

Finding, Reclaiming, and Reinventing Identity through DNA: *The DNA Trail*

Yuko KURAHASHI*

The DNA Trail: A Genealogy of Short Plays about Ancestry, Identity, and Utter Confusion (2011) is a collection of seven fifteen-to-twenty minute plays by veteran Asian American playwrights whose plays have been staged nationally and internationally since the 1980s. The plays include Philip Kan Gotanda's "Child Is Father to Man," Velina Hasu Houston's "Mother Road," David Henry Hwang's "A Very DNA Reunion," Elizabeth Wong's "Finding Your Inner Zulu," Shishir Kurup's "Bolt from the Blue," Lina Patel's "That Could Be You," and Jamil Khoury's "WASP: White Arab Slovak Pole." Conceived by Jamil Khoury and commissioned and developed by Silk Road Theatre Project in Chicago in association with the Goodman Theatre, a full production of the seven plays was mounted at Silk Road Theatre Project in March and April 2010.¹ On January 22, 2011, Visions and Voices: The USC Arts and Humanities Initiative presented a staged reading at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, using revised scripts. The staged reading was directed by Goodman Theatre associate producer Steve Scott, who had also directed the original production.²

San Francisco-based playwright Gotanda has written plays that reflect his yearning to learn the stories of his Japanese American parents, and their friends and relatives. His plays include *A Song for a Nisei Fisherman* (1980), *The Wash* (1985), *Ballad of Yachiyo* (1996), and *Sisters*

*Associate Professor, Kent State University

Matsumoto (1997). Born to a Japanese mother and African American father, Houston has explored biracial identity and the interplay of the cultures of Japan and the United States through her plays, which include *Tea* (1987), *Kokoro* (1996), *Calling Aphrodite* (2007), and *Calligraphy* (2010). Hwang is best known for his Broadway hit *M. Butterfly* (1988), a play that explores the romanticized Western perception of Asian women as exotic rather than human.³ In *Yellow Face* (2007) Hwang looks at the politics that surround ethnicity in theatre by highlighting the contradictions in color-specific and color-blind casting practices. Wong has portrayed intercultural and inter-racial relationships in *Letters to a Student Revolutionary* (1989) and *Kimchee & Chitlins* (1991). Her play *China Doll* (1996) is based on the life of the legendary Chinese American film star Anna May Wong. More recently, she wrote *Dating and Mating in Modern Times* (2003), a series of monologues about dating, sex, and relationships from an Asian American perspective. Kurup, an Indian American, is an ensemble member of the Los Angeles-based Cornerstone Theater Company and has worked as an actor, director, and playwright. His *Merchant on Venice*, which premiered at Silk Road Theatre Project in 2007, explores religious and cultural tensions in the United States. In 2010, Kurup staged one-person pieces, *Assimilation* (2009) and *Sharif Don't Like It* (2009), at the 2nd National Asian American Theater Conference and Festival. Both pieces focus on the immigrant experience of South Asians in the United States, including increasing racial prejudice after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Patel, a second-generation Indian American trained as an actor, has been demonstrating her talents as a playwright in the past several years. Her first play, *Sankalpan* (Desire), a semifinalist at the Sundance Theatre Institute in 2010, is an adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* set in "the volatile period of pre-Partition Bengal,"⁴ and *The Ragged Claws* (2008) examines a "fractured relationship between a British mother and her adopted Indian son."⁵ Khoury, a Syrian-Slovak-Polish American playwright, is the founding artistic director of Silk Road Theatre Project (now called Silk Road Rising). His *Precious Stones* (2003), a play about the Israel-Palestinian conflict, won *Gay Chicago Magazine's* 2003 After Dark Award.

The initial objective of *The DNA Trail* project was to use information provided by genetic testing as a launching pad for the playwrights to explore genetics and racial identity. However, due to limitations in the genetic data provided by the testing and the subsequent change in the interests of the playwrights, the plays they created did not directly res-

onate with this aspect, although in indirect ways many of the plays did. Yet, the project gave a unique opportunity for the playwrights to come together and exchange ideas about how they saw themselves, their families, and their racial and cultural identities. As Khoury reminisces, the project “demonstrates that a small, relatively young company like Silk Road Theatre Project can attract a stellar group of highly accomplished artists to create an original piece of theatre.”⁶ The participants recall how the process of reading other participants’ scripts that contain questions about their personal history, culture, and ethnic position helped them to rethink “who they are” in the United States. For example, Gotanda states that the act of sharing time with other participants allowed him to “get glimpses into each other’s ways and whys,” and it was during this “waiting time” that he could finalize his choice of subject, the relationship with his Nisei father.⁷

The results of this creative process, the short plays of *The DNA Trail*, overtly or covertly address the questions of cultural and biological identity among “hyphenated” populations in the United States. In this article I examine the initial impetus for the project, why the project is relevant to changing identity politics, how the participants’ original expectations changed due to the limited information provided by the DNA tests, what subjects actually became the focus of their short plays, and how these subjects relate to cultural and racial identity formation in the United States.

ORIGINAL IMPETUS

The idea for *The DNA Trail* project began as a conversation about collaboration between Khoury and some of his friends and colleagues in 2007. During the course of their conversation, they began to explore various subjects including “art, science, genetics, and pop culture.”⁸ Khoury had cofounded, with Malik Gillani, Silk Road Theatre Project in Chicago in 2002 as a “creative and proactive response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001,”⁹ and he had promoted dialogue between people of diverse backgrounds and histories with the purpose of “healing the rifts” caused by ignorance and lack of communication.¹⁰ Khoury’s prior theatre experience in collaborating with diverse groups of people helped him to materialize the idea of inviting multicultural playwrights to document their different histories, heritages, and cultures. Soon after his initial conversation about “how to collaborate,” Khoury invited a number

of Asian American playwrights to be part of the project that included collectively shared DNA tests. Khoury noted that the invitees' responses were very quick, which he saw as "testimony both to the power of ancestry and our innate desire to discover something new and unexpected about ourselves."¹¹

As the very first step of the project, the participants took DNA tests. Kits were delivered to their respective homes, and they "scraped [the] insides of [their] cheeks with something resembling a Q-tip and submitted a swab of [their] saliva to Family Tree DNA."¹² Next, in July 2008, they flew to Chicago for the initial gathering, where they met with geneticists, genealogists, DNA counselors, and a DNA ethicist. After they went home, they began writing plays and exchanged drafts of their plays by e-mail. During this writing and later, during the rehearsal process, they continued to exchange revised drafts for feedback.¹³ Giving and receiving feedback, which the participants call "collaboration," resulted, in some cases, in the creation of new characters, the elimination of old characters, and the development of relationships among the characters. For example, the birth of the character Cleopatra in Hwang's piece is owed to Kurup, who gave a suggestion to Hwang.¹⁴ Wong's suggestion helped Patel make the character of the narrator into the scientist (and also the result of the adoption project).¹⁵ Khoury recalls that the other participants' questions and suggestions helped him augment the play's structure and increase the clarity of its content.¹⁶

The DNA Trail project resonates with the result of an increased interest in using the availability of genetic testing as a means, particularly for people who have limited information regarding their ancestry, to find the answer to the question, who am I? As noted by Catherine Nash, a professor of geography at the University of London, the "all-pervasive" language of genetics and genealogy has become an "increasingly popular practice," along with other "recent developments in molecular biology, biomedicine, and new biotechnological commercial innovations."¹⁷ Sarah Franklin, an anthropologist/sociologist who has written a number of books on reproductive and genetic technologies, points out that "the rapid emergence of new genetic technologies has placed a premium on familiar anthropological questions, such as the meaning of genealogy, parenthood, or a 'blood tie.'"¹⁸ She also states that genealogy "promises a neat and satisfying pre-given and predetermined collective identity—such as 'Irishness'—guaranteed by descent," thus offering people "the potential pleasures of choosing an 'authentic identity.'"¹⁹

The release of the documentary film *Journey of Man* (PBS, 2003, based on the book of the same title by Spencer Wells) fueled public interest in the use of DNA testing in ancestry searches. The film documents how a group of geneticists arrived at the conclusion that the “global family tree” can be traced back to “one African man who lived 60,000 years ago.”²⁰ Wells used the evidence provided by DNA markers to trace two separate migration patterns from Africa: one that followed the coastline along the Indian Ocean and another that traveled into Central Asia.²¹ Beyond identifying these two great patterns of migration, there are markers that identify “branches” that migrated to other areas and later became identified with different ethnic groups. This discovery made it possible to use DNA testing to identify a person’s relationship, genetically, to the great migration patterns and to more specific branches of the human family tree. The potential to identify one’s ancestors, even if in only a very broad sense, is part of its appeal to a mixed ethnic nation such as the United States where many people have a very limited knowledge of their own racial and ethnic identities. Recent developments in DNA testing provide, if nothing else, a way to shortcut the process of identifying a person’s ancestors’ migration patterns. Contrary to people’s presumptions however, current DNA technology does not function as a perfect tool “for defining race and verifying race,” because the “notions of race” do not necessarily “correspond to genetic differences among populations,” and also because “the current definition of race regards it as a ‘social construct.’”²²

A relatively accessible technology based on scientific research and entrepreneurial development has made it possible to disseminate DNA testing to the general public, who may take genealogical DNA tests with the hope of finding out more about the race and ethnicity of their ancestors. In many ways, the popularity of DNA testing seems to lead to a more biologically fixed, essentialist notion of race as opposed to our contemporary understanding of race as social construct. As William Q. Lowe asserts, “from the nineteenth century until the latter part of the twentieth century distinct racial categories developed under the biological race theory,”²³ and DNA testing seems to validate this theory. In fact, many scientists and biologists see that “advances in sciences, particularly in DNA testing,” would “allow for a uniform method of determining one’s race” and provide a “settled definition of race,” thus serving as a sophisticated tool to obtain detailed information about ancestors’ race and ethnicity.²⁴ Thus, although Khoury’s original intention and

some of the playwrights' expectations of discovering scientific facts about their racial and ethnic backgrounds may seem naive, it is a natural reaction. For example, Gotanda hoped to find that his ancestors were "Portuguese or Panamanian or something exotic other than just Japanese."²⁵ Hwang hoped that the tests might confirm the existence of "British or Filipino ancestors" that his family had talked about for several generations.²⁶ Patel wished to discover that she "had African, Chinese, European—anything other than only South Asian—roots" in her ancestry.²⁷ The ethnicity that these playwrights romantically wished for resonates with what Gerald Vizenor, a Native American writer and American studies scholar, calls "the wannabee sentiment,"²⁸ a symptom of romantization and simulation to gain authenticity and authority in discourse with others. Hwang, Patel, and Gotanda's expectations also reflected their desire to challenge the labeling of their ethnic identity as Asian Americans, the simple category imposed on them.

The test results did not satisfy the playwrights' expectations, however. Gotanda found that the DNA results were so rudimentary that the participants lost interest in the tests' results themselves.²⁹ Hwang was disappointed by the results, which "only yielded the rudest outlines" of their ancestral histories.³⁰ Patel stated that because of the results that "contained nothing specific enough to be exciting," she shifted her focus to "the various debates within the field of genealogical testing" and people's notions of these tests.³¹ Houston, who thought that "it was like reading a history book, interesting but not relevant to who I am today beyond the basics,"³² nevertheless found in the DNA test results that her genetic heritage included ancestors from France, Armenia, Greece, India, China, the Philippines, Japan, Cuba, and some parts of South America as well as Africa and were provocative with regard to issues of deep ancestry and historical migratory patterns.

Both the unexpected data and lack of specific information for these writers reflect what scientists have discovered about DNA testing. Writing about the limitations and challenges of DNA tests, genetics scholar Linda McCabe states that although many individuals expect DNA tests to reveal details about their ancestry, the accuracy of the tests is limited by a number of factors, including the range of databases of the DNA samples available to the laboratory doing the testing and "the specific group or admixture of groups represented by the test-taker's ancestry."³³ The playwrights' expectations of the DNA tests also resonate with what McCabe calls the "genetic determinism" that people hold despite their

understanding of ethnicity as “a conception of shared cultural heritage.”³⁴ It is this sense of genetic determinism that some of the participants’ initially held.

A more positive reaction to the DNA test results came from Wong, who was captivated by the haplogroups that were identified by the tests. A haplogroup is a “cluster of similar haplotypes that share a common ancestor.”³⁵ A haplotype is the set of alleles (variants of chromosomes, long strands of DNA). The entire chromosome can be partitioned into the high linkage disequilibrium (LD) regions called “haplotype blocks”³⁶ interspersed with low-LD regions. While a specific group of haplotypes, as defined by genetic testing, corresponds to a specific ethnic population, haplogroups are defined by many different markers (genetic mutations) found in Y-chromosome and mtDNA (genetic material found in the mitochondria) testing. These markers link the members of a haplogroup back to the marker’s first appearance in the group’s most recent common ancestors.³⁷

After finding that the haplogroups could go beyond immediate race and ethnic factors, Wong wrote:

I’m in the N9a haplogroup. On the human genome migration map, it’s a brown line trekking eastward, one of the oldest lines out of Africa. With my parents and grandparents all born in mainland China, I just assumed I was a pureblood product. I thought the test results would verify me as a faded mimeograph of the first Peking woman, living proof for the argument that the early Chinese had developed independently of Africa, and that Peking Man was indeed my distant cousin. But to my surprise, my test results suggested otherwise. It’s mind blowing to find myself connected to a female ancestor who made that long, arduous trek out of Africa several millennia ago, fleeing floods, following the herds, battling wits with wild lands, and even wilder men.³⁸

The DNA testing allowed Wong to discover that, while the testing was not a magic tool to identify her ancestors, her own racial heritage merged with the broader history of humanity, linking herself to others beyond appearances.

In spite of their reactions to the results of the DNA tests, which could not scientifically clarify the intricate relationship of race, ethnicity, and culture, the participants found the project fruitful because even the unsatisfactory—to their eyes—results allowed them to see the importance

of exploring their identity formation in multiple ways and from multiple perspectives. The creative process provided an opportunity for these artists to reflect on identity politics in the United States, which they had dealt with for a number of years. As Houston states, “most people have fixed ideas about who they are racially, even though race is a man-made construct left over from the days of the plantation.”³⁹ Houston calls this view “ethnicity-lite.”⁴⁰ The project allowed the participants to see how much they were clinging to “ethnicity-lite” and the way this view has affected how they see themselves and their families.

FROM THE MELTING POT TO POST-MELTING POT

Before examining each playwright’s piece in response to the DNA tests, it is important to consider the current view of race and ethnicity in the United States, because the playwrights’ initial expectations of the DNA tests and the subsequent change in their focus in playwriting parallel changing views of diversity in race, ethnicity, culture, and religion in the United States.

Since the founding of the country people have debated which differences should be examined and valued in order to strengthen the United States and its people. One of the nationalist ideologies is the “melting pot” theory,⁴¹ in which the goal is to eliminate immigrants’ identification with their country of origin and merge them into an ideal of Americanism.

The United States has long used the metaphor of “melting” differences in culture and tradition among different immigrants as the means of achieving a distinctive American character and value. In his *Letters from an American Farmer*, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, an eighteenth-century Franco-American farmer and essayist, proudly proclaimed that a mixture of people including “English, Scottish, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes” have settled in “the unknown bounds of North America,” where “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.”⁴² A strong belief in this construct of a Eurocentric race called “Americans” was prevalent in the early political discourse as well. For example, in an 1814 speech, DeWitt Clinton, mayor of New York City, stated that “the triumph and adoption of the English language” had become the “principal means of melting us down into one people.”⁴³ These instances demonstrate how people have seen the melting of racial and ethnic differences as a positive goal for America’s future.

In opposition to the many who championed the idea of a melting pot,

some scholars began to express concern that the term ignored and sought to eradicate valuable “differences” in race and ethnicity. Writers and scholars such as Horace M. Kallen and Randolph S. Bourne disdained the term “melting pot” because it described a narrow view of what constituted the United States. While recognizing the importance of the commonwealth, Kallen saw the United States as a “mosaic of peoples, of different bloods and of different origins, engaged in rather different economic fields, and varied in background and outlook as well as in blood.”⁴⁴ Championing the importance of the different ethnic backgrounds of immigrants to the United States, Kallen used an orchestra as a metaphor: “As in an orchestra every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality,” so, in society, “each ethnic group may be the natural instrument” that plays its own “temper and culture,” and each is part of the “symphony of civilization.”⁴⁵ Bourne espoused a plurality of self-identifications as well as nationality. He challenged assimilationists who labeled those immigrants who refused “to be melted” as a “failure of Americanization.”⁴⁶ Bourne criticized the American public who marveled at the contributions of immigrants while “in the same breadth” insisting that “the alien shall be forcibly assimilated to that Anglo-Saxon tradition.”⁴⁷ He also pointed out that this public sentiment for assimilation had a paradoxical affect on a diverse immigrant population, because, in the process, instead of “washing out the memories of Europe,” non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants had a tendency to become even more interested in “memorializing and documenting their countries, languages and cultures in Europe.”⁴⁸

In the twentieth century, public policies began to slowly accept difference and diversity in race, gender, ethnicity, culture, and other attributes of individuals beyond the narrowly defined colonial definition of “plurality.” Examining the correlates of endorsement of multiculturalism and assimilation in the United States, Christopher Wolsko, Bernadette Park, and Charles M. Judd argue that although “models of thinking about ethnic diversity that endorse a system of blatant prejudice and discrimination are still present in U.S. society,” they are gradually losing their strength because of “significant action to counter and correct past discrimination.”⁴⁹ Offering and adding ethnic studies courses, establishing ethnic studies departments, and making diversity efforts imperative in public institutions are all part of the nation’s stride toward validation and appreciation of multiple races, ethnicities, cultures, languages, and religions.

Yet the decades-long debate over assimilation versus multiculturalism continues. Advocates of multiculturalism see multiculturalism as a “strategic component in a broader movement toward social transformation that emphasizes social equity.”⁵⁰ On the other side, opponents of multiculturalism, who hold a strong belief in a universal culture, value “a unifying cultural framework.”⁵¹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant call these two opposing ideals “the twin pressures of assimilation (dissolution of group identity) and cultural pluralism (preservation of group identity).”⁵² The conflict between assimilationists and multiculturalists is often compounded by a political discourse on patriotism and national security. As Margaret Mead asserted in the 1970s, although people in the United States are encouraged to know about their immigrant roots and to identify with their ancestors, when they try to maintain an ideal of an “ethic of cultural pluralism, of ethnic separatism,” they are constantly confronted by “the ethic of ethnic assimilation, the doctrine of the melting pot.”⁵³ In addition to the tension between these two ideological practices, the notion of race has continued to influence people’s views of themselves and others. As Omi and Winant argue, “specificity of race,” which is “an autonomous field of social conflict, political organization, and cultural/ideological meaning,”⁵⁴ continues to define who a person is. In *A Matter of Principle*, philosopher and legal scholar Ronald Dworkin argues that American society, which is “currently a racially conscious society,” is still dealing with the “inevitable and evident consequence of a history of slavery, repression and prejudice,” and thus even now the fixed notion of racial categories continues to dictate the roles and membership of “black men and women, boys and girls” in society.⁵⁵

Sociologist Mary C. Waters discusses how race-based self-identification overpowers ethnic, cultural, and experience-based self-identification, as seen in many in the second generation of immigrants in the United States. Writing about identities of the first and second generations of immigrants from the West Indies, Waters describes how some of the second generation tend to “shift toward developing a strong racial identity,” rejecting “their parents’ ethnicity, and primarily identify themselves as black Americans.”⁵⁶ The tug-of-war between the dominant labeling of “race” and the fabric of cultures, education, gender, and sexual orientation seems to constitute a dominant part of identity formation of many of the racially and ethnically mixed populations in the United States.

FAMILY, SELF, AND IDENTITY IN *THE DNA TRAIL PROJECT*

Racially based categories have been an important component of participants' identity formation in the United States, as those who are considered partially American and partially Asian. As Lee Weng Choy argues, the term "Asian" in "Asian American" emphasizes "ethnic origin," while the invisible hyphenation signifies a person's "marginality" both within the United States and abroad.⁵⁷

The participants in the project have differently dealt with their labeled position as partially American and partially Asian. Some have tried to escape altogether from their ethnically labeled group. For example, growing up in Chinatown, Wong recalls how she wanted to keep a distance between herself and other Chinese and Chinese Americans: "I didn't want to have anything to do with all these people who talked with accents."⁵⁸ Some of the participants had different approaches. By combining the terms Asian and American, Houston has found a way to empower her multiracial and multicultural position in the United States. In *The Politics of Life* Houston claims that she is "Amerasian," which means that she is "neither Asian nor American (and yet both)" and that she is "neither native Japanese, Blackfoot Pikuni, nor African American (and yet all three)—truly multiracial and multicultural."⁵⁹

Kurup, who was born in Bombay and raised in Kenya prior to his family's emigration to the United States, also expresses how his ethnically and culturally complex background has affected his identity formation. In my interview with him, he explained that although he knows he is American because he possesses a U.S. passport, part of his cultural identification is still with the places where he grew up—Kenya and India. He also points to the complexity within the compound term. For example, when he immigrated to the United States, he understood "Asia" as a geographical area that included India and Pakistan. However, he soon found that the "Asian" used in the term "Asian American" meant a person of Chinese or Japanese descent. Thus, as an "Asian" from South Asia, he has been "walled off" from his own identity within the Asian community in the United States.⁶⁰

Khoury's play "WASP: White Arab Slovak Pole" deals with how people see race, ethnicity, and culture in the United States. "WASP" portrays Khoury's daily ritual of answering questions about his "true identity." As an Arab American gay Christian with Polish and Slovak heritage, Khoury has encountered many prejudiced remarks such as

“You don’t look like Jamil,” meaning he should look like a Middle Easterner. People’s antipluralist responses, based on their presumptions, demonstrate biases that prompt them to categorize people into a single group that ignores the ethnic, racial, and cultural complexity and dynamics of the individual. Opposing these supersimplified presumptions, Khoury champions the complexity and multiplicity of his ethnic background. He is aligned with the poststructuralist view of ethnicity, which is championed by Fredrik Barth and Clifford Geertz, who consider that “ethnicity is no more fixed or unchanging than the culture of which it is a component.”⁶¹ He points out that he reacts differently when he encounters people who speak Arabic or Slavic languages, noting that the languages, which he acquired in his childhood, are part of the formation of his identity.

While Khoury deals with the mainstream view of others in the United States, Wong and Hwang underscore the current trend of using DNA testing for ancestry search. In “Finding Your Inner Zulu,” which depicts a Chinese teenager’s search for her ancestry, Wong uses a component of the DNA test, the haplogroup, the element that identifies the immigration patterns of a person’s ancestors that brought him or her to the place perceived as his or her country of origin. Cricket, a basketball superstar at her high school, is devastated because she is turned down by recruiters from the University of Connecticut. Cricket attributes this to her short height and decides to take a DNA test with the hope of getting inside her DNA and “turning on the tall gene.”⁶² The simple act of scraping inside her cheek is suddenly transformed into a fantastic voyage through the DNA galaxy where she encounters two of her cousins—a Zulu warrior and a rabbi. Though her height remains the same, the voyage empowers Cricket so much that she decides to ask the coach at the University of Connecticut to reconsider her application. To write this “fantastical” play, to use her word, Wong used her e-mail exchanges with people who responded to her social-network postings on a N9A haplogroup site. As she began to receive e-mail from those who also belonged to the N9A haplogroup, Wong began to feel an increased sense of kinship with other N9A group members. The DNA test and e-mail conversations allowed Wong to acknowledge the complexity of identity formation and to abandon her initial simple assumption about the relationship between “race and genome.”⁶³ Wong’s experience moves beyond what Waters calls “authentic” ethnic identification that is normally utilized in censuses and surveys.⁶⁴ Unlike the category used in censuses and surveys, Wong’s

concept of ethnic identity is not fixed or determined but is more fluid, providing the possibility of discovering how one could be related to individuals in other racial and ethnic groups.

Hwang's "A Very DNA Reunion" portrays an equally fantastical world created by Bob, a thirty-one-year-old Caucasian man, after he receives DNA test results. Bob is excited about his recent discovery of who he is and cries, "Now I know who I am!" He serves as a theatrical vehicle for Hwang to mock people's naive assumption that they can discover their identity from DNA testing. Through the character of Bob and his fantasy, Hwang illuminates his own discovery during the creative process. He states that he began "to feel that it was actually very lazy to imagine that swiping a Q-tip inside one's cheek could lead to self-knowledge."⁶⁵ In his fantasy, Bob's ancestors—Genghis Khan, Cleopatra, and Ninja Dude—visit him. These historical and imaginary figures resonate with the "wannabe syndrome" that Hwang might have entertained prior to taking the DNA test. In this play, Hwang points out the nature of the wannabe syndrome through the character of Bob, who enjoys his reunion with those who are bound to him by "history and blood."⁶⁶ By creating the character of Bob, who is thirty-one and still living with his parents, Hwang underscores his belief that indulging in DNA testing is the immature act of a "loser" who cannot see learned cultures and knowledge as part of identity formation.⁶⁷

Patel expresses her interest in the potential of DNA tests being used for adoption programs in her short play "That Could Be You." Unlike Wong and Hwang, who use DNA tests to create an illusionary world, Patel's play dramatizes the relationship between procreation and the science of DNA. The play's central characters—birth parents and adoptive parents—represent nature and nurture. The adoptive parents look forward to adopting the baby from its biological parents. The birth parents regularly meet with the adoptive parents to inform them of the status of the fetus as well as to discuss various arrangements for the future. The character of the scientist—who is actually the result of this surrogate project—functions as a narrator and explains to the audience complex scientific and medical facts. For example, during the development of a fetus, non-genetic factors, such as "nutrients, toxins, and oxygen levels during gestation," wrap "tightly around the pre-existing DNA and are passed down through generations," influencing "much of the child's behavioral patterns."⁶⁸ The scientist character tries to convey that while the gene determines many of the traits of the individual, variable factors such as

“nutrition, reinforcement (positive, negative),” and other forms of nurturing also affect the child’s development.⁶⁹ Although the adoptive couple is aware of various things that affect the child after birth, they tend to focus on the birth parents’ and their own genes, allergies, what they read, and their favorite subjects at school. At one point, this determinist view of the child’s personal development is challenged by Teddy, the adoptive father, who still believes, or at least hopes, that “a person’s character is not something they are born with” but “something that develops with love.”⁷⁰ His remark, which exemplifies the significance of cultural influences in identity formation, affirms the poststructuralist notion of identity while challenging biological determinism.

Houston, Gotanda, and Kurup used the DNA test results as their inspiration to write plays about relationships within the family. Houston’s “Mother Road” explores what is now perceived as a hereditary disease—breast cancer—and a sibling relationship around this topic. The subject of breast cancer was inspired by a talk delivered by one of the DNA experts who visited the participants at the Silk Road Project Theatre. Houston learned that DNA testing can reveal genetic markers for diseases and that some women voluntarily have bilateral mastectomies after learning their results. According to the expert, women sometimes decide to have their breasts removed, not because they have developed breast cancer but because their DNA tests reveal that they are at high risk for developing it.⁷¹ That lecture prompted Houston to create two siblings, Perpetua and her half-sister Eve. Perpetua visits Eve, who is older and who lives in a remote area on the southern edge of the Mojave Desert, to inform her of their mother’s recent death from breast cancer. The true objectives of Perpetua’s visit are, however, to find a new place of belonging now that their mother is dead and to warn Eve about the possible risk of their developing breast cancer. Eve, who has never forgiven her mother for putting her up for adoption, resents Perpetua’s visit. However, over the course of the evening of their meeting, Eve, who has recently lost both her husband and son in a car accident, begins to develop a sense of kinship with Perpetua, who has recently undergone a preventative bilateral mastectomy. Using her new knowledge about DNA testing and its function in discovering medical markers for certain diseases, including breast cancer, Houston focuses on reconciliation and mutual understanding between the siblings, one of the themes that she has dealt with for many years.

In “Child Is Father to Man,” Gotanda portrays the grieving and regret of the character “Man” after his father’s death. Man traces the life journey of his father from the island of Kauai to Arkansas and then to California, his marriage to a daughter of a wealthy businessman, their incarceration in an internment camp during World War II, and their struggle to rebuild the family’s life after the war. The play’s focus is on the conflicts between Man and his father, who criticizes his son’s decision to be a playwright instead of a lawyer. It also expresses the son’s regrets about the lack of communication between himself and his father. Gotanda’s theme—the conflict between father and son—is universal, yet his piece is also filled with Japanese American references. The play is an elegy to his own father, because he could express his regret about not spending enough time to understand his father during his father’s lifetime. Like Houston’s “Mother Road,” Gotanda’s play illuminates how one can reconcile with a family member. In his play he does this by accepting who he is and acknowledging that he himself is also part of the father.

In “Bolt from the Blue” Kurup pays tribute to his immediate and extended families. Instead of using the results of his DNA test as his subject matter, Kurup probes into the hidden family heritage of depression with which, according to his parents, several family members have been afflicted.⁷² Although this is not the raw data from the DNA test he took, the test, along with the conversations with other participants during the creative process, prompted him to use what he had heard from other members of his family as a hypothesis. The play centers on the conversations between a man in his late thirties or early forties named Rishi (who represents Kurup), who lives in the United States, and his cousin Hari, twenty, who lives in Glasgow and suffers from severe depression. The script consists of e-mail and phone exchanges between Rishi and his mother, his friend Paul who is a therapist, and Hari. Rishi tries to reach out to Hari through e-mail and via Skype. However, Hari makes a suicide attempt and his condition deteriorates so that eventually he is confined to a mental institution. The play ends with a sudden silence from Hari. Writing this story allowed Kurup to face his family’s problems, exploring a taboo area that his family had avoided openly discussing.⁷³

To summarize, the testing done for *The DNA Trail* project did not provide the information the participants had expected. As a result, with the exceptions of Patel and Wong, the participants were not able to write

plays as they originally planned that used detailed scientific information about their ancestors' race and ethnicity. Those who did not have specific expectations from the testing used the information and the DNA test results as sources of inspiration for stories indirectly related to DNA, incorporating such topics as genetics and medicine. However, *The DNA Trail* reminded the participants of the power of "learned cultures" or "enculturation," as is evident in many of the short plays, including the ones that focus on relationships among family members, a major source of enculturation. As David Matsumoto, a psychologist with expertise in cross-cultural communications, defines in *Culture and Psychology*, enculturation is "the process by which individuals learn and adopt the ways and manners of their culture."⁷⁴ The creative process that encompassed a series of e-mail and face-to-face communications helped the participants to reflect on how they have learned and adopted the cultures that they now regard as theirs. The project also reminded the participants that, although they are living in a multicultural era where multiplicity and pluralism are supposed to be welcomed, the general public's increasing interest in finding, through DNA testing, scientific data about the race and ethnicity of their ancestors may be contributing to a rigid notion about categories of race and ethnicity. As anthropologist George A. De Vos states, today, in the era of ethnic pluralism, "ethnic minorities" that would not remain in a fixed position are not "content to remain mute."⁷⁵ Although the creative results of this project, the seven plays, address issues that deviate from the originally intended premise, the experience of participation in *The DNA Trail* provided the authors with the opportunity to rethink and challenge the monolithic, fixed category of race that pigeonholes them as humans and artists.

NOTES

¹ Each production consisted of the seven plays. These have not been officially published.

² I attended this staged reading and have used it as research material for this article.

³ Hwang's interests and topics have been diverse and multifaceted as exemplified by *FOB* (1979), *Golden Child* (1996), the musical *Aida* (2000), *Flower Drum Song* (2002), and such musical dramas and operas as *1000 Airplanes on the Roof*, *The Voyage*, *Ainadamar*, *The Sliver River*, and *The Fly*. Hwang's newest play *Chinglish*, which premiered at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in July 2011, opened in fall 2011 on Broadway to rave reviews.

⁴ "Lina Patel," SouthernAsianPlaywrights, accessed 23 November 2011. http://southeastasianplaywrights.org/?page_id=8n.

- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Jamil Khoury, "The DNA Trail: From Swab to Stage," *World Literature Today* (March–April 2010): 26.
- ⁷ Philip Kan Gotanda, e-mail interview, 27 January 2011.
- ⁸ Khoury, "The DNA Trail: From Swab to Stage," 23.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 23–24.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 23.
- ¹² Ibid., 26.
- ¹³ Lina Patel, e-mail interview, 11 November 2011.
- ¹⁴ David Henry Hwang, e-mail interview, 29 December 2011.
- ¹⁵ Lina Patel, e-mail interview, 29 December 2011.
- ¹⁶ Jamil Khoury, e-mail interview, 30 December 2011.
- ¹⁷ Catherine Nash, "Genealogical Identities," *Environment and Plan D: Society and Space* 20 (2002):27.
- ¹⁸ Sarah Franklin, "Biologization Revisited: Kinship Theory in the Context of the New Biologies," in *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*, ed. Sarah Franklin and S. McKinnon (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 424.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Hillary Mayell, "Documentary Redraws Humans' Family Tree," *National Geographic News*, 21 January 2003, accessed 24 November 2011. http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/12/1212_021213_journeyofman.html.
- ²¹ S. Fisher, "Journey of Man," *Video Librarian* 18, no. 4 (July–August 2003): 22.
- ²² William Q. Lowe "Understanding Race: The Evolution of the Meaning of Race in American Law and the Impact of DNA Technology on Its Meaning in the Future," *Albany Law Review* 72, no. 4 (2009): 1141.
- ²³ Ibid., 1116.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 1114.
- ²⁵ Velina Hasu Houston, "Hiking the DNA Trail," *American Theatre* (March 2010): 41.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Gerald Vizenor "Native American Indian Identities: Autoinscriptions and the Cultures of Names," *Genre* 25, no. 4 (1994): 438.
- ²⁹ Philip Kan Gotanda, e-mail interview, 27 January 2011.
- ³⁰ David Henry Hwang, e-mail interview, 31 January 2011.
- ³¹ Lina Patel, e-mail interview, 25 January 2011.
- ³² Velina Hasu Houston, e-mail interview, 26 January 2011.
- ³³ Linda L. McCabe and Edward R. B. McCabe, *DNA: Promise and Peril* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 80–81.
- ³⁴ I use the definition provided by Raymond Scupin in "Ethnicity," in *Race and Ethnicity: An Anthropological Focus on the United States and the World*, ed. Raymond Scupin (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 67.
- ³⁵ Jeffrey Basset, "Genetic Genealogy and the Bassett Y-Chromosome Project," in *The DNA Trail* program notes (Chicago: Silk Road Theatre Project, 2010), 22.
- ³⁶ Kun-Mao Chao, "Pattern Identification in a Haplotype Block," in *Bioinformatics for Biologists*, ed. Pavel Pevzner and Ron Shamir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 24.
- ³⁷ Spencer Wells, *Deep Ancestry: Inside the Geographic Project* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006), 230–31.

³⁸ Elizabeth Wong, "Playwright Reflections," Silk Road Theatre Project, accessed 20 March 2011, <http://www.srtp.org/mediaplayer/thesevenplays.html>.

³⁹ Houston, "Hiking the DNA Trail," 41.

⁴⁰ Velina Hasu Houston, e-mail interview, 18 January 2012.

⁴¹ The use of the term "melting pot" to suggest the ethnically diverse populations in the United States dates back to 1908 when Israel Zangwill's play, *The Melting Pot*, was staged in Washington, D.C., to rave reviews. In the play, the central character, David, a Russian Jew, emigrates to the United States after losing all of his family members in a pogrom. Over the course of the play, David falls in love with a gentile woman, who turns out to be the daughter of the Russian officer responsible for the deaths of his family members. The central theme of the play, David's yearning for a metaphorical "melting pot" where everyone can live peacefully without racial discrimination, attracted an audience that included a number of immigrants. Philip Gleason, *Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 7.

⁴² J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, "What Is an American?," in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1783), ed. Susan Manning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42-44.

⁴³ The "people" in Clinton's speech meant Anglo-Saxons. See Merle Curti, *The Roots of American Loyalty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), 74.

⁴⁴ Horace M. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States: Studies in the Group Psychology of the American Peoples* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 58-59.

⁴⁵ Kallen's pluralism refers to pluralism within European countries. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States*, 124-25.

⁴⁶ Randolph S. Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks, eds., *History of a Literary Radical and Other Essays* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1920), 266-68.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁴⁹ Christopher Wolsko, Bernadette Park, and Charles M. Judd, "Considering the Tower of Babel: Correlates of Assimilation and Multiculturalism among Ethnic Minority and Majority Groups in the United States," *Social Justice Research* 19, no. 3 (September 2006): 278.

⁵⁰ Dennis J. Downey, "From Americanization to Multiculturalism: Political Symbols and Struggles for Cultural Diversity in Twentieth-Century American Race Relations," *Sociological Perspectives* 42, no. 2 (1999): 249.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁵² Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 52.

⁵³ Margaret Mead, "Ethnicity and Anthropology in America," in *Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict and Accommodation*, ed. Lola Romanucci-Ross and George A. De Vos, 3rd ed. (London: Altamira Press, 1995), 309.

⁵⁴ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 52.

⁵⁵ Ronald Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 294.

⁵⁶ Mary C. Waters, *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 286.

⁵⁷ Lee Weng Choy, "Accents and Hyphens: Reading Ping Chong's *Deshima*," *Art and AsiaPacific* 20 (1998): 79.

⁵⁸ Roberta Uno, "Introduction to *Letters to a Student Revolutionary*," in *Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women*, ed. Roberta Uno (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 262.

⁵⁹ As the daughter of a Japanese mother and an African American father, Houston has emphasized the complexity of her racial and ethnic attributes. She has also used the term "transnationality" to describe how being of both Japanese and American nationalities has shaped her identity and work. Velina Hasu Houston, ed., *The Politics of Life: Four Plays by Asian American Women* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 3.

⁶⁰ Shishir Kurup, phone interview, 7 February 2011.

⁶¹ Richard Jenkins, "Ethnicity Etcetera: Social Anthropological Points of View," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19, no. 4 (1996): 810.

⁶² Wong, "Finding Your Inner Zulu," (unpublished manuscript, 3 March 2011), Microsoft Word file, 1.

⁶³ Wong discovered that she and David Henry Hwang, who are both Chinese American, do not belong to the same haplogroup. Elizabeth Wong, e-mail interview, 28 January 2011.

⁶⁴ Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 53.

⁶⁵ David Henry Hwang, e-mail interview, 31 January 2011.

⁶⁶ David Henry Hwang, "A Very DNA Reunion" (unpublished manuscript, 3 February 2011), PDF file, 2.

⁶⁷ David Henry Hwang, e-mail interview, 30 December 2011.

⁶⁸ Lina Patel, "That Could Be You" (unpublished manuscript, 28 January 2011), PDF file, 2.

⁶⁹ Lina Patel, e-mail interview, 25 January 2011.

⁷⁰ Patel, "That Could Be You," 14.

⁷¹ Velina Hasu Houston, e-mail interview, 26 January 2011.

⁷² Shishir Kurup, phone interview, 7 February 2011.

⁷³ Depression has often been considered weakness and failure in general, and Kurup's family is not an exception in viewing it this way. Shishir Kurup, phone interview, 7 February 2011.

⁷⁴ David Matsumoto, *Culture and Psychology* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks and Cole, 2004), 156.

⁷⁵ George A. De Vos, "Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict and Accommodation," in *Ethnic Identity*, ed. Romanucci-Ross and De Vos, 12.