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Sarah Pita

Trinity University, sarahpita19@gmail.com

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The Bard and the Myth of Universality: Decentering Shakespeare in Asian American
Appropriations

Sarah Pita

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AT TRINITY UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION WITH
DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

APRIL 2023

Dr. Kathryn Vomero Santos

THESIS ADVISOR

Dr. Betsy Tontiplaphol

DEPARTMENT CHAIR

Jennifer Henderson, AVPAA

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Introduction

This thesis is a case study of two Shakespearean appropriations by Korean American playwrights: *Do it for Umma* by Seayoung Yim and *Peerless* by Jiehae Park. Both are written within the context of Asian American cultures, struggles, and intergenerational strife. Because these are broad categories, and no one play could possibly encapsulate the “Asian American” experience, this introduction will situate Park’s and Yim’s plays within my personal academic trajectory, as well as within the growing field of Shakespeare and race studies.

As I began to explore Shakespeare and race studies, I found what is largely a gap in the literature when it came to Asian American stories and faces on the stage. When I first told my boss, Dan (a lawyer in his late seventies with a passion for opera and art history), that I was studying Asian American Shakespeare appropriations, he wondered incredulously, “Where on Earth do you find those?” He then asked me to recite various passages from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and was surprised to learn that my knowledge ended at “to die, to sleep.” Dan could not understand how I, a student of English literature, did not worship the Bard and his flawless writings.

Now, Dan has probably seen countless *Hamlets* and countless *Macbeths* over the years. I can imagine him mouthing the words to each esteemed soliloquy as it is performed. Yet his response clearly communicated that he could hardly fathom a *Hamlet* tailored to the struggles of

Asian American identity. To him, Shakespeare was perfectly universal as-is. No need for specification. But to me, an Asian American student from a background in which studying the humanities is a luxury unique to my generation, Shakespeare came a lot harder. It felt distant and foreign, and that is partly what attracted me to it at all. To me, studying Shakespeare was not an inspection of my own self, but an exploration of a culture I fought to understand, an establishment to which I aspired to belong without question.

But Dan is not alone in his thinking. I had found myself surrounded by Shakespeare addicts a year earlier, on a guided tour of the Bard's own home in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. They oohed and ahed at the gloves his father had made, at the reconstruction of his marital bed. And I was one of them too, marveling at the wonders of historic preservation. But I was also hit with the realization that Shakespeare was just a man with all the flaws and quirks that come with being human. How could the words "universal," "genius," "legendary," encapsulate the impact of a person who slept in a rather uncomfortable-looking wooden bed on uneven floors? Would he recognize the copper statue of himself in his hometown today?

It was through studying the works of scholars such as Ayanna Thompson and writers such as Toni Morrison that I began to understand the righteous and controversial act of challenging Shakespeare. These thinkers understood Shakespeare as inherently flawed, and not necessarily because his plays were of poor quality, but because their reception as perfect and universal is a dangerous notion. To assume any voice as universal is dangerous. As Toni Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*, "Writers work in a highly and historically racialized society...imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming* (Morrison 24). This thesis is founded on the

notion that readers, too, are perceiving a work from their own racialized lens that is influenced by their own conception of the world around them.

Thus, I am motivated by the understanding that if Western culture can come to idolize a singular writer, transforming him into a concept and a hallmark of literary tradition, then surely we can criticize Shakespeare from that same intellectual platform. As Thompson puts it, “To pass beyond the strangeness of American constructions of Shakespeare and race, we will have to destabilize both race *and* Shakespeare. To destabilize does not mean to destroy, vilify, or denigrate; rather, it means to shift the foundation so that new angles, vantages, and perspectives are created,” (Thompson 8). My thesis aims to illuminate the ways in which Asian American playwrights have challenged Shakespeare by destabilizing his works, taking the contours of his original plays and adapting them to highlight specific attributes common amongst immigrant communities (*Do it for Umma*) and the politicized nature of Asian American social mobility (*Peerless*).

This analysis is based on the existing scholarship surrounding Shakespeare and race studies. Generally, there are three important elements to consider when accounting for this field. First, scholars have interrogated the ways in which Shakespeare’s work was not only reflective of race making processes in early modern Europe, but was also an active participant in that process. As scholars have established, modern conceptions of race and “whiteness” are not natural in society. Rather, these constructs were born through a socioeconomic process in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly in England (Allen 1994; Vaughan and Vaughan 2021). Arthur Little Jr. remarks, “Because Shakespeare is now the most consequential founder and practitioner of what may be called modern, global English, it’s imperative that we at least take account of Shakespeare, if not hold Shakespeare accountable, in the theatrical, historical,

and contemporary milieus of white-world-making. Shakespeare is no mere bystander” (Little, Jr. 273). Shakespeare and race studies acknowledge this relationship between colonial England, the English language, whiteness, and the Bard. Consequently, this thesis is embedded with the understanding that Shakespeare is a cultural marker of how the western world understands whiteness, and using the Bard’s voice to decenter whiteness empowers playwrights and their characters to speak back to white supremacy.

Secondly, scholars discuss how teaching and performing Shakespeare is a process in which race is inherently embedded. In connection with the first element, Shakespeare’s plays, like any work of literature, are subject to interpretation. When audiences, teachers, students, and readers come to Shakespeare with their modern understanding of race, often having interpolated racist ideologies through education and media (such as racial stereotypes), they bring those ideologies to the text at hand. Miles Grier affirms this, stating that “Whatever is in [Shakespeare’s plays] cannot entirely determine whether the plays will be mobilized for racist or anti-racist ends. However, it does seem that the name of Shakespeare and the aura of artistic supremacy that accompanies it are more easily wielded by advocates of white supremacy than they are by anti-racists” (Grier 244). The plays featured in this thesis certainly lean toward anti-racist messages that implore audiences to question, or at least add to, their understanding of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Their very nature as appropriations rather than word-for-word adaptations challenges the idea that these are perfect, universal works as-is. Yet they are also working against a history in which centuries of performers, directors, educators, and scholars have touted the plays as exactly that—perfect and universal, with no need for specification.

Lastly, and perhaps the element most directly related to the work presented here, is that marginalized artists are using Shakespeare as a tool to interrogate against the aforementioned race-making process. By shifting Shakespeare to fit their political, cultural, and artistic needs, both Yim and Park present plays that highlight the unique and systemic struggles of Asian Americans. Each of these elements is distinctive, and they represent different approaches to this expanding area of scholarship, yet they are interwoven with one another. Understanding race as a constructed and inherently human phenomenon allows us to deconstruct it, whether that be by analyzing Shakespeare's role in the process, how he is taught and performed to reinforce this phenomenon, or how he is used to counter the phenomenon.

Despite my exploring of this growing and multi-faceted scholarly field, Dan's original question was right in some ways. It was somewhat difficult to find Asian American Shakespeare appropriations. But eventually I came into contact with the two plays that are at the center of this thesis. Both are written by Korean American playwrights. The first is *Do it for Umma* by Seayoung Yim, and the second is *Peerless* by Jiehae Park. Fittingly, they are appropriations of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, respectively. My analysis of both plays is heavily rooted in the existing scholarship in Shakespeare and race studies aforementioned.

However, as much as my thesis is grounded in Shakespeare and race studies, my research revealed a gap in the existing literature in regards to the role that Asian Americans have played in this developing history, suggesting that this scholarship is, at a minimum, not as robust as it could be. Though scholars such as Thompson have briefly explored this relationship, there is largely a need for anti-racist case studies that converge the lenses of both Shakespeare studies and Asian American studies. Much of the established theory is still applicable, but it is also

critical to this analysis to understand the specific and multifaceted relationship that exists between Asian American identity and Western culture and performance.

There are several aspects of Asian American history, particularly as it relates to literature and theater, that appear in *Peerless* and *Do it for Umma* or are otherwise relevant to this analysis. First is the community's histories of immigration, and how these histories have surfaced in the cultural sphere as a critical theme. Generally, Asian American literature has frequently revisited the question of Asian American identity in regards to the fact that many Asian Americans are affected by a diasporic sense of disconnected identity, in addition to the struggles of assimilating into a mainstream American culture that is primarily defined by whiteness. Books like Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (and its film adaptation), *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chang Rae-Lee's *Native Speaker*; among many others, have garnered praise for their exploration of this theme and for illuminating how individuals from first- and second-generation American families are deeply affected by a sense of displacement and struggle to feel grounded in either the "Asian" or the "American" aspects of their cultural identity. In recent years, the film world appears to be catching up to this prominence, with breakout films like *Minari* (2020), Disney's *Turning Red* (2022), and this year's Best Picture Winner at the Academy Awards, A24's *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2021), similarly interrogating the effect of social and economic struggles on Asian American families.

Despite this shared history, the second common theme is, perhaps paradoxically, the lack of centralized identity among the Asian American community. Even the term Asian American itself is surrounded by a contentious dialogue, as identifying oneself with the term is inherently a racializing act. How do we account for cultural differences between the descendants of immigrants from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and those who immigrated within

their own lifetime or are the direct offspring of such immigrants? Surely these are two vastly different groups of people who may share some experience, such as discrimination based on their appearances, but differ in other identity-related aspects such as economic status or their relationship with the English language. Moreover, the term Asian American has historically neglected to include those of South Asian descent.

The works in this thesis focus on characters who are immigrants or the children of immigrants from East Asia. They are also both written by Korean American playwrights, and while the central characters of *Peerless* are undoubtedly of East Asian descent yet are not specified in their ethnicity, *Do it for Umma* is specifically tied to Korean American culture. Despite certain prevailing themes, Asian American literature can also be paradoxically categorized by the fact that no singular work could possibly account for each individual, country of origin, or regional group and the themes and aspects of identity that are tied to those specific groupings. The same challenge is applicable to this thesis, which aims to illuminate the commonalities and diversity within the category of Asian American Shakespeare appropriations, yet welcomes the idea of a growing expanse of literature wherein a plethora of contributors can continue to add analyses and scholarship to further explore this genre.

That being said, the third, widespread theme that appears in Asian American cultural production, including the plays in this thesis, is that of the so-called model minority myth. According to Samuel Museus and Peter Kiang, the model minority myth is based on five key misconceptions. First is the notion that all Asian Americans share a similar experience. Second, many discount Asian Americans as being minorities at all, seeing them instead as sharing in the privileges of whiteness. Third is the misconception that “Asian Americans do not encounter major challenges because of their race.” Then there is the notion that “Asian Americans do not

seek or require resources and support.” Lastly is the misconception that the high percentage of Asian American college graduates equates in overall Asian American success (Museus and Kang 7-11). The model minority myth and its popularization thus incorrectly participates in the erasure of Asian American struggles and the racism faced by this marginalized group. Literature like that of Yim and Park counters the model minority myth, as well as various stereotypes that are present in media and culture that target Asian Americans and encourage philosophical divides within that community.

Because three themes have permeated Asian American presence in theater, performance, and literature, it is no surprise that we find them in Asian American engagements with Shakespeare too. This presence is largely understudied, but is well worth noting as the cultural context for this thesis. There are two main areas worth exploring when it comes to the dialogue between Asian Americans and Shakespeare’s legacy: issues of casting and representation, and the repeating patterns within Asian American Shakespeare adaptations.

On the topic of casting, one interesting phenomenon surfaces in which Asian women are cast in *Hamlet* in the role of Ophelia. In 1930, the English writer Evalyn Waugh even called for Anna May Wong, a famous Chinese American actress, to play Ophelia, stating, “Why not a Chinese Ophelia? It seems to me that Miss Wong has exactly those attributes which one most requires of Shakespearean heroines.” He went on to add that he “cannot see her as a Lady Macbeth, but she seems to me perfectly suited for the role of Juliet or any of the heroines of the comedies” (*The Daily Mail*). Alexa Huang writes that “There has always been a perceived affinity between Ophelia and East Asian women,” (Huang 79). This affinity, as well as Waugh’s comments, are founded in the stereotypical image of a demure and indecisive Asian woman.

Now, nearly a century after Waugh's comments, Western theater is engaged in a dialogue surrounding "colorblind casting," in which actors are cast in roles theoretically regardless of their race or the race of the character. The downfall of this approach is that characters like Ophelia are still prone to the conscious or subconscious classifications of race. Audiences are not immune to the internalized belief of racial stereotypes, and nor are casting directors. Margo Hendricks comments on how something as seemingly small as gesture can influence audiences by explaining that "the physicality of race must be made visible if race is to have cultural and ideological weight" (Hendricks 201). As a result, the attempt to avoid discussions of race creates a lack of proactive awareness as to how audiences interpret the performance based on the race of actors and characters.

However, colorblind casting is seen by some as a positive effort to encourage the casting of people of color in more prominent roles. This is worth acknowledging. Particularly for Asian American actors, who have historically lacked representation on stage and on screen, colorblind casting can be perceived as a means through which to enter the world of Shakespeare performance as there is a lack of Asian characters in Shakespeare's work. Shakespeare's work, as part of the aforementioned race making process, reinforces a black and white racial binary that is threatened by Asian American presence. This thesis favors approaches like those of Yim and Park, who subvert this binary and converge Shakespeare and Asian American identity through the reinvention of texts rather than through relatively small counters to racism in performance alone.

Additionally, such adaptations have resulted in a pattern that illustrates how Shakespeare is used to revisit the common themes of Asian American previously mentioned. In my search for Asian and Asian American Shakespeare appropriations, I found myself repeatedly stumbling

across performances of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, more-so than any of the Bard's other works. There was even a somewhat common occurrence of *Macbeths* adapted and appropriated to tell the stories of Japanese Shoguns. Alexa Huang writes of one such instance in *Weyward Macbeth*, asserting that "the artistic and critical focus of *Shogun Macbeth* has thus far rested upon the production's capacity to test Shakespeare's universality and liberate *Macbeth* from variously defined traditionalist interpretations" (Huang 124). Both of these texts are not only among Shakespeare's most celebrated works, but they are also seen as his most universal. In creating culturally specific renditions, Asian American playwrights utilize the plays' fame and influence to epitomize the fact that even the most fundamental works of English literature can be brought into question.

In addition to challenging Shakespeare's universality by adapting his most traditional texts, Park and Yim share two similarities in their approaches to adapting Shakespeare, and both of these factors stem from similarities in the original texts. First, both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are plays regarding Western European royal powers. Their characters are lords, kings and queens, vying for control of their nations. This is also a contributing element of the second factor: both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are some of Shakespeare's most hyper-masculine texts. Thus, it is particularly poignant that Park and Yim invert those original aspects and create plays that appeal to uniquely American and class-based themes as well as feminine familial relationships. For Yim, this is done through a portrayal of a mother-daughter relationship while Park's central characters are twin sisters.

Both playwrights take their respective source texts not only as templates for their plays, but as a basis from which to create something new and original. In analyzing these plays

side-by-side we can understand some critical patterns emerge between the texts, pointing to the larger understanding of answering two critical questions:

- 1) How do Asian American playwrights translate Shakespeare to not only accommodate but accentuate uniquely Asian American stories and characteristics?
- 2) What elements of Shakespeare's texts make them a suitable platform to advance conversations surrounding the aforementioned issues?

By analyzing both of these texts in light of these questions, we can understand the ways that two Asian American playwrights have explored specificity, utilizing their works by expressing their culture and the political issues that concern them. This specificity, as opposed to an essentialist approach, is what Yim and Park use to pointedly target myths and misconceptions about race, Asian Americans, and Shakespeare's universality.

Chapter 1

Challenging *Hamlet's* Universality in Seayoung Yim's *Do it for Umma*

Seayoung Yim's debut play, *Do it for Umma*, reframes and retells Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through the lens of a Korean American mother-daughter relationship. Described in its promotional material as “an absurd tragicomedy about a young woman trying to to gain her dead mother's approval and protect her family's honor in the strangest of circumstances,” (Porkalob) Yim's play serves as an innovative example of how Asian American authors appropriate Shakespeare to create a platform to discuss diasporic narratives. Rather than performing loyalty to Shakespeare's text itself, Yim foregrounds women impacted by American imperialism and immigration to a culture that supplants cultural values. The Kingdom of Denmark is exchanged for Umma's (엄마 - mother) strip-mall convenience store, and the crown prince is Hannah, who is described in the character list as “jaded and vulnerable, trying to get her shit together.” As Esther Yun writes in her review of its first performance, “the dynamics between each character — mother and daughter, mother and son, sister and brother, mother and neighbor — were spot-on and placed perfectly on the hierarchy of Korean culture” (Yun 2016).

By supplanting Shakespeare's text with a uniquely Korean American story, Yim implicitly draws a sharp critique of American identity and the conflicts that result from the pressures of assimilation for many Asian American families. This chapter will examine how *Do*

it for Umma explores the challenges faced by a first-generation family by highlighting cultural and generational differences while critiquing America's imperial history and consumerism. Yim does so first by altering critical elements of the source text and secondly by highlighting cultural hallmarks such as food and family dynamics. By specifying the unique qualities of Korean American culture and struggle, *Do it for Umma* contributes to the Shakespeare and race conversation by offering one avenue through which Asian American literature can lean into its cultural richness to contrast claims of Shakespearean universality.

With *Hamlet* serving as a template for the revenge story at the heart of *Do it for Umma*, Yim makes a few critical alterations to tailor her play's narrative in a way that is culturally specific and thus suitable for its purpose of critiquing Shakespeare and the prevalence of American whiteness in claims to universality. Yim modifies various aspects of *Hamlet*'s story, including changes to the genders of the play's central characters. *Do it for Umma* features Hannah, a daughter seeking revenge for a mother who was murdered by Mrs. Yi, the Korean woman who seeks to expand her dry cleaning business next door by taking over Umma's store, in the place of Prince Hamlet avenging his father King Hamlet who was murdered and usurped by his brother Claudius. The mother-daughter dynamic is critical to the play as Hannah grapples with the responsibilities that fall to her as a result of her mother's gendered perspective, offering a complex, caring yet strained relationship.

The second major change is to the community in which this play is situated—a Korean community that is displaced in America outside of its original setting, and in a much less privileged status than *Hamlet*'s royal family and subject matter. Within these changes lie other small alterations that highlight Yim's intention to create a culturally specific take on Shakespeare's play. Each change to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* offers a microcosm of Korean

American identity and culture, challenging viewers to understand the roles of generational trauma and economic status in the characters' actions.

For instance, Hannah is tasked with embracing the challenges specific to the daughter of a Korean American immigrant. As Yim explained in an interview with *The Seattle Globalist*, “the norm in Korea is different from what you experience in America. As a child, you still have some degree of power because you know the language of the mainstream culture, while your parents don't” (Yim 2016). Hannah and her brother Jason are rooted in this central conflict. Even as American children, they are still tasked with straddling a cultural divide much larger than themselves. The attempts to please their mother while simultaneously acting as members of their American society take an emotional toll on both siblings and cause tension in their relationship with one another.

For Hannah, this struggle manifests itself in her relationship with her mother and more specifically, in her felt obligation to please her mother even after her death. As the play's title suggests, Hannah's main task in the play is to carry out an act of vengeance for her mother—to do it for Umma. Umma expresses her love by spending her life laboring in the family-owned convenience store, pouring hope into the futures of her children. Yet this care is paradoxically transactional, leaving Hannah's end of the bargain in the hypothetical accomplishment of this seemingly far-fetched “American Dream” ideal unfulfilled. Exasperated by her lack of release from this obligation of filial piety even after Umma's death, she asks her mother's ghost, “do you still need me to fulfill your hopes and dreams?” (248). Umma replies, “no rest until you give me BOKE SOO” (248). Yim interestingly defers to the Korean expression of revenge here to define Hannah's central conflict of the play—avenging her mother as her final act of daughterly love. With this goal, Yim concretizes the play's focal point of featuring a second-generation daughter

set on pleasing her first-generation mother one last time. This is staunchly different from Hamlet's revenge plot, which is rooted in his royalty and unmarred by cultural separation.

Hannah's burden is further compounded by her role as a woman. At various points throughout the play, Yim draws specific attention to how Hannah and Jason are treated differently by Umma, and she dramatizes the impact that the gendered dynamic has on their reactions to Umma's death. In the first appearance of Umma's ghost to Hannah, when she is asked to avenge her mother, Hannah protests and comically questions why this burden falls to her rather than her older brother:

Ask Jason for help! I bet when you visit his 30-something-year-old ass, you'll be offering to cook him ghost food. But me? You come here and ask me to commit murder and clean up shit! Is it cuz I'm a girl? Why do I always have to wipe everyone ELSE'S ass? What about me? (248)

In a moment of exasperation, Hannah laments her role as a daughter and points out this inequality to her mother. She expresses frustration that additional burdens fall to her without benefit specifically because of her gender, whereas her brother is largely lauded for minimal effort. However, that lack of praise is also what fuels Hannah to please her mother through this quest for revenge, fulfilling her duty and epitomizing the ideal set out by Umma for Hannah to be a "good daughter." This theme of gendered familial obligation remains prevalent throughout the play, and Hannah has another, more fruitful conversation with Umma regarding their family dynamic in the second act. Again, Hannah asks, "Why were you always coddling [Jason] but not me?" to which Umma responds,

I don't know. Custom. You son has to be treated like king in house. Custom. Long time ago, family have to be good to son because they care parents when

old, like pension plan. Daughter, get married to other family and don't make no money. Oh, you know, Jason take care of Umma with money. Pay many bill.

He is good son but a little helpless because he has no common sense. (265)

With the repetition of the word "custom," Umma admittedly chalks up her varying treatment of her children to a cultural tradition. In this moment, Umma faces the fact that her explanation is more out of expectation and habit than any true logical reasoning. She gives a reasoning that seems to no longer be relevant to a modern Asian American family. Her ideology is one reminiscent of her home culture, likely repeating the parenting approach she received in her upbringing.

When Hannah continues to press her mother, Umma finally outlines the ways that their mother-daughter relationship has positively impacted her, despite how difficult it is for her to verbally express this emotional sentiment. She then continues to plead to Hannah:

Umma rely on you with f-feelings. You listen with Umma, you help Umma with store. If you don't come help me, I don't pee or eat for 12 hours. Umma don't say but Umma is grateful to have strong daughter like you. Understand, stupid?... Hannah-yah. Listen to me. Please. If you do not do this, I will never rest. I will toil porever in this hell because my Han will be stuck in my chest.

Here. Here. Here. Please, please I beg you. KILL HER FOR ME (266).

This conversation's significance to the play's drawing of a Korean American experience is two-fold. First, it ties Hannah to a gendered experience rooted in traditional culture. Yim highlights how generational gaps are widened in an immigrant family with cultural barriers adding to the disconnection caused by age. This is evident in how Yim shapes Umma and Hannah's relationship by emphasizing how it is strained by a misogynist custom. Umma carries

the familial traditions she was raised with, and she is stuck with an outdated mentality that Hannah grew up separately from for both generational and cultural reasons. This mars their relationship, creating a wound they are only able to heal through the events of this play, after Umma is already dead. Secondly, the revenge plot from *Hamlet* is adapted in such a way that brings to life how generational trauma is passed down from immigrant parents to their American-born children. Hannah is required to fulfill her mother's wishes in order to allow her to rest. Similar to Hamlet, Hannah acts on behalf of a slayed parent and has a personal crisis of identity. But unlike Hamlet, her act of revenge is tied to generational suffering and cultural disconnection rather than to royal jockeying for power.

One of the reference points of that culture mentioned in *Do it for Umma* is Yim's reference to Korea's subjugation to Japanese imperialism from 1910 to 1945, and the Korean War (in which the United States played a significant role as part of its Cold War-era foreign policy) following the occupation, resulting in a military coup in 1961. This history plays a twofold role in *Do it for Umma*. First, Umma was notably raised in Korea during the war, and the toll this takes on her is influential in her perspective. She frequently references an impoverished youth, passing stories of this traumatic upbringing to her children. Secondly, Japan's political and social occupation of Korea has been linked to a corresponding exploitative capitalist occupation in which Korean farmers were subjected to a serf-like servitude (Haggard 877). *Do it for Umma* critiques American capitalism, and though humorous in its criticism, frequently jests at American work culture and materialism.

The other motif of Korean culture is a social phenomenon that emerged as a result of Korean suffering under the occupation and through the war. The Korean word, "han," for which there is no direct English translation, emerges as a major theme in Yim's play. It can most clearly

be described as a deeply felt sorrow. It also carries a particular weight for women in Korean history and society. Korean women have struggled under the patriarchal social system and have survived by embracing han (suffering). Indigenous Korean women suffer with han, yet at the same time they survive because of han” (Lee 29).

However, the sociohistorical literature surrounding the term’s use in modern day Korean literature and media (and diasporic Korean literature in America and Japan) reveals several interpretations of han. Hye Lim Nam writes:

The understanding, perception, and application of han have been varied and often contradictory. Some of the main tensions nested within the emotion concept based on relevant literature include the following: Han is an emotion afflicting the socially disadvantaged—especially women and the working classes—while claiming applicability to the whole of Korean society. Han cannot be fully comprehended by non-Koreans and it cannot be translated accurately, although other people with a history of foreign aggression may feel han and not recognize it as such, making it both universal and unique. Han is both sorrow and hope. It is both negative and positive. (Nam 58)

Just as han can be widely felt but is specifically identified within the context of Korea’s history of invasion and imperial rule under Japan, *Do it for Umma* offers a specific narrative that echoes in the stories of many first-generation families.

Han is prevalent in the play in several ways. First is in Hannah’s name, a mirror-image palindrome of sorts for the English spelling of han. This denotes Hannah as a human representation of han, deeply impacted by her relationship with her mother who feels the hope and sorrow toward her displacement in America and who feels the direct effect of economic

subjugation and oppression as the result of war. Second is throughout the plot of the story. The glossary of the text defines han as “unresolved grief or rage,” which undeniably aligns with Umma’s main burden throughout the story. Hannah’s mission, given to her by Umma, is to resolve this burden and release her mother of that han feeling through revenge, boke soo. Lastly, the relationship between boke soo and han is then related through the text. Umma pleads with Hannah to follow through with the revenge and to kill Mrs. Yi, telling Hannah, “If you do not do this, I will never rest. I will toil forever in this in hell because my Han will be stuck in my chest. Please, please I beg you. KILL HER FOR ME” (266). Again, han is Umma’s touchpoint for communicating her feelings to Hannah. She states that without resolution, han will be “stuck in her chest.” Umma’s dissatisfaction with her life, and with her ultimate demise, is manifested through her connection with Korea. She feels han so strongly that only boke soo could bring her peace, and that boke soo can only be achieved through her daughter’s fulfillment of her wish. Just as han is seen as a generational burden of Korea, Umma’s unresolved anger toward Mrs. Yi is passed down to Hannah in order to bring peace to her mother’s spirit. Through the Korean notion of han, Yim illustrates how culture is passed down in an immigrant family, but also how the trauma of the parent’s country lingers in the new one.

In addition to featuring a protagonist with culturally specific struggles and identity, Yim’s play strays from the original text with the addition of a chorus that is not present in *Hamlet*, though it certainly is associated with Shakespearean drama and its Greek antecedents. This chorus consists of “ajummas,” a term used to refer to older Korean women or aunties who tend to be immersed in their culture and carry a motherly relationship with members of the community. It is a distinctly Korean concept, echoed in other Asian cultures, and it is recreated in Asian American community pockets of the United States. The use of ajummas for the chorus

creates an air of a Korea that is displaced in a consumerist America, and they are used throughout the play to offer definitions and provide brief glimpses into Korean culture and language that give context at various points of the play.

The creation of this displaced community immediately establishes the setting and tone for Yim's play. Umma's world is one of capitalism, but it is experienced and explained through the lens of several Korean American, female, immigrant voices. As the lights come up at the start of the play, they begin a list of "things you may buy in a Korean-owned convenience store" that includes "patriotic items, such as American eagle figurines," "cigarettes and chewing tobacco," "packs of herbal supplements for penis," and concludes with "lotto and scratch tickets. MAYBE YOU WON!" before an ominous sound is heard (244). This opening draws a critique of American consumerism, pointing to material objects produced in the name of patriotism as well as the vices, embarrassments, and hopes that all fall into and are commodified in this strip-mall convenience store. Umma's territory is a catch-all of various traits of American culture, from the American eagle figurines to the penis supplements, and particularly the lotto tickets that act as a symbol for hope and the struggle of upward mobility.

Whereas Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a story of Danish royalty and European war, "this was the kingdom of Umma, owner of this convenience store" as the chorus describes (245). This is one of the more direct references to the original play in Yim's appropriation. Yim places emphasis on trading Denmark for the US, and the US is defined by this market of goods and the seemingly menial things that Umma makes her living on. The combination of the chorus with this establishment of setting creates an interesting vision of America—one that strikingly points out the incongruity of American consumerism. The listing of items takes on a level of absurdity, and Umma is at the heart of ruling over—and selling—this absurdity.

Yim continues to play with absurdity to portray her characters. One of the ways this is done is through the expression of food and candy throughout the play. Of course, Umma sells food, snacks, and candy at the convenience store. The latter is of particular interest to the contrast between Mrs. Yi and Umma, drawing a portrait of two different approaches to assimilation and American consumerism. Mrs. Yi, who takes on a role akin to Claudius from the source text and kills Umma and has an affair with her son Jason, prefers the name “Candy” that is associated with her positive inclination toward adapting American culture. Umma has a rather complex relationship with candy that involves a more negative connotation.

Both Mrs. Yi’s chosen American name and her age are used to communicate her stark contrast from Umma, as well as project her own insecurities about status and maturity. Mrs. Yi, who is described as being ten years younger than Umma, is conscious of her age which comes to the forefront in her relationship with Jason. Mrs. Yi makes it clear that the balancing game of assimilation and cultural maintenance is an internal struggle for her. She expresses discomfort at being referred to as an ajumma, yelling at Jason when he tries to call her this, “AJUMMA is such an ugly, old word. It puts distance between us. It puts years and years between us” (262). The chorus also chimes in here with their own descriptions of what being an ajumma entails, including its typically cringey nature, “one who is pushy and aggressive. One who often wears mismatched prints... And sports a short poufy perm for volume” (262).

Mrs. Yi explicitly states that she wants to be seen as young, and not an old lady. As much as this implies Mrs. Yi’s desire to cling to youth, it is also a question of her need to “assimilate.” Ajummas are a uniquely Korean community, and Mrs. Yi seems to fit this mold of an older Korean woman, but is hesitant to accept the label. She also uses this as a means to put distance between her and Umma. When Hannah walks in on Mrs. Yi and her brother, she expresses

surprise by exclaiming, “ew! Ew! How could you? She’s like Umma’s age.” Mrs. Yi rebels against this by saying, “No. I am at least 10 years younger than your Umma” (263). Here, she aims to put distance between her older sister figure.

This generational gap is particularly interesting in her relationship with Jason, considering the fact that he is much younger, as well as the fact that he was born in America and is more fully aligned with this Korean American identity. She asks Jason to call her Candy instead, telling him, “I’ve gotten so much done on my face. Flew three times to Korea. That’s why my face is smooth as a baby’s ass. Not like other women my age that look like baloney is peeling off their faces. So anyway, don’t spoil my good feelings. Stop calling me AJUMMA and call me Candy” (284). When Jason questions this, she declares, “This is my American name...It’s a cute name. Cute, like me” (262). Mrs. Yi expresses a performed desire to be somewhat artificial, referencing her plastic surgery that would give her a young but almost plastic-like appearance. Both candy and the surgery align with an American identity of youth and this juvenile yet contrived nature.

This new moniker is also reminiscent of an earlier passage in which Umma comments on the particularly American association with candy and gluttony that acts as a sharp contrast with Umma’s impoverished adolescence. She recounts this story from her childhood during the US occupation of Korea:

My family, we took turn eating, different days. One time, American G.I. feel sorry for me and gave me candy bar... I put it in mouth, and it was most delicious thing I taste. I was so selpish, didn’t share it with nobody. But I eat dis, and all my pain go away. I thought: ‘This how America tastes, everyday?’ But you know, you

have too much just one thing - it all tastes like shit. Now I own all kind of American candy! Can you believe! (245)

Here, candy's other side, through Umma's eyes, is representative of an indulgent, packaged, and consumerist culture that Umma reluctantly participates in by selling candy in her store. It is also intertwined with an imperial and military history, as demonstrated by Umma's memory from the Korean War with the American soldier. In this way, candy was symbolic of all America to Umma. It was a saving grace from hunger and offered a childlike joy amidst otherwise traumatic times. At the same time, it was a reward of pity from a US soldier, and it draws attention to the contrast between the wealth of America even in its wars abroad.

It is also interesting that Umma explicitly mentions that she did not share her candy with anyone. This uniquely American treat also comes with a level of greed for Umma, and the trauma that surrounds it manifests in her role as a parent to Hannah. One source of the strain on Hannah and Umma's relationship is Hannah's weight and Umma's comments. Hannah describes this to her girlfriend Drea: "I think she was just traumatized from being starved as a kid. She'd always make more than one family could eat— then watch me eat it with such intensity, take it away from me mid-bite and call me fat, like a sacred ritual, repeated over the decades" (249).

This treatment of candy, and its distinction as an American entity, is directly contrasted throughout the play with Korean food and comes to a crux, fittingly, with the play's ending. Perhaps most significant is the final scene of the play, where Jason attempts to appease Hannah by offering her tofu given to him by Mrs. Yi. The chorus again chimes in to provide context into the historical significance of tofu:

Feeding tofu is correlated with Japanese colonization of Korea when Korean prisoners were starved terribly. Family members wanted to give ex-prisoners

something nutritious, like tofu, as soon as they got out... The color of tofu—white—represents purity... In her essay titled Tofu (Doo boo), famed novelist Park Wan-Seo wrote that eating tofu represents a transformation. As tofu is the liberated spirit of beans, one also wishes one's criminal spirit is likewise. (275)

In this instance, food is a tie-in to a different aspect of Korea's colonized history. It is also worth noting that Mrs. Yi, as the source of the tofu dish, is associated with that colonial history. Korean tofu represents the ability of Korean culture to survive cultural threats—it is a means of resistance against Japanese imperialism and was literally a way to rejuvenate soldiers who fought for Korean independence. Its ties to purity similarly portray a country that remains untainted by its struggles.

The third layer of symbolism, that of transformation, is resisted by Hannah, who refuses to eat the tofu. She responds, "I don't want to be transformed. I'm making my own fucking justice" (275). Unlike Jason, who has a romantic relationship and is allied with Mrs. Yi's assimilating, Americanized philosophy, Hannah acts on her mother's behalf. She is resistant to the idea of passive transformation, and establishes her resistance with the rejection of the tofu and embraces her autonomy in the situation. Hannah, who largely carries with her the obligation of maintaining her mother's Korean identity, reclaims control and enacts her own justice in her mother's name.

In contrast, Jason, frustrated by Hannah's resistance, eats the plate of tofu. His indulgence leads to his death, as Mrs. Yi had poisoned the food with the intention of murdering Hannah, instead killing her own lover, much as Claudius inadvertently kills Gertrude with the poisoned cup of wine intended for Hamlet in Shakespeare's play. Ironically, Hannah's refusal to accept a

passive transformation that is embedded in the traditional dish and her more radical inclination towards concrete, violent revenge is what saves her.

The final critique of the play, fittingly, comes with its dramatically violent ending and a last reference to cuisine's power to signpost cultural difference. After a physical confrontation between Hannah and Mrs. Yi, wherein Hannah successfully avenges her mother and kills Mrs. Yi, the entire strip mall "bursts into flames" and "everyone dies" (277). In the aftermath, Umma delivers a final monologue that drives home the larger critique of the play with a last reference to cuisine's power to signpost cultural difference. Her speech encapsulates this symbolic rupture where the hub of conflict, assimilation, and the capitalist setting of the bulk of the play are all destroyed:

All dis, gone. Because of you know, Han. No English word is same. Is like, suppering, angry, sad peeling STUCK in your ma-uhm. No way out. When too much my han, buried in da mall make everything blow up, go BOOM. Burn everything. Anyway. So bitchee Mrs. Yi was right: Whole Poods coming in here. And you know, this spot where store burn? Whole Poods put in cold case and they sell bullshit organic kimchee in bullshit recycled jar. You know how muchee they sell dis? \$25! Can you believe this? Before I was so scared white people customers get angry if they smell my kimchee in my store so I wrap in two plastic bags, very very tight. Like dis. Now berry popular. Before, people ask me "Why is Korean food so spicy?" I say, because we know pain. Then they ask, "Why is Korean food so salty?" Because da salt preserve our pain. We all die, but you know, now we together again. (277)

With this, the play concludes. This dramatic ending forms a summation of the challenges faced by a Korean American family in two ways that are each consistent with the critique that runs throughout the play. Again, food points to American consumerism and the struggles of assimilation. Umma points out how kimchi, a traditional Korean dish, has been overtaken by an American commercial grocery empire such as Whole Foods, and marketed at a higher price and a lower quality. She criticizes the fabricated nature and American capitalism's appropriation of that food in contrast with her authentic version. This mirrors the overarching theme of assimilation that both she and Hannah face. Just as the candy represented a uniquely American and materially packaged form of capitalism, the Whole Foods kimchi represents the appropriation of Korean culture. Additionally, she again reinforces the link between Korean food and han, noting that spice is an attribute of a cuisine belonging to a people who have endured suffering. It is interesting that what triggers Umma to mention her qualms with the kimchi is her original discussion of han. She clearly links her own internal sense of frustration with the material goods that surround her in her life, and in the convenience store.

Through food and the reference to American products such as candy, the text notably associates that which is American with consumerism and materialistic sensibilities. As shown through Umma's relationship with candy and her dominion over the convenience store, which is at the crux of the play's consumeristic elements, this perspective is dominantly expressed through Umma's worldview. Furthermore, Umma's perspective is aligned with Korean post-war attitudes toward America. Hanmee Na Kim enumerates the various ways American culture was influential in the post-war period.

Material goods, aesthetics, cultural practices, institutions, and technological developments as well as values of optimism, pragmatism, and efficiency that were

seen as being American circulated and rose in popularity simultaneously around the globe within the context of the post-World War I global rise of the United States...Korea was no exception to this trend. In this setting, ‘America’ emerged as both a physical and imagined site onto which Koreans inscribed many meanings, and it came to occupy a dominant presence in the Korean press. (Kim 649)

This development in the Korean perception of America is critical to understanding Umma’s perspective. She experiences a sentiment of admiration that remains from her youth, when “America” was perceived as a rising superpower in her economically struggling nation. At the same time, she now feels a distaste for what she sees as a more disappointing reality as a resident of the United States.

Moreover, by interpolating this global view of America, the play dons an inherently multicultural perspective. This perspective displaces the audience from a solely American understanding of events. Rather, the audience comes to view Umma’s world through her lens, a lens that originates from outside of America in order to critique the dominance of American culture. Moreover, the convenience store is a large source of tension between Hannah and Umma. In a breakthrough moment between the mother-daughter pair, they finally communicate their thoughtfulness toward one another, revolving around the convenience store.

HANNAH: I wanted to get so far away from you and this shitty place [the convenience store]. But I stayed. You know why? I was fucking worried about you being alone.

UMMA: Yeah, I know this. Umma rely on you with f-feelings. You listen with Umma, you help Umma with store. If you don’t come help me, I don’t pee or eat

for 12 hours. Umma don't say but Umma is grateful to have strong daughter like you. (266)

In this moment, Umma and Hannah connect and begin to see each other's perspective. The convenience store transitions from being a conduit for American consumerism, to a setting in which cross-cultural bonding can occur between the play's protagonists. This setting is thus emblematic of the Korean American identity that Hannah grapples with, an identity in which she struggles to understand that she is not Korean, yet not solely American either. In the same vein, the Korean-owned strip mall store is a locale that could only exist in an American concept. Through this setting and its description in the stage directions and words of the chorus, Yim offers a perspective that bridges a diasporic divide.

The bringing together of what could be mistaken as solely American or solely Korean is thus critical to the play. *Do it for Umma* challenges simplistic binaries, inviting complexity and ambiguity into each symbol, motif, and character. With this poignant and innovative appropriation of *Hamlet*, Seayoung Yim points out cultural differences without necessarily condemning an unbridgeable cultural divide. Instead, she lays out this gap to accentuate the difficulties faced by Hannah and her family in having to straddle those lines, marking the idiosyncrasies of both American and Korean life. *Do it for Umma*, in language and content, weaves Korean cultural resistances throughout while as a whole establishing itself as a work indicative of a uniquely Korean American experience itself. In doing so, it rejects the compartmentalization of identity, offering a blended perspective of that which is uniquely diasporic, grounding its audience in a specific, rather than universal, not-so Shakespearean world.

Chapter 2

Allegorizing the Model Minority in Jiehae Park's *Peerless*

Jiehae Park's *Peerless* is another dark yet comical Asian American Shakespeare appropriation that is rich in social commentary. The play, originally written for the Yale Repertory Theater in 2015, provides a fresh look at *Macbeth*, swapping the play's central couple for two Asian American twin sisters, M and L. M stands in for Shakespeare's Lord Macbeth while L acts as a Lady Macbeth character, spurring on M's ambition. Park's play follows the twins in their violent efforts to get into The College after D, a boy at their school with a partially Indigenous heritage who serves as the King Duncan figure, is given what they believe to be their spot at the elite university. The play concludes eerily and with their plan mostly coming to fruition after they murder D, with L attending The College and introducing herself as her sister, M, who dies in the aftermath of their bloodless deed.

Peerless takes after a tradition of dark comedies revolving around teenagers and their lives as high school students. Park has explained that she was influenced by films such as *Mean Girls* and *Heathers* (Putnam). This stylistic choice, like Yim's inclusion of Korean culture, is one of the ways Park opts for a more culturally specific and niche approach to Shakespeare's text that grounds the play in the contemporary moment. It is also worth noting that its humor, as well as its energetic nature, is often derived from its stylistic rhythm. Park seems to respond to the poetic

language that is characteristic of Shakespeare's dramatic style with near-lyrical, short, quippy lines that bounce back and forth between characters. This trait of her play helps to invoke an edgy, modern sensibility in addition to its comical nature. *Peerless* develops the audience's sense that the twins are set in a fast-paced environment, but one that is somewhat lacking in depth. The stylistic choice is thus compatible with Park's ultimate critique of the elitist, treacherous extremes of overt ambition in a corrupted system.

Despite the fast-paced and quippy style of Park's play, the critique it delivers is nuanced. *Peerless* is a satire that is interested in critiquing two separate but related issues. First is the college admissions system itself. Of course, in critiquing college admissions Park is also in conversation with the larger issue of an elitist education system and American classism, similarly to *Do it for Umma*. Secondly, *Peerless* adds an overarching layer that also satirizes racial discourse and points to the role that ignorance often plays when discussing affirmative action, as well as race and political correctness more generally. This, at times, includes critiquing commonly held misconceptions within the Asian American community as well. Furthermore, this two-pronged critique is executed through hyperbole. In essence, *Peerless* satirizes the college system by pushing it to a humorously extreme state, and then observing what unfolds when its characters are consequently pushed to extremes in reaction to the system in which they are confined.

This approach is evident in one of the most fundamental aspects of the play: its protagonists. As we will see in what follows, M and L play into common stereotypes of overambitious, booksmart but oblivious young Asian American students. They represent those stereotypes to such a comical extreme that it leaves them willing to commit murder in the name of a college acceptance letter. While *Do it for Umma's* critique thrives in its cultural specificity,

Peerless challenges the audience to imagine what reality would look like if silhouettes and stereotypes were truthful. The caricature-like nature of their characters is another way in which Park critiques those stereotypes, pointing out their ridiculousness.

Park employs a similar hyperbolic effect by situating the plot of the play within particular educational and political contexts. Just as *Do it for Umma* takes the distinctively American motif of the strip mall to critique American capitalism, *Peerless* makes the American college admissions system its central subject and a high school its primary setting to critique political conversations about college admissions. While Park herself is Korean American, the specific ethnicity of the twins is left intentionally ambiguous, presumably to reflect the experiences of many Asian Americans and to critique the presumed interchangeability in the predominant cultural imagination. By resituating Shakespeare's famous play about ambition in such contexts, Park creates a satiric hyperbole of the politics of college admissions, especially when considering the racial and legal controversies that have emerged in recent years.

To put the text into context, the play debuted in 2015—a mere five months after the US Supreme Court decided it would once again hear *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2016). This controversial and broadly discussed case involved a white student named Abigail Fisher who sued the University of Texas, claiming that she had been unjustly denied admission on the basis of her whiteness in favor of students of color. The Court ultimately decided against the student in 2016 (Peralta), but it is important to note that *Peerless* is directly in conversation with this controversy wherein affirmative action became politicized in the media and viewed by many as an unfair disadvantage for white students. M and L seem to be victims to that very mindset, believing that they have been slighted on account of another student's marginalized status, foreshadowing the more current *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* case where Asian

Americans have become the subject of a similar controversy led by the same attorney (Liptak and Hartocollis). The College in Park's play hyperbolizes the American higher education admissions system, seemingly having just one "affirmative action spot" that the twins hope to claim in consecutive years starting with M.

By situating such relevant and controversial subject matter within the literary tradition of adapting Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Park is able to use Shakespeare's play to invoke complex thoughts about this topic while rooting in conversations about Asian American identity and the politicization and racialization of ambition. In her introduction to the book *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*, Ayanna Thompson comments on the inherent yet implicit linkage between *Macbeth* and ideas about race by stating, "It is not simply the witches' brew, with bits of a Jew, Turk, and Tartar, nor even the play's consistent recourse to early modern figurative invocations of whiteness and blackness that makes *Macbeth* read as much more racially engaged than is conventionally assumed. The play's very rhetoric of blood and staining informs—or seeps into—early American racial rhetoric as well." (Thompson, *Weyward Macbeth* 4). Selecting *Macbeth* as a source text thus imbues *Peerless* with a history of racial rhetoric. Planting the Scottish play in a story of Asian American ambition is far from outlandish—it forces the audience to question the racialized connotations behind something as vague and conceptual as ambition and upward mobility.

In addition to presenting characters of a different race than in the original text, Park, like Yim, focuses on female characters. Gender factors heavily into how M and L perceive themselves as victims of this system. Just as Yim writes for the mother-daughter relationship between Hannah and her mother in *Do it for Umma*, Park changes the marital relationship of the Macbeths to one of twin sisters, M and L. In this way, Park establishes the play as a way to focus

on themes of Asian American first generation experience by examining how the twins adapt to their surroundings, as well as their relationship to one another. However, while *Do it for Umma* focuses on a multi-generational tale to fashion Hannah and her mother as direct comparisons to one another—two women who have grown up in different cultures and environments and thus clash due to their different perspectives—*Peerless* illustrates how the twins act as a unit despite still being different from each other. In *Peerless*, the focus is on how the twins react to their environment and those around them.

The first way we can observe M and L's extremities (including their willingness to commit violence and the way they are prone to using offensive language) is through their warped understanding of historical injustice and colonial history. Such history is left ambiguous in the text itself, leading us to believe that Park chooses to submerge the audience in an anti-colonial discourse that they presumably are aware of. After all, the play debuted at Yale Repertory Theater the same year that the Ivy League school saw a widespread controversy surrounding racial sensitivity after students protested against an administrative email sent to the student body warning against cultural appropriation in Halloween costumes (Nelson).

The twins' dialogue is indicative of their understanding of racial and cultural sensitivity, and it reflects their sense that as women of color they are disadvantaged by the system. But the play also points to a particular and largely unhealthy way of accounting for those disadvantages. This is most clearly portrayed through the central conflict of the play—their effort to get into “The College.” Of course, the twins are ambitious and set on success, but there is also room to speculate their motivation for being so singularly focused on such a specific goal. Unlike Hannah, there is no direct reference to being pressured into success by their parents. However, Park does leave hints in their dialogue that key the audience into the mindset of the twins and

how they view academics as a ladder to climb, as well as a setting for retributive success. In essence, Park makes it known that the girls think of themselves as victims of a colonial past and racial injustice, and, though questionable, their comically exaggerated actions are a means of showing how their desperation leads them to act in response to those injustices. Essentially, M and L perceive themselves as victims of an unjust system, and they are dedicated to correcting that perceived injustice via their personal success.

One such instance of that mindset occurs quite early in the play, as M reads the rejection letter from The College and discovers that another person from their school has earned a place at The College instead of them: D. Here M and L bounce back and forth, saying,

M: Your spot in the class of 2020 has been taken

L: Occupied

M: Seized

L: Usurped (12)

It is worth noting the language that the twins use to describe this turn of events: “Occupied,” “Seized,” “Usurped.” This language is surely evocative of colonial history in addition to Macbeth’s usurpation of the throne, and it is significant that the twins view their spot in university in this way—as something that has been stolen from them, and thus it is a wrong that is worth fighting to get back. This viewpoint is comically and ironically juxtaposed just a few lines following their epiphany, as they in turn discuss M’s “summer in / Africa” as something that should have advantaged her when she wrote about it for her admissions essay. Even when the twins feel that they are victims, they are oblivious to the colonial undertones of their own actions and continue to say politically incorrect, downright offensive things about those around them whenever they feel slighted. It also shows their calculative thought process, in which every

experience they have or action they do should be able to play out to their advantage. Even the way in which they think of themselves is reductive as they reduce their own humanity and experience to how it would look on paper.

This calculating and reductive logic extends to M and L's awareness of the historical disadvantages they face, despite the fact that they react to this a situation in a largely inappropriate and violent way, in their reaction with BF, who is M's boyfriend and is Black.

M: Oh are we talking "black now" / I didn't know we

BF: Whoa hey now whoa hey

M: There's no *Historically Asian College* I can apply to

BF: It's not about

M: Some of us need all the help we can get. (26)

This interaction is revealing in a few ways. First, it again points to how M, in her effort to establish the need for equity in her favor, is offensive to other marginalized groups and is also guilty of not utilizing the privilege she does have in a positive way. To her own boyfriend, she uses race as an insult and slings the words "talking black now" at BF. Situations like these reflect Park's aim in *Peerless* to hyperbolize and criticize the so-called "oppression olympics" that dominates news media and popular culture discourse, particularly when discussing the model minority myth. Her text is less about taking a stance on such matters as it is about illustrating how a high-pressure system pushes people to extreme action.

Secondly, this passage directly illustrates the vein of thinking with which M aligns herself. She explicitly points to the fact that there is not a "Historically Asian College." Though this line is a point of humor as well, it also illustrates the calculating mindset that M carries, which justifies her cutthroat logic. She feels that she is at a disadvantage, that there is no history

or historical college for her to count on, and thus this justifies her need to get “all the help we can get” through whatever means necessary. It also reflects M’s lack of awareness regarding the oppressive history that led to the creation of colleges and universities intended to serve Black students largely due to the fact that they were excluded from other institutions of higher education.

In addition to how the twins are ignorant regarding the oppression faced by other marginalized groups, they also appear to weaponize the discrimination they face in a manner that reduces the very real oppression caused by casual racism and microaggressions. Later in the play the twins are speaking with D, and they antagonize him teasingly, with M saying:

M: You can’t tell us apart

’Cause we’re twins

And we’re Asian

it’s like double hard for white people (51).

Of course, the play’s humor is prominent in this dialogue, laughingly pointing to the fact that M and L are, in fact, identical twins. They later admit “we switch all the time, we never get caught,” (51). As comical as the scene is, it is also revealing of how the twins acknowledge their racial status. Here, they comment on the common experience of Asian individuals being mistaken for one another. They are aware of the ways that their Asian identity and appearance govern how they are treated and of the possibilities of racism that could be posed against them. However, it also parallels their valid yet misplaced angst regarding their treatment, directing it at D out of envy rather than genuinely calling for justice.

This idea of misplaced anger is critical to the characterization of the twins. *Peerless* is rooted in the critique of injustice in the college system, but it is equally interested in satirizing

the mainstream dialogue around affirmative action conversations, in which a perceived slight against an individual is prioritized over challenging systemic oppression. This, of course, is the intended purpose of affirmative action. As Lynne Eisaguirre writes,

Proponents of affirmative action claim that affirmative action is the best means of defeating the inequality produced by historical discrimination...proponents further argue that affirmative action has accomplished its goals, but that reducing its application will result in a new onslaught of discrimination. In contrast, opponents view affirmative action as divisive and injurious to individual rights and assert that it impinges on individual freedoms. (2)

Park uses the twins here as an almost allegorical vessel to express the complex double-edged sword that is college admissions for Asian American students today. Cynthia Chiu explains,

The historical discrimination of Asian Americans and their existence as a group too different to be white and not different enough to be a “true minority” give context to why there is frustration and misunderstanding over affirmative action in the Asian American community. Although the negative repercussions of these circumstances and the stereotypes they come with are harmful to Asian Americans, they are not the result of affirmative action and would not be remedied by an elimination of affirmative action... For the Asian American community, their position as a racial bourgeoisie can have a significant impact in the affirmative action discussion if Asian Americans can target their efforts at attacking negative action while simultaneously supporting affirmative action. (485).

M and L embody this internalization of the model minority myth, and demonstrate how it leads to their disapproval of affirmative action. By using humor to point to the flaws of her protagonists, Park forms a nuanced critique that draws a divide between the valid, justified grievance of the girls to address the racism that they are subject to and their violent, individualistic overcompensation.

This individualistic overcompensation, as shown through M and L's violent approach to their situation, is emphasized through their often mean-spirited nature that reveals them to be hypocrites when it comes to advocating for a just system. Their understanding of racial oppression is calculating, and they tend to make racist or ableist insults themselves, as shown in M's relationship with BF but particularly in their treatment of D leading up to the murder.

M and L's treatment of D is a critical element of the play's satire. It highlights the ignorance of the twins, and shows how D's Indigenous identity reveals a crucial flaw in their logic. As Lydia Heberling writes:

Park's script also interrogates the fact that most Americans, especially high school students, simply do not have the language to talk about Indigeneity, constructively or not; L and M, in their frustration with D, are unable critique his Indigeneity as such, and so they insult him the way high schoolers know: by making fun of how he looks. By grounding M and L's dialogue about D in dominant yet false narratives about Native peoples, Park integrates a critique of these discourses into the play. Ultimately D is allowed to complicate the stereotypes and false assumptions about his Native identity, and the script makes a compelling (and accurate! And hilarious!) assertion that "authentic" Native identity is actually anchored in networks of community and relationship. (Heberling)

As Heberling points out, M and L criticize D on unfounded grounds. Their dialogue indicates their lack of knowledge regarding Indigeneity, despite their intelligence and acceleration through the school system. The twins often boast of their own academic superiority and their “perfect” stats that should render them shoo-ins for a prestigious institution like The College. Their ignorance calls attention to the question: if M and L have excelled in this education system, how can they lack so much knowledge on a topic so relevant to their peers? Their ignorance is evidently a critique of the American education system’s failure to adequately teach such topics in and of itself. As Mohawk scholar Scott Manning Stevens writes,

We must consider when addressing Native American issues in an American college classroom that most students have never heard, discussed in a classroom setting, the most pressing issues confronting today’s Native American communities. The depressing reality is that the average American student does not learn much about Native America at school after fourth grade. (25)

M and L’s ignorance clearly shows that they fall into this category, acting as a part of Park’s larger commentary that even the most accomplished of students can absentmindedly make blunders when it comes to race discourse in America—that their education leaves blindspots in how those young people are thinking about race and identity politics.

Another important element of M and L’s unwarranted treatment of D is that their reason for their judgment of him is incorrect. He explicitly states that he did not write his admissions essay about being Native American, as the twins assume. Rather, he wrote about his relationship with his mother and how it developed through going to a weight loss program together. He comments on this, questioned by M and L:

M: You wrote about a weight loss club?

D: About how it brought us together

About how like *trials* can bring family together (66)

Ironically, L does not understand this sentiment and replies by saying “this is boring” despite the fact that D’s story should completely alter her notion of him and correct her assumption that he played into his Indigenous heritage for admission into The College. Again, this is another signpost for M and L’s misunderstanding of their situation and misplaced vengeance.

Additionally, D has a legitimate claim to his ancestry, stating that he received an identity card which indicates that the tribe of his heritage has claimed him and legitimized his ancestry. M and L wrongly assume that D, like them, would do whatever it took to get ahead and dishonestly use his ethnic status to give him an advantage. M and L’s treatment and opinion of D is largely influenced by their dismissal of his own cultural identity. In some ways, this embodies the harm done by the model minority myth. Rather than seeing that they are hurt by the same systems of oppression and white supremacy, M and L are turned against those of a different race. They fall into the misconception that their Asian American identity has victimized them, placing blame unto D rather than upon the systemic discrimination of minorities in the upper education system. They make affirmative action their enemy, rather than the system affirmative action is designed to work against.

It is evident, however, that D is also prone to blunders when it comes to discussing race. For instance, he has a conversation at a school dance with M and L where, in an effort to flirt with the twins, he mentions foot binding and also reveals himself to apply certain racial stereotypes:

D: Your feet are so small...

M: Not really

L: They're my feet too and they're seven and a half

D: They look so small

So dainty and small...

I read about

In History?

In this handout on China?

L: Ohhhh you mean foot binding (42)

In this passage, D is evidently playing into sexist and racist stereotypes about Asian women. Namely, that they are “dainty” and demure, as illustrated by his limited understanding of the foot binding tradition. By including D’s blunder in addition to the many of M and L, Park continues the critique that ignorance points in all directions. It stems not from any singular source but is mistakenly a factor on multiple sides of the discourse, clueing readers into the systemic rather than individual nature of the critique.

Interestingly, the twins’ obsession with college and success seems to be their response to how they are marginalized. They have no outlet to express their frustration other than to victimize themselves. But D’s presence and admission into the College complicates all of that. They still view him as an enemy, but the development of his character and his history leaves him in a gray area in terms of M and L’s oppression-ranking system. He is white-passing and a man, but he is proven to be Native and feels an emotional connection to this community. He also has dealt with body image issues and has a disabled brother, to whom M and L are particularly cruel. D’s inability to fit into their calculative thinking points to the overall conceit made by M and L’s thought process, largely in that truly thinking like this is simply implausible. Reducing humans

to a running sheet of what would advantage or disadvantage them in college admissions is illogical, and that seems to be part of Park's commentary within *Peerless*.

M and L's faults demonstrate that they are not immune to Park's critique. In criticizing her own protagonists, Park forms a satire that rejects the possibility of an entirely white audience. She not only writes a play *about* Asian American struggles—she speaks directly *to* those who find themselves at the intersection of race and upward mobility. Consequently, while *Peerless* draws attention to (and pokes fun of) discrimination against Asian Americans, it simultaneously acts as a specific cautionary tale for Asian Americans, warning against the traps of the model minority myth.

Park's stylistic and plot-related choices give *Peerless* a removed and allegorical sensibility. Each character takes on a representational role that speaks to a part of the larger conversation surrounding education and race in America. Yet by adapting *Macbeth* to target a social and political issue that is specific to Asian Americans, Park places *Peerless* staunchly in the philosophical center of this discourse, intellectually yet playfully engaging with a conversation that has dominated legal, education, and political discourse. Just as Macbeth's greedy lust for power leads to his downfall, M and L's mistaken belief in the model minority myth leads them down a path of ignorant and ultimately violent action. Like Yim, Park creates a unique and specific play that works to fill in the infinite gaps left by Shakespeare, wielding specificity to combat the notion of a universal bard.

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