The Chinese Lady

US History's Object Lesson Becomes US History's Interpreter

Colleen Kim Daniher

In the final moments of Magic Theatre's production of *The Chinese Lady*, the house lights come up on the audience as Afong Moy, played by Rinabeth Apostol, implores us to "look at each other." At this juncture in the play it is 2019 and Afong, we are to understand, is 199 years old—and she has been waiting for us. Wearing a purple shroud and seated in a chair on an elevated platform stage inside San Francisco's Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, Afong/Apostol asks us to look at her and each other, and to consider "the relevancy" of her story to the present. "I'm looking at you," she says. "Are you looking at me? Can you see me?" (Suh 2018:43).

My seatmates and I shift awkwardly, and cast sidelong glances at each other. We have been plunged back into the present. It is a cool October evening in prepandemic 2019, and approximately 70 of us have assembled in the Magic Theatre's intimate blackbox theatre space. We sit in raked seating facing three sides of an octagonal raised platform stage. The set, designed by Jacquelyn Scott, brilliantly captures both the 19th-century Orientalist excess and the surveillant conditions of the real Afong Moy's life (1820–ca. 1850). The specially constructed platform stage is draped in lush, embroidered silk curtains; a rope is suspended from the ceiling to the front-left on the stage, with a chair on the floor in front and to the right. Whereas the curtained stage represents the museum exhibition room wherein Moy spent most of her documented life while in America, the rope and the chair help to delineate the extension of the play's dramatic action beyond the edge of the stage. When the mechanized curtains open, we know that Afong Moy is available for public, commercial view, and that we, by extension, are cast as that historic museum public; when they close, she is hidden away, cloistered behind curtains that our gaze can't penetrate. These openings and closings, combined with the box-like structure of the curtained platform stage set within the larger blackbox playing space, reinforce the peep show–like titillation of the historical Afong Moy's display and exhibition.

The Chinese Lady is a show-within-a-show. It is thus filled with metatheatrical moments when we, the audience, are made conscious of our looking. The story of Afong Moy, after all, is a story about looking. The historical Moy, the play's titular "Chinese Lady," was ostensibly the first Chinese woman to come to America in the early 19th century. Prior to this, the "first wave" of Chinese immigrants were mostly laboring men who arrived in the Pacific Northwest in the 1850s, following the 1849 Gold Rush and the building of the Transcontinental Railroad (1862–69). Moy was brought to the US in 1834, after having been sold by her family in Guangzhou to Nathaniel and Frederick Carne, two American traders who specialized in imports from the "Far East." And she was brought to be looked at. Like an exotic vase or a teacup, the 14-year-old Moy

Colleen Kim Daniher *is Assistant Professor of Performance Studies in the Department of Communication Studies at San Francisco State University. She is a cultural historian of race and performance in the transnational Americas. Current book projects include an analysis of the "mixed-race" femme performer as a fruitful interpretive problem of 20th-century US performance historiography and transpacific performance and the idea of tropical Asia. ckdaniher@sfsu.edu*

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Figure 1. Rinabeth Apostol as Afong Moy in The Chinese Lady *by Lloyd Suh, directed by Mina Morita. Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, 2019. (Photo by Jennifer Reiley; courtesy of Magic Theatre)*

was exhibited and displayed in a room alongside artifacts promoted for sale to the American public. She was first exhibited at Peale's Natural History Museum and later at P.T. Barnum's American Museum in New York City. With her bound feet prominently displayed, she would perform mundane tasks for her audience, such as eating and walking, at a rate of 25 cents per viewer. Moy would later tour much of the eastern United States, disappearing from the extant historical record after 1850, at the age of 30.

The story of Afong Moy can thus be understood within a long and ugly history of human exhibition, where the racist, heterosexist, and ableist freakshow served as a lynchpin of popular mass entertainment (see Garland-Thomson 1996). In this sense Moy, "The Chinese Lady," can be positioned alongside other iconic "freak" figures such as Saartjie Baartman ("The Hottentot Venus"), Julia Pastrana ("The Ape Woman"), and Joseph Merrick ("The Elephant Man"). And, in the same vein as Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* (1990), Shaun Prendergast's *The True History of the Tragic Life and Triumphant Death of Julia Pastrana, the Ugliest Woman in the World* (1998), and Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man* (1977), Suh's *The Chinese Lady* is a theatrical work of historical fiction that tries to imagine the human story of someone who was understood to be less than human.

While broadly humanistic in tone and historical in scope, the Magic Theatre production enacts, at the same time, a decidedly Asian Americanist critique of the present. Under the skillful direction of Mina Morita, *The Chinese Lady* stages a reversal of the Eurocentric, ethnographic gaze, such that Afong Moy, one of the infamous objectified subjects of US history, here gets reimagined as an interpreter of US history. What results is a kind of history and anthropology of—what was in October 2019—the Trump-era present, told from the perspective of a ghostly Afong Moy.

Suh's *Chinese Lady* debuted in 2018, first at the Barrington Stage Company in Pittsfield, MA, and then in New York City in a coproduction by the Barrington Stage Company and New York's Ma-Yi Theater. Witnessing the Magic Theatre production in San Francisco in the fall of 2019, I find it nearly impossible to separate my viewing from the immediacy of my own place and time. First, there is

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the matter of place. Just a short bus ride away from the Fort Mason Center is San Francisco's historic Chinatown, the oldest Chinatown in North America. To the north is Angel Island, a former immigration inspection and detainment station (1910–1940) that intercepted and detained millions of US-bound transpacific Asian migrants during the Chinese Exclusion Act era (1882–1943). To the east and southwest, respectively, are the University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco State University, two historic sites of the student-led protests that 50 years ago became the launching pad for ethnic studies curricula and the Asian American social movement as we know it today.



Figure 2. Atung (Will Dao) provides the tea that Afong (Rinabeth Apostol) drinks in front of her museum-going public/the audience in The Chinese Lady *by Lloyd Suh, directed by Mina Morita. Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, 2019. (Photo by Jennifer Reiley; courtesy of Magic Theatre)*

Then there is the matter of time: Suh, one of the preeminent Asian American playwrights of the past decade, began writing *The Chinese Lady* in 2015 and finished it in 2017—during the transitional period between the US presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. In the wake of the Trump administration's overtly xenophobic, anti-immigration rhetoric and policies (such as the notorious "Muslim ban" of January 2017), *The Chinese Lady*'s excavation of the history of 19th-century anti-Asian legal exclusions in the US feels all too prescient. After all, as historians like Beth Lew-Williams and Erika Lee have pointed out, laws like the 1875 Page Act and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which targeted Chinese women and then men for immigration restriction and exclusion, preempted the Muslim ban as the first laws in the country to bar immigrants on the basis of race and national origin (see Lew-Williams 2018 and Lee 2003). Positioning Afong Moy as a proto–Asian American, the San Francisco production of *The Chinese Lady* gains much of its polemical force through the understanding that the history of Chinese immigration in the US *is* a history of exclusionary US citizenship writ-large.

The play is structured in two loose acts and six scenes performed without intermission. These scenes are demarcated visually by the opening and closing of the raised stage's curtains, and sonically by the sounding of a gong. The dramatic action unfolds primarily through audience direct-address and dialogue between the play's two main characters: Afong (Apostol) and Atung (played by Will Dao). Based on historical documentation of the real Atung, the play's Atung is Afong's translator, stage manager, and general "minder"; he provides the tea and meals that Afong eats in front of her museum-going public, he tells her when to walk the exhibition room's perimeter during her act, when to rest, and when the show is over. In fact, as stage manager for Afong's star-turn as human exhibit, it is Atung who sounds the gong (by pulling on the suspended rope) and cues the closing of the curtains. He spends most of his "onstage" time literally offstage: seated in the chair on the floor in front of the platform. Whereas Afong is an educated, upper-class Chinese woman (evidenced by her delicate manner and what she tells us are her bound feet), Atung is a peasant. We are told repeatedly by both characters that Atung is "irrelevant."

As audience members, we understand that we, too, are cast as diegetic characters within the world of the play. In her opening monologue, Afong introduces herself, tells us that the year is 1834, and thanks us for coming to see her. Positioned thus as both witnesses to Suh's

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play in the present and Afong's 19th-century exhibition audience, we time travel with Afong and Atung through the play's scenes, from 1834 when Afong is 14 years old and newly arrived in America through to "our" present, in this case, the year 2019.

Suh's script is decidedly unnaturalistic. From its outset, the play makes clear its investment in exploring performance as reenactment—that is, performance not simply as the *re-creation* of the past but as what Joseph Roach would call the *surrogation* of the past (Roach 1996). We are continuously reminded that the actors' bodies onstage stand in for but do not replace the historical actors they embody. For example, within minutes of Afong's opening lines of address, she explains that she appears to be communicating in English only because she is "not really speaking" at all:

> AFONG: It would of course seem that I am speaking, as my mouth is moving and my thoughts are becoming articulated through sound, but this is not in fact what is happening. What is happening is performance. [...] These words you hear are not my own. These clothes that I wear are not my own. This body that I occupy is not my own. (Suh 2018:2)

These actorly surrogations have two layers: just as the historical Moy stood in for a mythical "Chinese Lady" presented to the American public, so too does the actress Rinabeth Apostol stand in for the historical Moy, who is given language only through Suh's fictional script. Thus, while interested in Afong Moy's subjectivity, *The Chinese Lady* insists upon the impossibility of restoring it.

The first act follows Afong from ages 14 to 17 (ca. 1834–1837), when she is young and still cheerfully optimistic about her imposed sojourn in America. Apostol's precocious young Afong, played with wit and verve, is especially effective here. In addition to believing that her stay in the US is only temporary, young Afong understands her public exhibition in terms of cultural diplomacy between China and the US. "I am very pleased to be here in this great country. I am very pleased to represent my homeland, my family, my culture, and my history to you in hopes that this may lead to greater understanding and goodwill between China and America, and between all the peoples of the world!" she says at the end of scene 1 (2018:5).

The second act (ca. 1849–present) follows an increasingly jaded Afong from ages 29 to 62 through three seminal flashpoints in Chinese American history: 1) the 1849 San Francisco Gold Rush; 2) the 1864 building of the Transcontinental Railroad; and 3) the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. These landmark moments in Asian American immigration history are referenced within Afong's first-person, direct-address monologues, but they are never directly shown. This is because *The Chinese Lady* is, for the most part, a "front-of-stage" drama. In a reversal of the conventions of a backstage drama, we never see Afong outside of public exhibition hours, and in fact we never see Afong even leave her exhibition room (or "Room," as anthropomorphized in Suh's script) until the penultimate scene of the play.

And even then, her leave-taking is ambiguous. Faced with the prospect of replacement (by a 14-year-old girl from Peking) and abandonment (by Atung), a defiant 44-year-old Afong announces her intention to walk and ride the rails from New York to San Francisco. Then, like Ibsen's Nora, Afong walks out of the theatre proper by descending from the elevated platform stage, crossing the narrow passage between the stage and the front row, and exiting past the seated audience through the lobby door. As audience members we applaud her heroic exeunt, but we also know the unlikelihood of her making it to the West Coast: her feet are bound, she can't speak English, she knows no one. Nonetheless, this highly kinetic moment stands in stark contrast to the rest of the play, where Afong's movements are constrained to both her museum act and her museum room. Beyond re-creating the limited gestural routines of her museum act for us (walking around her room to show off her clothes and bound feet; eating a bowl of food with chopsticks), Afong spends most of the play static, seated in a chair in the middle of her museum room. Although Apostol approximates the bodily habitudes of the historical Moy in this regard, she does not attempt to walk as if her feet are bound, in keeping with Suh's expressed instruction in the production notes.

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Figure 3. Afong Moy (Rinabeth Apostol) on display with Atung (Will Dao), her "minder," in The Chinese Lady *by Lloyd Suh, directed by Mina Morita. Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, 2019. (Photo by Jennifer Reiley; courtesy of Magic Theatre)*

The sixth and final scene of the play functions more like a coda or alternate ending to the previous one. Dream-like, it opens with the curtains drawn on the empty museum room and a voice-over of Afong introducing herself in her usual fashion, indicating that the year is 1882 and that she is now 62. Unlike the previous five scenes, however, theatrical time here is compressed: 130 years pass within a few lines of the recorded voice-over. As Afong's prerecorded voice lists a litany of dates and instances of turn-of-the-century anti-Chinese mob violence and legal immigration restrictions that came after her years on display, Apostol-as-Afong returns to the theatre and silently reassumes her seated position in the Room. When she begins speaking again, it is in shared space-time with the audience: "It is the year [2019] and I am one hundred and ninety [nine] years old [...] I have been waiting for you for so long" (42).[1] The effect is as disconcerting as it is circular: Afong speaks to us both beyond the grave and within the immediate present of live theatre.

This moment is the production's clearest expression of its philosophy of time, specifically, the relationship between the past and the present, and how the theatre can bend this relationship. It is also a moment that is unique to the Magic Theatre production: Suh's script does not indicate the use of prerecorded voice-over. Indeed, one of the most compelling propositions that the Magic Theatre production has to offer is that, through performance, the past can, in fact, look into the face of the present and speak. Like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, Afong Moy returns to us "at a moment of danger" and asks us to look at her...and remember ([1955] 2007:255).[2] This is a powerful political rejoinder at a moment in contemporary America when wall-building, kids

1. The original line in the 2018 published script is: "It is the year 2018 and I am one hundred and ninety eight years old...I have been waiting for you for so long" (Suh 2018:42).

2. The longer passage in question reads: To "articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was (Ranke).' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin [1955] 2007:255).

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in cages, and now, as I write, virulent racism against supposedly contagion-bearing Asians has become the new normal.

Unlike Benjamin's Angel, however, Afong is able to do more than look silently at the present in horror. Through that strange alchemy of surrogation and presence in performance, Afong not only appears before us but also speaks across time to teach us about the present. Throughout *The Chinese Lady*, Afong delivers a series of "history lectures." She lectures on everything from the history of commodities that led the US to China (tea, opium) and China to the US (gold), to the Liberty Bell, Indian Removal, Manifest Destiny and their founding fictions of naturalized freedoms and property that continue to shore up white nativist claims to America today. It is in this teaching that Afong reveals herself to be as much an expert in the US culture that observes her as the Chinese one she is supposed to unequivocally represent. By the time Afong utters the final lines of the play—"Are you looking at me? Can you see me?"—the answer is already self-evident: "We" may not have been looking at "her," but Afong has been looking, and studying "us" all along.

Over the course of the production's 90-minute runtime, Morita handles Suh's metatheatrical whimsy and dialogue-driven script with a clear directorial vision of her own. By the play's Brechtian end, with the house lights up and Afong's final exhortation to "really look at each other" (2018:43), it is obvious that—although sumptuously beautiful in visuals and poetic language—this is no "culinary" theatre experience. What we are watching is *political* theatre, meant to reveal and confront the xenophobia of our own present conditions through the story of Afong Moy.

Suh is just one of a handful of writers and scholars to have turned to Afong Moy in recent years. In 2019 alone, the story and figure of Afong Moy has appeared in a full-length biography by curator/historian Nancy E. Davis (2019), in professor and cultural critic Anne Anlin Cheng's tract on the object-like racialization of "the Asiatic yellow woman" (2019), and in award-winning poet Sally Wen Mao's collection of poetry, *Oculus* (2019). As the Magic Theatre production of *The Chinese Lady* attests, the present-day lure of Afong Moy rests in her ability to speak to present-day problems as yet unresolved. Ultimately, she prompts us to ask: who looks, who gazes, who sees, who can be seen?

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