already played an important role in drawing attention to discriminatory casting practices and the relative invisibility of Asian American experiences onstage. Mok provides insight into the politics of cross-racial and so-called color-blind casting and into how Asian Americans mobilize around issues of equity and employment.

In its fifty-year history, EWP has actively promoted new plays by and about Asian Americans that provide additional opportunities for Asian American actors to move beyond the stereotypical or minor parts to which they are so often assigned. Important instances of Asian American playwriting took place well before the founding of EWP. For instance, Ling-Ai (Gladys) Li wrote what might be considered the first Asian American play, *The Submission of Rose Moy* (1924), as a student at the University of Hawai‘i–Manoa. That play was first produced in 1925 at the Arthur Andrews Theatre University of Hawai‘i, and published in *Hawaii Quill Magazine* in 1928. But since 1968, EWP has been a leader in the production of new plays by and about Asian Americans, actively encouraging dramatists through playwriting awards, workshops, and productions. For example, it was an EWP-sponsored playwriting contest that first drew attention to Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, which later, at the American Place Theatre in 1972, became the first mainstream New York production of any Asian American play. Many today know Asian American playwriting only through David Henry Hwang’s Tony Award–winning 1988 play *M. Butterfly*. (Hwang’s long history of involvement with EWP is evident in the name of its current main stage, the David Henry Hwang Theater, a 240-seat venue housed in the historic Union Center for the Arts in the Little Tokyo district of downtown Los Angeles.) However, the history of EWP is inseparable from the careers of many notable Asian American playwrights such as Chin, Hwang, Edward Sakamoto, Philip Kan Gotanda, Velina Hasu Houston, R. A. Shioimi, Karen Tei Yamashita, Prince Gomolvilas, Chay Yew, Alice Tuan, Sung Rno, Lloyd Suh,
Cherylene Lee, Shishir Kurup, Qui Nguyen, and Julia Cho. In her essay “The Narrator as Dubious Witness,” Ju Yon Kim traces the iconic significance of one formative EWP production: the 1977 premiere of Wakako Yamauchi’s *And the Soul Shall Dance*. The play was based on a short story by Yamauchi, who, at EWP artistic director Mako’s request, turned the story into her first play. Her exploration of two Japanese American families in California’s Imperial Valley became a pivotal moment in EWP’s history; it had an extended run of fifty-three performances and received much critical acclaim. Kim highlights the interplay among narrator, character, and spectators, suggesting how complex figurations of audience and community have always been necessary to Asian American theatre.

EWP’s productions continue to raise central questions about theatrical representation, aesthetics, and politics. Beginning with its initial production of *Rashomon*, a dramatic version of Akira Kurosawa’s film (based on two short stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa) written by Fay and Michael Kanin, EWP has been heavily engaged in intercultural theatre. Particularly in its early years, there were enthusiastic audiences for *Rashomon* and other plays set in Asia and critical acclaim for EWP’s borrowing of traditional Asian theatre styles for works such as *The Substitute* (1968), *Monkey* (1971–2), and, through its Total Theatre Ensemble for the Young Audience, *Tales from East West Players: 1980*.1 But in retrospect, productions such as these drew concern about whether the blending of “East and West” reinforced all-too-common essentialist conflation of “Asian American” with “Asian” or, even more dangerously, played to orientalist fantasies of exotic Others. This worry was aggravated by the fact that these intercultural pieces tended to be more commercially successful than some of the pieces that dealt more explicitly with Asian American experience, such as the 1981–2 series of plays on Japanese American internment (including Richard France’s *Station J*, Dom Magwili’s *Christmas in Camp*, Wakako Yamauchi’s *12-1-A*, and Edward Sakamoto’s *Pilgrimage*), which were far from box office successes.2

American theatre has had a long and dubious fascination with staging a fantasy Orient through spectacular settings, glamorous costumes, and quaint characterizations. The popularity of EWP’s interculturalism with non-Asian audiences risks being seen as continuing this long tradition of fetishism. However, EWP’s intercultural work should not be interpreted simply as capitulating to box-office demands for orientalist fusion. As Yuko Kurahashi suggests, using non-Western theatrical traditions also speaks to a more hybrid or transnational Asian American cultural identity staged for the benefit of Asian Americans.3 More recently, this identity has taken on even more significance as what is meant by “Asian American” has become increasingly transnational in nature. As Elizabeth Son’s work on the successive productions of Chungmi Kim’s *Hanako* in New York and Seoul suggests, EWP’s work suggests the possibility of a transpacific conception of audience, arguing for the necessity of taking into account an Asian spectatorship for Asian American plays. Focusing on the story of a Korean “comfort women” survivor and a Korean American student, *Hanako* proposes remembrance and healing as global practices; its subsequent 2004 New York production (*Comfort Women*) and translation into *Nabi* [Butterfly] for a Seoul
audience in 2005–9 suggest how drama might do more than reflect transpacific and intergenerational ties and communities; theatrical production might actually enable these things.

While all three essays focus on different aspects of EWP’s legacy, all address its capacity to create a sense of racial community out of disparate panethnic, multigenerational, and diverse experiences. From its modest beginnings in rented space in a church basement (with productions funded in part by company dues) to an Equity theatre that serves more than ten thousand people each year, EWP has negotiated the contradictions of Asian American representation and the tricky terrain of nonprofit and commercial theatre practice in the United States. Marking EWP’s half-century allows us to acknowledge and applaud the many efforts, actions, words, thoughts, feelings, and bodies that have made up “Asian American theatre” through the twentieth century and continue do so into the twenty-first.

ENDNOTES

2. Ibid., 147–8.
3. Ibid., 21.