Spies and Aliens as Translated Figures:

Strategies of Otherness in the Plays of Translingual Anglophone Writers of Asian Heritage

submitted by

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Abstract

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This doctoral thesis by creative product comprises my full-length play, *Coloured Aliens* and a critical exegesis that examines the plays of Asian translingual writers who use the genre tropes (the alien, the spy) as part of their literary strategy to manage their linguistically mobile identity. My study explores what it feels like to *live in translation* to investigate translingualism's unique impact on the creative writing process.

The creative component, *Coloured Aliens*, is a comedy that depicts an interracial couple navigating their romance in the context of racism. It investigates issues of racial and linguistic identity in the lives of Mai Nguyen, a Vietnamese-Australian playwright, and her Anglo-Celtic Australian boyfriend, Kevin O'Sullivan, who ultimately steals her persona to write a mainstream play that will save them from economic precarity.

The critical exegesis examines the use of intertextuality, genre tropes and meta-theatrical techniques in David Henry Hwang's play, *M Butterfly*, which is studied alongside my play. In chapter one, I draw on research by sociolinguists and Eva Hoffman's memoir *Lost in Translation* to argue that translingualism is characterised by the experience of translation, which I define broadly to include both linguistic and cultural translation. Chapter two draws on research by Tina Chen to argue that my translingual reading of Hwang's play reveals both strategies of imposture (within the narrative) and impersonation (in the operation of the play as a whole). I examine *M Butterfly,* its critical reception and interviews granted by the playwright to investigate how Hwang expresses his translingualism as an Asian writer working in the white and monolingual context of North American theatre in the late 1980s. Chapter three explores the use of the alien trope in my play to self-reflexively interrogate how it addresses the challenges of living in translation. *Coloured Aliens* references colonial Australia's categorisation of Asians as 'coloured aliens', before conflating it with extra-terrestrial aliens found in science fiction. I analyse how the stage production deploys reverse-racial casting (where an Asian actor plays the white character and vice versa) and design elements to subvert expectations of racial/linguistic conformity.

Doctor of Philosophy Declaration

I, Chi Thi-My Vu, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *Spies and Aliens as Translated Figures: Strategies of Otherness in the Plays of Translingual Anglophone Writers of Asian Heritage* is no more than 80,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of bibliography, references and footnotes.

This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

I have conducted my research in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and Victoria University's Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures.

Signature

Date
31 December 2023

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Coloured Aliens

They live among us

By Chi Vu

"At the present time in Sydney, we have whole streets which are practically given up to the businesses conducted by Chinese, Syrians, and other ***coloured aliens****, and one cannot go today into more than five towns of any importance in the country districts of New South Wales without finding two, three, or perhaps half-a-dozen coloured storekeepers apparently doing a thriving business"* – John Watson 1901.

Character list

Mai Nguyen - an Asian female with a Western suburbs Australian accent.

Kevin O'Sullivan - a well-spoken, Anglo-Australian male with a sporty physique.

Dennis Worthington - a volunteer board member of Everyman Theatre Co. He is very likeable, older and old-monied (can be a voice over)

Moira - an Irish Computer Voice (as well as other computer-generated accents).

Note

A forward slash (/) indicates when the next speech begins, overlapping with the dialogue.

[Translations] do not need to be read out.

If the actor playing Mai is not a fluent Vietnamese speaker, it's preferable to read the English translation instead.

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Introduction

Two languages, one body

I do not write from a 'Vietnamese' literary lineage. Though I have learnt that this is what is expected of me, both from my name and my author photograph. This is despite the complexity of Vietnamese literature, given the huge influence of Chinese domination, French colonisation, North American imperialism and Soviet ideology on Vietnamese language and culture. Yet readers and critics in Australia sometimes want me to write from a purely Vietnamese perspective. For Anglophone writers of Asian heritage, the para-text inscribed by our Asian bodies and non-Anglicised names seem to be the most prominent aspects of our literary presence.

This has happened throughout my career. When I was invited to write a short memoir about leaving Vietnam as a refugee to migrate to Australia in support of writers who are persecuted by their governments[2], I had no misgivings about telling my 'migrant memoir' in a way that met some of those expectations. In *The Uncanny* (2013), I utilised the expected tropes of how my family, as newly arrived immigrants, had humorously misunderstood the 'No Standing Anytime' traffic sign of our new country. However, I also made sure that this relatable anecdote was accompanied by a less familiar account of what it felt like, viscerally, to be inhabited by an alien language. To describe this, I used the metaphor of bodily mutation because it conveyed how disquieting it had been to suddenly find oneself experiencing the world through a foreign linguistic framework:

> Less than a year after my family's arrival in Australia, I experienced that moment of unconsciously thinking in the adopted language. I was standing on the wooden steps in my public Primary School when this foreign thought arrived. The mind – *my* mind – had thought directly in English without my willing it, without having put any effort into creating it. I stood there frozen on the wooden steps, wanting to burn that moment into my memory, for it was as surprising as suddenly growing a third arm and watching it wave back at me for the first time…[My birth] limbs remain under my jacket, weak and

[2] Proceeds from the *Joyful Strains* anthology are donated to PEN (MacCarter & Lemer 2013).

> pale… I take them out now and again to grasp the texture of words and ideas, to finger-tap quiet rhythms with those tiny fingernails, to listen for the resonances within (2013, p. 83)

The excerpt reveals the complex relationship I have with both of my languages. As a writer whose primary language is Vietnamese but whose *dominant* language has become English, I've had to consider carefully who engages with my creative writing and how. I've increasingly learnt to use metaphor or genre in my work to navigate the sense of in-between-ness due to my translingual identity. As a researcher, I am therefore interested in how scripts written by other Anglophone playwrights of Asian heritage relate to their translingualism.

My professional creative practice spans more than two decades of publications and theatre productions. In each of my creative works, I have sought to express the experience of being fragmented culturally and linguistically. In my first play, *A Story of Soil* (2000), I made a conscious decision to write a bilingual script because it was rare for these two linguistic audience groups (English and Vietnamese) to share an experience, artistic or otherwise. As a bilingual young artist during the late 1990s, I wanted to craft a theatre play that involved linguistic code-switching to represent how I, and the people I knew well, lived our lives across two languages. Marvin Carlson's *Speaking in Tongues: Languages at Play in the Theatre* (2006) is an early text that addresses the question of multilingualism in performance. Carlson argues that 'linguistic negotiations between [minority- and mainstream-language speakers] reveal…power relationships, dominance, and resistance' (2006, p.124). The book goes on to emphasise that, 'switching languages in specific contexts and from one mode of expression to another is a feature of syncretic theatre' (Balme 1999, cited in Carlson 2006, p. 124). The dialogue of *A Story of Soil* was written in a way that made it possible for monolinguals in either language to follow the narrative, while the staggered audience responses (depending on which language they were able to follow) was a key part of the enjoyment of the performance.[3]

[3] While Marvin Carlson advocates using a 'confluence' of concepts by Mikhail Bakhtin and Homi Bhabha to analyse the 'mixture of cultural discourses manifest in the postcolonial plays under scrutiny' (Marc Maufort 2003, cited in Carlson 2006, p. 110), I chose not to use these theoretical approaches in this exegesis. The reason is that the focus of my doctoral thesis is not my first play, *A Story of Soil*, where it would be appropriate to centre my discussion on the multilingual dialogue in theatre as a means of conveying Bakhtin's heteroglossia and Bhabha's hybridity. While I do discuss translingual dialogue briefly in relation

A Story of Soil, directed by David Everist, went on to be produced by Footscray Community Arts Centre[4] (FCAC) in August 2000. While live theatre affords a unique cultural interaction and exchange for all who are witness to it, it is also a demanding form. My play required—perhaps impractically, given that the Vietnamese community was still establishing itself in Australia—six of the seven actors to be bilingual in Vietnamese and English. The actor Tâm Phan was the only trained actor with professional experience. He had been a film director in South Vietnam and had to burn all his movies upon the Fall of Saigon to avoid persecution. The lead role was played by HảiHà Lê, in her first major production, who would later become a professional actor. *A Story of Soil* then toured to Sydney in October 2002.

For the premiere season, I remember how positive word-of-mouth for *A Story of Soil* spread quickly in the Melbourne theatre scene, with seats becoming increasingly hard to secure. It seemed that everyone was surprised that such a well-crafted play was written by a writer who, at that time, was still very much a member of the 'newly arrived' Vietnamese community. The season became sold out after we received highly positive reviews from *The Age* and *The Australian*, two of the main newspapers in Melbourne. There was a 'buzz', as front-of-house efforts went from trying to help audiences feel reassured (that their trek to what was then a sketchy outer suburb of Melbourne was worthwhile) to suddenly managing ways to add more seats to FCAC's Basement Theatre to accommodate as many people as possible as they jostled for a ticket. However, I felt perplexed about how one glowing review was at pains to label this play as 'community theatre at its best' (Thomson 2000). Another review qualifies its praise for the production by cautioning readers 'this is community theatre and must be viewed accordingly' (Ball 2000).

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to the translingual wordplay that occurs between Mai and Kevin in my play, *Coloured Aliens,* the primary concern of this thesis is to look at the genre tropes (or archetypes) used to embody the tension of opposites in the dialogue, which have been variously studied as hybridity or heteroglossia. Thus, this research is not solely concerned with the dialogue spoken by the characters in the plays studied. Rather, my unique contribution is a study of the metaphorisation of the act of conversing across and between languages, which I describe as translation.

[4] It is through cutting-edge, multi-artform organisations like FCAC that Australian theatre is able to de-centre whiteness, by staging playscripts by non-white Australians. FCAC continues to support the work of diverse artists to make exciting artistic work today.

Despite how well this first play had been received, I remember feeling that the emphasis on the label 'community' was both inaccurate and somewhat troubling. I have no qualms about being involved in community development arts projects when it is an apt description[5]. The label 'community theatre' in the context of the Australian arts sector applies to projects where professional artists work with non-artists from the 'community', and from this interaction and engagement, a theatre show is created from the voices of the many. For *A Story of Soil,* however, I spent two years teaching myself how to write a full-length play. Thus, it felt confusing to me that my script was labelled as 'community theatre'.[6] The process was not what arts funding bodies would consider a community engagement process because I, as the professional artist who received government funding, had not collaborated with any community members to create my script; indeed, the 'community development' sector would consider it inaccurate and even unethical of me to label *A Story of Soil* a 'community theatre' piece for this reason. So, I wanted to figure out why these respected theatre critics would mislabel the play. A benign explanation might be that they wanted to signal to readers how the play was presented at an arts centre that was still very much under-resourced at that time, so readers should not expect the expensive costumes and sets associated with well-funded mainstage theatre. A less charitable explanation might involve the critic's perception of the point of view – or *gaze* – of the work, being that of a non-white writer. At that time there were few people of colour on mainstream media, let alone in the theatre. Given what theatre was expected to look (and sound) like at that time, I wondered whether the 'community theatre' label arose because these critics felt their readership needed to be forewarned about how it was coming from a *minority* perspective? The word 'community' was, and still is, code for 'non-white' in Australia. To designate a work 'community' might have been a way to imply that the narrative does not centre whiteness[7] for audiences who were unaccustomed to such undomesticated texts. I wondered then, as I do now, whether to be an Asian writer

[5] Indeed, I have worked on community theatre projects for decades and had been one of the founding co-artistic directors of Western Edge Youth Arts, which came out of youth theatre projects based at FCAC. Alongside my work with disadvantaged and/or at-risk young people at WEYA and FCAC, I have more recently mentored culturally and linguistically diverse artists through universities and not-for-profit arts organisations.

[6] I received funding from the Australia Council's Literature Board to write this play, not the Community Development board, as it was known at the time.

[7] On the other hand, the label 'community theatre' does not guarantee that the narrative is from a non-white perspective: there are plenty of problematic examples of this label being used to seek funding for colonising projects.

means to be seen as less 'professional' or 'creative' than a white-Australian one. If so, where does that leave me as a Vietnamese, translingual writer in Australia? More disconcertingly, I wondered whether plays were, and are, evaluated on a criterion *other* than artistic merit – specifically on whether they centre whiteness or not. This central concern would be raised explicitly when began writing my play *Coloured Aliens*, produced almost twenty years after *A Story of Soil*.

In the same year that *A Story of Soil* premiered, I was granted an Asialink Residency and lived three months in Hanoi. During those months, I met with courageous independent visual artists and writers[8] who defied the threat of government censorship and persecution in pursuit of their artistic conviction. Their generosity and defiance deeply inspired me. The text I wrote during this time eventually became a short story, *Vietnam: A Psychic Guide*, which was published in Meanjin (2001). Years later, it was excerpted in The PEN Macquarie Anthology of Australian Literature (2009).

The text of *Vietnam: A Psychic Guide* also became the basis for a theatrical performance, adapted and directed by Sandra Long (2003). This was a new method of working for me. I found the process of devising performance to be much more flexible because the work can be shaped according to the available artists rather than trying to cast actors of very specific age, gender, physical build, etc. to fit a pre-existing playscript, which is a difficult task for a newly settled immigrant community with few trained actors to call upon. This was the experience I'd had with my first play. I continued to conceive of new creative strategies to explore my evolving bilingual subjectivity. While in *A Story of Soil,* I used code-switching (swapping between English and Vietnamese'), in the stage adaptation of *Vietnam: A Psychic Guide*, I asked celebrated translator Tôn Thất Quỳnh Du to translate my text from English into literary Vietnamese. Director Sandra Long placed three performers on stage for this completely bilingual production using my text: Tâm Phan (again) – who spoke the Vietnamese translation; Jodee Mundy – who performed the English original[9]; and me; I performed in both English and Vietnamese. My prose was

[8] Two of the authors who kindly met with me were Dương Thu Hương and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. I was greatly supported by arts journalist, Sơn Nguyễn, who helped translate a short play of mine into Vietnamese, as well as welcomed by expat artist, Hania Galan and gallery owner Natasha and visual artist Vũ from Salon Natasha.

[9] For one performance, Mundy added Auslan – Australian Sign Language – too, for members from the deaf community.

presented in the North Melbourne Arts House along with the Long's fusion of poetic stage imagery, sound design and video projections, allowing the audience to experience the musicality of each language.

In *Banh Chung* (2010), I wrote and directed a short play that drew on Vietnamese culinary practices, mythical legends and historical events associated with the Lunar New Year (Tết Nguyên Đán) to confront the legacy of colonialism, war and mass migration. However, I was dissatisfied with the traditional presentation of this story because performing the work in a proscenium arch theatre implies there was *one* narrative shared by the entire audience sitting in the auditorium; that didn't feel true to me. Instead, I wanted to convey how the immigrant experience is one of fragmentation and solitude. The subjectivity of living in the Vietnamese diaspora feels as though one is both 'here' and over 'there' simultaneously, whether that is in a Vietnam that no longer exists, or in cities such as Los Angeles or Paris, where there was a large population of Vietnamese speakers. Therefore, I reconceived the narrative as an audio play that one listens to through headphones while moving[10] through an installation performance space (2012; 2013). Working with talented artists, Naomi Ota (visual artist) and Jacques Soddell (sound designer) to realise this more experimental version of the work, I was finally able to convey the simultaneity of the translingual imagination. One audience member described the experience as follows: 'Each of us started on the same journey but in a different space, as if we were all fellow travellers through time and history, having both an individual and collective experience' (2012, pers. Comm.). Thus *Banh Chung* installation performance inverts the relationship between time and space that usually exists in a traditional theatre performance.

After the spatial innovation of creating an installation performance, I began to consciously employ genre to characterise my linguistically-mobile identity. My novella, *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale* (2012), drew on an ancient Buddhist tale. Angulimala was said to have lived in the time of the Buddha, in ancient India. He was a deranged killer who wore a garland of his victims' fingers around his neck; Angulimala means 'garland of fingers'. Fascinated, I took the basic elements from this story and set it in the Vietnamese refugee community in 1980s Melbourne. One reason I leant on the gothic genre was because of

[10] Through audio instructions, each audient is invited to move, sit or stand in different areas within the space.

my hesitancy about how to depict a serial killer (who, in my version, was also a member of this minority community) for a broader Anglophone readership. Simply writing such a figure without careful consideration felt problematic to me, because the resulting work could be co-opted by racists to argue against allowing non-white immigrants into Australia. I used the postcolonial gothic to emphasise how the narrative was a fictional and artistic product, rather than a 'migrant memoir' because that is how texts written by non-white writers are often interpreted. Obversely, my decision to use the Buddhist tale of Angulimala as a starting point was to protect me from criticism from 'my own' minority community, as leaning on a preexisting tale allowed me to depict both inspiring and unsavoury Vietnamese characters while writing in English. *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale* used the metaphor of bodily amputation to speak of the trauma of leaving one's ancestral land, and then trying to reassemble one's life in a foreign one. The novella was published by Giramondo and shortlisted for a NSW Premier's Award 2013.

Next, I continued exploring genre as a way to embody translingual subjectivity through the motif of the doppelgänger in *The Dead Twin* (2015), directed by Deborah Leiser-Moore. This play was about a family haunted by the ghost of their dead son, while the living son was kept in the dark about his twin. This time, I utilised the horror genre as a metaphor for inherited trauma, and how children acquire what Marianne Hirsch calls an indirect 'postmemory' of the horrific events that their parents had endured (2008). The family I presented in *The Dead Twin*' are not Vietnamese or even bilingual. However, the secret narrative of this play is about repressed cultural and linguistic identity; for me, it depicts how the Vietnamese side of my psyche is like a (dead) twin whose very existence is not acknowledged by most people, and yet my lived experience is very much haunted by this twin. One could argue that the trope of the twin is a metaphor for an aspect of my translingualism from that period in my life.

In my most recent full-length work, *Coloured Aliens* (2017), I once again used genre tropes to highlight themes of alienation and translingualism. As you will have noted, this play uses the trope of the alien to situate and historicise Vietnamese immigration to Australia[11]. Consequently, my creative writing has spanned naturalism, surrealism,

[11] I go into more detail about *Coloured Aliens* in chapter three of this exegesis.

postcolonial horror, to comedy and science fiction. Looking back, I can see that I have always used metaphor to create an expansive idea of what it is to live in translation.

The Structure of the thesis

My doctoral thesis by creative product comprises a full-length play and a critical exegesis that examines two plays by Asian translingual writers who use the genre tropes (the alien, the spy) as part of their artistic strategy to manage their linguistically mobile identity.

CREATIVE COMPONENT: '*Coloured Aliens*'

The creative component of this PhD is my play, '*Coloured Aliens*'. I describe it as a comedy of manners about racism in Australia, including in Australian theatre. The protagonist, Mai Nguyen is an Vietnamese-Australian playwright living and working in an Australia that wants her to write the ethnic play, but that's exactly the kind of story she no longer wants to tell. Feeling she's trapped in a crappy role inside a 'migrant-makes-good' narrative, Mai tries to escape genre expectations by escaping to a silent meditation retreat. Her partner, Kevin O'Sullivan, is a security guard who projects his own frustrated creativity onto Mai's career; he gives her well-meaning, sometimes pithy, advice. In Mai's absence, Kevin decides to write a pitch and submit it using Mai's name: perhaps having an ethnic name will help 'their' chance of success. The fallout from Kevin's act of identity theft highlights the impact of a theatre industry that struggles to overcome its centrality of whiteness and monolingual mindset.

EXEGESIS: *Spies and aliens: strategies of Otherness in the plays of translingual Anglophone writers of Asian heritage*

In the exegetical component of this PhD, I examine two plays alongside one another: David Hwang's script, *M Butterfly* (1989) and my own play *Coloured Aliens.* I ask how translingual playwrights of Asian heritage, like Hwang and myself, living in countries such as the USA and Australia are impacted by the white and monolingual conditions under which they create, and how these, in turn, affect the metaphors or genre tropes that they deploy in their theatre scripts. This approach allows a comparative analysis of each script's use of genre tropes as metaphors that emphasise distinct aspects of

translingualism.

My understanding of translingualism is drawn from Steven G. Kellman's definition of this concept. A translingual is someone who 'uses more than one language or predominantly uses a language other than their primary one' (2000). My usage of the term places an emphasis on a 'literary imagination' that both spans, and is in-between, two national languages, and thus admits Martha Cutter's suggestion to emphasise the act of 'crossing over to another linguistic identity' (2005, p. 199). In the field of linguistics, the term bilingual is often used instead of translingual. While it is possible to be 'bilingual' while remaining mono-cultural, in this exegesis I will only be referring to research where linguists use the term 'bilingual' or 'multilingual' in a way that also implies crossing over into another linguistic identity, that is, someone who is 'translingual'.

In this perspective, Hwang as a second-generation playwright whose parents had each migrated to the USA from China, and myself as a Vietnamese-born, Australian writer, are both *bilingual*, defined by linguist François Grosjean as those who 'use two or more languages or dialects in their everyday lives' (2010, p. 4), and *translingual*. This is because the small subset of bilinguals who are not *also* transcultural conjures up the image of foreign-language students still living in their primary language and culture (and so while they are technically 'bilingual,' they remain within the confines of their primary linguistic identity). Writing generated by second-language learners who fit within this subset is therefore outside the scope of my research, and because I wish to emphasise the fact that this research draws on both the fields of literary studies as well as linguistics, I will use the terms translingual and bilingual interchangeably.

In chapter one, 'Translingual Lives: Living in Two Languages,' I reference the writings of linguist François Grosjean to examine how the predominant experience for a translingual is that of linguistic relativity. This phenomenon is where both of the languages of translinguals are activated, even when they communicate in only one of their languages due to the monolingual context. Grosjean emphasises that translinguals are best understood as possessing a 'unique linguistic configuration', instead of the popular misconception that they are, or should be able to function at the level of fluency of two

monolinguals in housed in one body (2010, pp. 19-22). Motivated by my personal experience as a translingual in monolingual Australia, my study aims to explain the impact of translingualism on the creative writing process. Drawing on Eva Hoffman's celebrated memoir *Lost in Translation* (1989), as well as case studies provided by linguists such as Claire Kramsch and François Grosjean, I argue that translingualism is characterised by the experience of translation, which I define broadly to include both linguistic and cultural translation. I refer to the translingual's unique subjectivity as 'living in translation' and use the word 'translation' in the sense of *being translated* by others, as well as doing the *translating,* which I define broadly to include both linguistic and cultural translation.

In addition, I propose that translingual writers face a set of challenges beyond those involved in the process of writing creatively *per se.* Examining the memoir and case studies of translinguals, I observe their unique linguistic identity reoccur in themes of duality, transformation, identity performance, allegiance, belonging and betrayal. Having identified a pattern of experiences in the narratives of translinguals, I argue that they enter the condition of *translation* through three overlapping stages of distress: (i) through their alienation from their surroundings; (ii) through alienation from other people, and ultimately (iii) alienation from their inner addressee.

In response to these creative challenges, which literary strategies do translinguals use to manage their linguistically mobile identity? My hypothesis is that creative writers may employ a number of metaphors, or *genre tropes*, to help them embody and dramatise their translingualism. I contend that they do this to examine the complex processes of translation that they experience every day, but which remain largely unrecognised by the monolingual mainstream. In literary terms, novelist Salman Rushdie describes these experiences as the 'migrant [having] entered the condition of metaphor (Rushdie & Grass 2000, p. 77).' I conclude chapter one by affirming the correlation between translation and metaphor and propose using this correspondence to undertake *translingual* readings of the selected plays.

Researcher Tina Chen remarks that the figures of the spy and alien are particularly apt for describing stereotypes of racialised Asians in monolingual America (2005, xviii). It isn't

difficult to see how her observation can also apply to racialised Asians in monolingual Australia. I propose a close reading of the genre trope of the spy or alien as productive frameworks to interpret the play scripts. Thus, I advance the argument that these genre tropes can be interpreted as metaphors for living in translation. To test my claims, I undertake an analysis of *M Butterfly* in chapter two, before turning to *Coloured Aliens* in chapter three.

In chapter two, 'Spies as Translated Characters: A Translingual Reading of *M Butterfly*,' I examine Hwang's script, its critical reception and interviews granted by the playwright to investigate how Hwang expresses his translingual subjectivity as an Asian writer working in the predominantly white and monolingual context of North American theatre in the late 1980s[12]. Specifically, I contend that Hwang uses the spy figure, intertextual references, and meta-theatrical techniques, including cross-gender characterisation, to question and disrupt Orientalist stereotypes of the racialised linguistic other. My translingual reading of Hwang's play also reveals how these creative strategies subvert simplistic assumptions about translation as an uncontested process used to benefit the dominant linguaculture. The figure of the Asian spy in *M Butterfly*, Song Liling, can be interpreted as a metaphor for the complications of living in translation. Please note that, throughout this thesis, when Song Liling is in the guise of a woman in *M Butterfly*, I use the pronouns 'she/her', and when Song Liling is in the guise of a man, I use the pronouns 'he/him'.

My critical analysis of Hwang's play is organised according to these sub-questions:
a) What linguistic conditions led Hwang to write *M Butterfly* as he did? Here, I borrow from an interview with translator and author Illan Stavans to explain why Hwang's play possesses a 'translingual sensibility' (Kellman & Stavans 2015), despite it being written predominantly in English.
b) What cultural conditions did Hwang find that led him to use intertextuality to write his play? How does Hwang's intertextuality subvert the stereotype of the submissive Oriental

[12] *M Butterfly* is a work that has been consistently performed and revived. This fact demonstrates that it occupies the rare space in Asian diasporic theatre as a canonical work; it is a play that it is worthy of scholarly attention. Revised productions of *M Butterfly* have reduced the emphasis on the 'gender reveal' but not Hwang's critique of race and ethnicity. This means that my analysis of the trope of the spy in Hwang's play is not affected by more recent productions.

female, found in Giacomo Puccini's Opera, *Madame Butterfly* (1904). In my analysis, I identify three ways in which this occurs: in the title of Hwang's play; through the lines of dialogue that directly address the Orientalist stereotype found in the Opera; and finally, through the dissonance between what the audience sees, as described in the play's stage directions, and what they are told by Rene Gallimard as he recounts his favourite scenes from the Opera.

c) In a close reading of *M Butterfly*, I ask whether the Asian character, Song Liling (who is a spy and lover of the play's main character, Rene Gallimard) can be interpreted as a metaphor for linguistic identity performance. If so, what are some conclusions we can draw from such an interpretation? My finding is that Song's character arc confirms the negative consequences awaiting translingual Asians who decide to stop impersonating their own 'Asian stereotype' for the benefit of white viewers. The ending scenes in *M Butterfly* contain a clear warning about what is in store for Asian characters who refuse to conform to the racial/gender stereotypes expected of them by a colonising Western gaze.

In chapter three, 'Aliens as Translated Characters: A Translingual Reading of *Coloured Aliens*,' I continue the correlation between metaphor and translingualism by turning my critical attention to my play, *Coloured Aliens*. In a more discursive investigation, I scrutinise the cultural conditions that led me to write *Coloured Aliens* as I did. I argue that I am translingual in a monolingual system (which includes my schooling and tertiary education in Australia, as well as my early experiences in the theatre). I then contend that Australia sees itself as a white and monolingual nation due to its colonial history, and this has profoundly affected how the theatre sector operates (all white casts in a racially diverse, multilingual nation). This historical backdrop affects how Asians are presented, or worse still *present* themselves, on stage as the targets of humour in Australia.

It was in this cultural and linguistic context that I wrote *Coloured Aliens.* As I wanted to address the centrality of whiteness in Australian theatre, I began by gathering organisational allies to avoid being easily dismissed in a culture that frequently dismisses the harmful effects of racism by calling it *casual*, as though it's a collection of loungewear.

In terms of artistic strategies, I started my script by borrowing from the migrant memoir genre. Because the main character Mai is a playwright, the play is able to examine the Australian theatre industry in detail. As a Vietnamese-Australian, she is the putative 'coloured alien' who refuses to see herself as such. Her Anglo-Celtic Australian, security-guard boyfriend, Kevin ultimately steals her identity to write a mainstream play that will save them from economic precarity. They are an interracial couple navigating their romance in the context of racism. It was easy to examine the trope of the extra-terrestrial alien in my play using colonial Australia's categorisation of Asians as 'coloured aliens.' My play intertextually references the immigration restriction laws that were enacted as part of Australia's Federation. It does so to comment on existing stereotypes of Asian Australians in contemporary Australia.

To complicate and problematise the play, I make Mai and Kevin both likeable and unlikeable at various times to avoid binary oppositions in terms of depictions of race and gender. With regard to the play's dialogue, I decentre monolingual English through translingual wordplay between the two main characters. As a result, I emphasise the characters' intersectionality as well as their varying degrees of translingualism. In amongst this playfulness, I introduce the question of casual racism by starting with ironic teasing - which eventually leads to Kevin's act of identity theft. All of these strategies taken together allow my play to complicate the idea of identity itself. This chapter also examines the casting and design choices made during the play's production, which further enhance the script's central argument about the constructedness of identity. The performance of *Coloured Aliens* uses reverse-racial casting (where the white character is played by an Asian actor and vice versa) to subvert expectations of racial, linguistic and genre conformity. Finally, I evaluate the responses from the theatre industry to my play about racism in Australian theatre. I contend that these creative strategies invite the audience to reflect on the complex processes involved in linguistic, cultural, and artistic translation.

In my **conclusion** to the exegesis, I resolve that the use of genre tropes and other creative strategies demonstrate that the playwrights of this study reject a simplistic model of translation as 'carrying across' words from one national language to another with its implication that the transported 'cargo' remains intact; instead, my analysis shows an

emphasis on the diversity and complexity of translational processes, including the precondition of transformation that is at its heart. The translingual playwrights of this study use genre tropes (the spy, the alien) to reveal how they have entered the condition of metaphor.

The significance of my research rests on the following challenge: if we fail to understand how living in translation impacts writing for performance, then we may overlook translingual approaches to interpreting and evaluating a growing number of writers' creative works. When we disregard the complexity of living in translation, with its insistence on transformation, we may fail to appreciate the creative strategies utilised by writers to assert their translingual subjectivity. In addition, creative writing educators who are unaware of the needs of their translingual students may fail to properly support these students' creative texts. What is lost then is the opportunity to fully express their unique linguistically mobile identity -- if that's what that student wants to do. When this occurs, we risk neglecting the needs of a younger generation of translingual playwrights and authors. Thus, as a nation, Australia will continue to misunderstand what it means to live in translation.

Chapter 1

Translingual Lives: living in two languages

The migrant has entered the condition of metaphor—Salman Rushdie.

Introductory Section

Postcolonial author Salman Rushdie's quote is an enigmatic description of those who have crossed geographic and linguistic borders. Despite its obliqueness, I immediately agreed with its truthfulness when I initially came across it. I was pricked by curiosity, so I asked myself: What does Rushdie mean by '*entering* the condition of metaphor'? And why — what is it that makes the migrant enter this state? I was eager to discover what such migrants might find once they were inside these metaphors? Furthermore, what does Rushdie's statement suggest about monolinguals and their relationship to metaphor — do they merely live *beside* it? Because there was no other information accompanying Rushdie's quote when I first came across it, I became obsessed with tracking it down in the belief that it would somehow help me articulate what it feels like to be translingual. It seemed that this enquiry mattered to both my research into literature written by translinguals as well as to my creative writing. I imagined that it would reveal some recurring themes that preoccupy translingual writers, and these would no doubt make their way into their literary output, however obliquely.

But in order to do that, I first needed to find some facts about the object of my study, translingual writers, or as Tijana Miletić puts it, 'literary migrants' (2008). Translingualism has been misunderstood in the popular imagination, even by translinguals themselves. As a Vietnamese-born writer who publishes (mostly) in English, I am constantly considering the subtle differences between my two languages. Even though I have spent over four decades of my life in Australia, I remain fascinated with

how each of my languages affect me differently. This lack of knowledge about translingualism is in part due to a lack of scholarly attention on multilingualism until only relatively recently. Thus, there are many misconceptions that surround bilinguals and bilingualism. These myths include:

> bilinguals are rare in the population, and they possess equal and perfect knowledge of both of their languages; real bilinguals have acquired their two or more languages in childhood and have no accent in either of them…switching between languages is a sign of laziness in bilinguals…and so on (Grosjean 2010, p. xv).

Linguist François Grosjean then spends the rest of his book, *Bilingual: Life and Reality*, refuting these misbeliefs about bilinguals. Due to the prevalence of these misconceptions, however, bilinguals are held up to the standards of monolinguals, because they are thought to function simply as two monolinguals existing in one body. This has been shown to not be the case: Grosjean argues that bilinguals are not two, complete or incomplete, monolinguals in one, but rather are 'uniquely and specifically configured'. That is, the 'coexistence and constant interaction of the languages in the bilingual have produced a different but complete language system' (2010, p. 75).

Unfortunately, the foundation of linguistics research was done on monolinguals, with the assumption that bilinguals simply use language in a similar way but apply it to two or more languages rather than just one. This approach has been proven to be deeply flawed. Ukrainian-American linguist Aneta Pavlenko argues that bilingualism requires its own theory, because there is a 'growing realisation that 'monolingual' theories are of limited use in explaining linguistic and cognitive processing in bilinguals and multilinguals' (2014, p. 20). It is therefore vital to study how translinguals' experience of language may differ from monolinguals.

Living in two languages[13] may be advantageous in terms of greater access to knowledge and networks, especially if one of the languages is a globally powerful language like

[13] In my thesis, I specifically look at 'living in two languages in the context of immigration to countries such as the USA or Australia, which points to a hierarchy of languages, with English at the apex as the only officially recognised language, while 'community languages' such as Chinese or Vietnamese are regarded

English. However, less frequently articulated are some of translingualism's disadvantages, such as the emotional risk entailed in acquiring a new language. For example, linguist Claire Kramsch identifies that for language learners, the foreign language can be expanding/expansive - that is for some, it gives a sense of an enhanced self (she uses Alice Kaplan's memoir, *French Lessons*, to demonstrate this), while for others it provokes a sense of being diminished, as though invaded by an alien self (she uses Richard Watson's memoir, *The Philosopher's Demise: Learning French*, as the contrast). Kramsch studies the reason why one language learner might embrace their second language[14] while another might resist it and proposes that the metaphors we live by 'can impede [or] facilitate our production of a language that is foreign to our body. These metaphors are grounded in our bodily experience of big versus small, up versus down, inside versus outside, etc' (2009, p. 46).

The danger of experiencing a diminished or *alienated* self when speaking another language can be examined in greater detail if we study the fraught process of transitioning from one dominant language into another. Analysing Eva Hoffman's acclaimed memoir, *Lost in Translation*, I propose that translingualism involves three stages of distress due to alienation, which may overlap temporally.

In the first two sections of this chapter, I delve into translinguals' experience of alienation from their surroundings and from other people. The third section describes a stage of distress that is particularly relevant to creative writers: the translingual's alienation from the self (the inner addressee or inner reader). Using the findings from the stages of distress, I will argue that the experience of translation is the predominant, lived experience which recurs in translingual lives. In the final section of this chapter, I aim to connect translingual distress with Salman Rushdie's striking observation (Rushdie & Grass 2000, p. 77). I do this by building on the research into how translation and metaphor are linked, etymologically and historically, to consider whether the translingual writer has, indeed, entered the condition of metaphor.

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as un-prestigious when compared to languages such as French or Italian. My thesis does not refer to bilingualism in countries where two or more languages are official (Switzerland, Belgium, for example).

[14] This is what linguists call the student's 'L2', whereas the primary language is called the 'L1'.

Alienation from One's Surroundings

The first stage of distress is encountered immediately upon contact with the foreign language, whether this is due to migration, or upon leaving the immigrant family home (where the mother-tongue prevails) to experience life in the broader culture. This is where the translingual finds that signifier and signified are split asunder, and words no longer correlate with the things they point to. This can be experienced as traumatic, as it places the 'literary immigrant' in a world that suddenly has limited resonance for her; indeed, we see this in Eva Hoffman's celebrated memoir *Lost in Translation* when the new, foreign words do not resonate emotionally with her. The word 'river' is a disembodied word without energy, aura or accumulated associations. 'It does not evoke,' (1989, p. 106) Hoffman scoffs, and it is this which creates a sense of disconnection. To her horror, having previously felt that words were inseparable from what they signified, this loss is felt spiritually, 'I cannot help knowing that words are just themselves…this radical disjoining between word and thing is a desiccating alchemy' (1989, p. 107). While monolinguals generally experience words and the things they signify as being absolute, translinguals can be said to experience words in one language as being *equivalent* (but not *equal*) to the words in their other language.

For translinguals, words and language are more frequently experienced as symbolic tools—the word stands in for a concept and is not the concept itself—and is understood to be arbitrary due to customary usage in a particular language (Kramsch 2009, p. 27). The process of 'crossing over' to another linguistic identity involves the disenchantment from the magical powers of language to reveal its arbitrary and symbolic processes (discourse). It involves the experience of de-familiarisation with language itself. Thus, translinguals become highly self-conscious about the emptiness of language, because each word points to other words, which point to yet other words, in order to create its nuanced meaning.

Pavlenko contends that, '[l]anguage functions as an attention-directing mechanism - both in terms of what to pay attention to and also how much significance of these distinctions within a category we should ascribe to it' (2014, p.53). The grammar and lexicon of a language direct our attention to the features of reality that are salient to that particular

linguistic community. But which facets of reality are emphasised differ from one language to another. Polish-Australian scholars, Mary Besemeres and Anna Wierzbicka encapsulate Edward Sapir's hypothesis that, 'we live in different worlds, not the same world with different labels attached' (2007, xvii). This does not mean, however, that we cannot think outside of our first language, but rather that it requires greater conscious effort in order to think outside the framework set by our mother tongue. Translator David Bellos also illustrates Edward Sapir's work to explain that '[t]he mind-grooves laid down by the forms of a language are not prison walls, but the hills and valleys of a mental landscape where some paths are easier to follow than others' (2011, p. 169). Thus, a translingual such as Eva Hoffman has to therefore deliberately, painstakingly, work to overcome the 'mind grooves' that her primary language has set for her in order to distinguish linguistic elements required to communicate in her second language, while ignoring other features of reality she is accustomed to articulating in her mother-tongue.

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I want to take a moment to provide an example from my first language, Vietnamese. Some concrete nouns such as 'watermelon' can be more readily translated, thanks to the intersubjectivity of language which results in an agreed-upon meaning between speaker and listener, writer and reader. One does not need to stray very far from 'watermelon' to find that different cultures place different values on various relationships to people and things - and so the emotional *valence* is different, and therefore is valued differently between cultures. For example, the word '*Cậu*' (your *mother's* younger brother) might objectively be considered equivalent to the word 'Uncle'. However, subjectively, this isn't true. The complication is that different hierarchies of familial attachments and power relations are evoked by the world *Cậu* in relation to other words for uncle that also exist in Vietnamese. *Cậu* has an inferior position to *Chú*, your *father's* younger brother, because in the patriarchal system that Vietnam adopted from Chinese Confucianism, there is differential treatment in terms of rewards and allegiances for one sort of uncle over another sort of uncle. All other things being equal, *Chú* is a *superior* type of uncle, while *Cậu* is an *inferior* one.

The Vietnamese words for grandmother and grandfather make this even more overt. One's maternal grandmother is literally 'Outside' grandmother (*bà ngoại*) while one's paternal grandmother is 'Inside' or 'Interior' grandmother (*bà nội*). The implications of these nuances are tangible to people's lived experiences: in a traditional, extended Vietnamese family, how you treat your son might be different from how you behave towards your daughter because one day, if you become a grandparent, you hope to become the more respected and intimate '*inside'* grandmother or grandfather, rather than the more distant and tenuous '*outside*' one. Thus, Vietnamese words like Uncle (*Chú* or *Cậu*) and Grandmother (*Bà Nội* or *Bà Ngoại*) are often accompanied by non-identical emotions in English because of their differing associations, values and hierarchies in each of the languages. As Besemeres observes, 'bilingual testimonies indicate that emotional lives—and cognitive worlds—are significantly shaped by the particular languages we live with' (2010, p. 502). And yet societies that are dominated by monolingualism rarely take such challenges of cultural negotiation into account when they interact with translinguals.

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Another finding on bilingualism that is likely to be surprising to monolinguals is that *both* languages are activated in the mind of the translingual, even when they are using only one of their languages (Grosjean 2010, p. 75). That is, instead of engaging only one of their languages to undertake communication in a monolingual context, translinguals thwart research expectations by engaging *both* of their languages. This research is verified by Eva Hoffman, who writes.

> When I speak Polish now, it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it. Each language makes the other relative (1989, p. 122).

As a result, the translingual is continually measuring, or surveilling, one language system against the other, swapping perspectives in order to calibrate their understanding of the language they are using. For Kramsch, 'the self is constantly engaged in reflecting upon itself, aware of its state of well-being and its relation to others' (2009, p. 71). Correspondingly, Grosjean argues that the constant presence of the other language

(whether wanted or unwanted) means that bilinguals experience language as being *relative* to each other. Grosjean goes on to argue that bilinguals can be thought of as being *haunted* due to constantly being *accompanied by* their other language, or other linguistic self:

> Interferences, also called transfers, accompany bilinguals throughout their life, however hard they try to avoid them. They are the bilinguals' uninvited "hidden companions" (Grosjean 2010, p. 68).

Despite writing from the field of linguistics, Grosjean uses metaphor to describe how bilingualism works. According to Grosjean, translinguals can be thought of as being followed around, or haunted, by their other linguistic selves. To me, Grosjean's description is, of course, highly stimulating because in my creative writing I have written works like *The Dead Twin* (2015) and *The Uncanny* (2013) that allude to this linguistic duality and inhabitation. Grosjean's metaphor also coincides with Sneja Gunew's observation of migrant writing, where languages 'function as somatic or corporeal technologies and at times, unbidden, the old and discarded spectre of a prior language surfaces' (2004, p. 63). Tropes such as doppelgangers, the spy or alien, seem particularly apt literary devices to embody translingualism, as the quotes above demonstrates. I will expand on these tropes in later chapters.

The alienation that translinguals experience in relation to the things that surround them is, however, only the first stage of distress. The next stage is in relation to other people.

Alienation from Others

A second stage of distress is the translingual's experience of alienation from her monolingual peers. Her communication with monolingual native speakers is often marred by 'involuntary dissent' which arises due to the differences in knowledge and contextual information that exists between her and interlocutors in her second language (Besemeres 2015). Comparative literature scholar, Mary Besemeres states that the translingual experiences marginalisation when they try to introduce terms and discourses that derive from other linguacultures (2015, p. 19). The involuntary dissent is a 'a painful

incompatibility' between the translingual and her monolingual peers which is 'rooted in language' due to the differing attitudes arising from 'discourses current in their adopted language (often crystallized in particular words) but not available in their mother tongue' (pp. 18-19). The sense of alienation is 'a form of marginality rooted in language' which is central to translingual subjectivity, argues Besemeres (2015, p. 19).

Monolinguals' inability to see the linguistic relativity and ongoing cultural translation that translinguals must undertake leads to translinguals' sense of ambivalent belonging to the dominant culture. Besemeres observes that, 'living between languages entails an ongoing negotiation of different cultural viewpoints that remains largely invisible to those speaking the dominant language' (2015, p. 24). What is especially interesting to note here is that the translingual's knowledge from elsewhere is so alien to the dominant culture that others cannot connect with it in any way. Because monolinguals are unlikely to have a frame of reference outside of the dominant language in which they use, the cultural values that are embedded in English can be taken for granted by monolinguals as being 'natural', 'normal' and therefore 'universal'. Thus, monolinguals may not realise that these values may be different in other cultural-linguistic perspectives or contexts that might necessitate them to be curious enough to ask open-ended questions to 'flesh out' or clarify the translingual's viewpoint, which is 'neither mainstream nor oppositional in a familiar vein' (Besemeres 2015, p. 28) because the latter, a form of deliberate or voluntary dissent, would still require some shared cultural reference points. Thus, involuntary dissent is 'an exclusion of translinguals which non-translingual conversation partners are unaware of inflicting' (p. 19).

For literary migrants unable to reside in a place where their minority linguaculture is well understood, the experience of involuntary dissent compounds as she is 'confronted day after day with an ambivalent reality which throws her identity into permanent question' (Savin 1994, cited in Besemeres 2015, p. 23). In terms of literary output, I suggest that one outcome of ambivalent belonging to the dominant culture is that translinguals become concerned with questions of allegiance and betrayal which, as I show in chapter two, is also a predominant concern of spy narratives.

Next, I want to build on Besemeres's concept of involuntary dissent to propose that translinguals' sense of alienation from others is not only due to differing cultural influences: I suggest that it can also be due to the experience of translingualism itself – which is subjectively different to that that of being monolingual. In other words, the difference is not always a lack of overlapping knowledge between monolingual locals and translingual migrants – it may also be the difference between monolingualism and translingualism as lived experiences. An example of this was related by scholar and literary activist, Michael Mohammed Ahmad at the 2019 Greek Writers' Festival in Melbourne[15]. Ahmad shared with the audience that when he started his memoir about living as a Lebanese-Australian with the words: 'My name is Mohammed and Michael,' his editor had responded with, 'This sentence doesn't make sense. You could write it as: My name is Mohammed *or* Michael,' to which Ahmad replied in the document's track changes: 'I know what my fucking name is' (M Ahmad 2019, pers. comm., 1 June). The room full of festival goers rippled with indignation that a concept so self-evident to most people whose subjectivity spans two cultural-linguistic identities seemed to be epistemologically unintelligible to a (powerful and erudite) monoglot. Because translingual subjectivity is rarely even acknowledged, it is harder to explain what it feels like to experience living between and across two languages, especially when using a globally dominant language such as English. It seems that before monolingual societies can begin to find a solution, they need to acknowledge that they cannot even see the problem. Monolinguals are simply unaware in the first place about the possibility that their subjectivity is not one that is shared by translinguals. Translinguals' sense of alienation is the result of what the late Australian linguist Michael Clyne calls the 'monolingual mindset' of English-speaking countries such as the USA and Australia. Such a mindset sees everything in terms of monolingualism being the norm (Clyne 2005, p. xi).

Australia has always sought to be institutionally monolingual – and this myth of monolingualism has been present from the legal falsehood of *terra nullius* – that Australia is a nation was not already inhabited by Aboriginal peoples whose ownership of this

[15] Writes such as Michael Mohammed Ahmad who were invited to speak at this Festival were not necessarily Greek-Australian, and their inclusion in the programming shows how the Festival conceived of itself in a brilliantly translingual way.

country was evidenced by over 250 Indigenous languages at the time of white settlement. At Australia's Federation in 1901, the myth of monolingualism was further enshrined through the 'whites only' immigration policy, whereby undesirable non-white migrants were required to sit a dictation test in *any* European language – with the aim of enabling Australia to imagine itself as a white, English-speaking nation (or at the very least, one that spoke a European language). The fabrication of a 'monolingual' Australia helped erase many Aboriginal languages, and therefore their valuable cultural knowledge as well as Aboriginal groups' ability to legally reclaim their ancestral lands; its processes continue today through an institutional mindset that denies the value of first languages of refugees and migrants who settle in Australia—for those coming to Australia are assumed to want to throw off the shackles of their mother-tongue. Vietnamese Australian festival coordinator and artist Lana Nguyen asserts that linguistic activism to preserve a bilingual program at Footscray Primary School, in the Western suburbs of Melbourne, must also promote other minority languages as part of a wider campaign against Australia's monolingual mindset:

> It's not just about Vietnamese: it's about all immigrant languages, Indigenous languages, languages that are farther from English in their structure, their distance, and their knowledge (L Nguyen 2020).

The monolingual mindset arises from institutions that do not expect translingualism to be the norm in Australia. This 'monolingual mindset' sees translingual skills, subjectivity and identity as deficits to the nation, rather than as assets. Thus, translinguals' alienation from others (including book editors, publishers, literary and theatre critics, funding bodies) is likely to result in increased disadvantage for translinguals, resulting in the amplification of translinguals' experiences of non-belonging.

Translingual ambivalence is further exacerbated when a translingual writer cannot pass for a native speaker of English, which in Australia is anyone without the physical attributes of a non-white subject. In Michael Mohammed Ahmed's case, it is his Lebanese features in Australia, and in the case of David Henry Hwang, it is his Asian face and body in the United States. By looking foreign, non-white speakers prime their monolingual peers to act as linguistic gatekeepers, as Kramsch notes:

> The native speaker acts as a gatekeeper against non-standard, non-legitimate uses of the language. Here, Valerie, a heritage language speaker, is made aware of the social shame that awaits anyone trying to 'pass for' a native Korean when she is, in fact, American. Conversely, the Korean-American narrator in [novelist Chang Rae] Lee's *Native Speaker* is accused of being a 'surreptitious/B+ student of live/…illegal alien/emotional alien/…stranger/follower/traitor/spy'…when he speaks English like the native English speaker that he is (2009, p.92).

These feelings of dissent, alienation and linguistic surveillance by monolingual native speakers are enhanced when one's visage cannot 'pass' for that of a native speaker of that language. Because translinguals live between and across two languages, they are suspected by monolingual speakers of performing (rather than embodying) their linguistic identity. When Asian Australians speak or write perfect English (because, like Chang Rae Lee, they *are* native speakers of English), monolinguals vigilantly scrutinise them for errors.

Translinguals' feelings of dissent**,** whether involuntary or otherwise, is initially experienced in relation to interactions with others. Over time, though, the sense of 'involuntary dissent' starts to be directed inwards, towards the translingual herself – specifically towards her 'inner addressee' or 'inner reader'.

Alienation from the Self

The culmination of the previous two stages of distress into the third one is perhaps the most poignant for literary migrants. This final distress impacts on her even in moments of solitude. It arises from a shift in the author's 'inner reader' from one who validates the author's first language to her adopted language. Eva Hoffman's memoir chronicles – through a dialogue between her 'two linguistic selves' – the bewildering experience of one's 'inner reader' or 'imaginary addressee' changing from that of the mother-tongue to that of the adopted language; increasingly, the once-foreign language displaces the mother-tongue in this most intimate act of perceiving and interpreting reality. Within a matter of months of living in English-speaking Canada, Hoffman finds that she has 'no interior language…The words float in an uncertain space'…which have 'no connections

to [her] instincts, quick reactions, knowledge' (1989, p. 108). Hoffman is in a dangerous time, as the events she experiences fall 'through some black hole, and [she falls] with it' (p. 108). Perhaps this explains why, as Steven G. Kellman observes of published translingual authors, 'no utterance can be automatic' (2000, p. 30), despite their obvious fluency in their secondary language. Literary migrants like Hoffman have to deal with the emotional distress of being disconnected from their adopted linguistic self, as well as negotiate the more obvious language barrier. They lose a previously taken-for-granted sense of belonging in the world where the language of their inner addressee coincides with their social existence. As Besemeres observes, the expression of emotions is managed differently in different languages, which 'can greatly intensify an immigrant's sense of emotional loss in coming to live in English as a second language (2010, p. 502). Teen-aged Eva Hoffman eventually makes an excruciating decision:

> Because I have to choose something, I finally choose English. If I'm to write about the present, I have to write in the language of the present, even if it's not the language of the self (1989, p. 121)

The sense of grief and loss arising from linguistic fragmentation is palpable in Hoffman's account. Her transition over to the dominant language is not achieved without trepidation and feelings of grief, feelings of betrayal to the mother tongue (or the inner addressee associated with the mother-tongue), as well as concerns about her own conflicting allegiances.

This inner displacement can be experienced as the death of her primary inner addressee, which is a not uncommon experience for translingual writers. As author Agota Kristof, who fled her native Hungary at age 21, attests in her memoir, *The Illiterate*:

> I have spoken French for more than thirty years, I have written in French for twenty years, but I still don't know it. I don't speak it without mistakes, and I can only write it with the help of dictionaries, which I frequently consult. It is for this reason that I also call the French language an enemy language. There is a further reason, the most serious of all: this language is killing my mother tongue (2014, p. 20).

Unless one lives in a bilingual society, translingual authors like Kristof find themselves forgetting their primary language. In most nations in the world there is one dominant language, which thus forces the translingual to be in a situation where one of their languages is considered less valuable than the other one. For Kristof, the dominant language, French, is also the cause of the death of her primary language, Hungarian. This is so distressing that it feels like an act of betrayal - a sense of betrayal of standing aside to let the language of the dominant culture murder your mother tongue.

The result of this is a slow 'death' of this first language due to the less well studied phenomenon of language forgetting, which Grosjean describes as the flipside of language learning (2010, pp. 90-93). Thus, language forgetting, especially when it is one's mother tongue (p. 92), is another reason why translinguals face the bewildering experience of feeling alienated from the self, and for writers this is especially painful as their inner addressee is either confused and mixed between languages, or is not the same inner addressee as what others expect from them (in the case of Asians living in English-speaking countries), or what they would once have expected of themselves (in the case of teenaged or adult migrants such as Eva Hoffman or Agota Kristof, whose sense of identity had already been forged in their mother-tongue).

What is the effect of these three stages of distress on translinguals' creative writing? How might it impact on the creative process itself? And how might this be different for translinguals compared to monolinguals? Does alienation from one's inner addressee make it more challenging for translingual writers to decide what to write and for whom? These concerns are significant because if the workings of literary translingualism is poorly understood, then this might stymie our understanding of the conditions under which translinguals might best do their creative writing?

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A few weeks after I wrote in my journal about the difficulty of translating nouns such as 'uncle', I made a chance discovery about bilingualism and the creative writing process. I had been working on a new, short story, and it is useful to know here that when I am deep inside a writing project, I can 'see' ideas for it everywhere. Therefore, as part of my

creative process, I allow myself to undertake digressive behaviour during my breaks as this can be helpful for making chance discoveries that enrich my creative text.

That day, during lunch, I decided to browse the audio books available online via my local library; I typed 'Vietnamese' into the search field. It returned a number of brightly-coloured music album covers that looked unappealing to me, but also some audio files for Vietnamese language learning called Vocabulearn. I decided to play one to see if this was a viable way to passively maintain, or even expand, my stunted Vietnamese vocabulary, which can sometimes be likened to that of an inattentive ten-year-old.

I pressed play, and my laptop read out a stream of English verbs which were immediately followed by their Vietnamese translations. When the verb 'to hate' came up in the audio recording, I guessed that its translation was the common word, *ghét*. But the translation proposed by Vocabulearn was *căm thù*, which chilled me to the bone. Even though I recognised these two words, I did not think they were on the same level as the simpler verb 'to hate'. *Căm thù* is a much deeper hatred, more suggestive of historical wrongs that can lead to intergenerational cycles of hatred. Fascinated, I then found that *căm thù* could also be translated back into English as, 'deep resentment' or 'vindictive hatred'. Wearing my 'language learning' hat, I noted that in English 'hate' can be used lightly, such as in 'I hate peppermint ice-cream' (similar to *ghét*), but this particular translation on the audio track has emphasised its more traditional meaning, 'deep resentment' (*căm thù*).

The audio track continued to read aloud other (randomly selected) verbs along with their Vietnamese translations. The next half dozen also piqued my interest, but this time because they connected to my creative writing. In each case, I found that, once again, the Vietnamese word had a much more forceful effect on me than their English versions. As I chewed my sandwich, I noticed that the verbs in English did not evoke the same depth of emotional reaction in me that their Vietnamese counterparts did. Could it be that, like Eva Hoffman, I too felt greater emotional resonance with the equivalent Vietnamese words, despite migrating to Australia at age six, rather than Hoffman's thirteen. And unlike Hoffman, my six-year-old self had attained proficiency in English quickly and

easily, so that by age twelve, English had become my dominant language, driving out the mother-tongue from my dreams and interior monologues.

The thing about verbs is that they are the basis of all good writing. Author and writing teacher Anne Dillard went so far as to require her students highlight every verb in their writing to see if they could swap them out with a more expressive or befitting verb.

> After the lecture on verbs, we counted the verbs on the page, circled them, tallied the count for each page to the side and averaged them. Can you increase the average number of verbs per page, she asked…Now look at them. Have you used the right verbs? Is that the precise verb for that precise thing? Remember that adverbs are a sign that you've used the wrong verb (Chee 2009).

In writing for performance, however, verbs take on an even greater significance. In script writing, it is the job of the writer to embed transitive verbs, such as, to *seduce*, to *deflect*, to *interrogate* in the scenes, so that the actors have subtextual dramatic action to pursue with each other. Think of a scene where two people are talking about how lovely the coffee is, but what's happening underneath the words, subtextually, may be seduction, deflection, or interrogation, even though neither state these words aloud. Scriptwriters like me are trained to plot their narratives around verbs, specifically *transitive* verbs. Similarly, directors and actors are also skilled in how to analyse a script — to find the transitive verbs that form the subtext of each scene.

Verbs therefore evoke in a scriptwriter a variety of specific character traits and story ideas; they affect not only the diction of a written story, but also the dramatic action that the characters take; verbs have a direct impact on the development of plot. To return to the example above, if I were to brainstorm character action or plot ideas from 'deep resentment' (*căm thù*), it would yield different plot ideas than if I were to brainstorm from 'dislike' (*ghét*), or even the English word, 'hate'. And here is the paradox for my creative writing: technically, my English is much, much better, but emotionally my mother tongue continues to evoke a different range of emotional 'textures' in me. Why is it that my stronger language is not the one that 'evokes' under these circumstances? And what predicament does that leave me in as a bilingual who writes (mostly) in English?

François Grosjean observes that bilinguals' language choice can impact on which memories or emotions they access. Therapy, for instance, requires that the patient access their memories in an emotionally vivid, yet somewhat vulnerable, way. Bilingual author Nancy Huston reports that her psychoanalysis was far less effective when conducted in French because it allowed her to feel in control of her neuroses, and thus enabled them to remain hidden away from the effects of the therapy (Grosjean 2010, p. 133).

Perhaps a similar dynamic is at play when I write creatively, or when I try to tackle certain topics or characters. Maybe some themes are harder to write because the emotional connections I have to them exist in my other language. If I insist on pursuing only one of my languages, then some of the emotional resonances I am seeking may not surface; a particular feeling/sense may be situated in the Vietnamese part of my psyche and not in the English part. The now dominant 'foreign-language' twin is not identical to its primary-language sibling.

I finished eating my sandwich. There was a slight feeling of regret that I was identifying this problem only now. I reflected on how the creative writing subjects I did at university at undergraduate level had each been designed for the monolingual in mind. There was, and is, an expectation that students in creative writing courses have English as their only language. American Vietnamese writer and scholar, Viet Thanh Nguyen have commented on the whiteness of creative writing workshops in the USA:

> As an institution, the workshop reproduces its ideology, which pretends that "Show, don't tell" is universal when it is, in fact, the expression of a particular population, the white majority, typically at least middle-class and often, but not exclusively, male… [Creative writing] must be taught not only as an isolated craft or a set of techniques. It must be taught in relation to, or within, courses on history, politics, theory and philosophy, as well as ethnic studies, gender studies, queer studies and cultural studies (V Nguyen 2017).

I wholeheartedly agree with Nguyen's argument that situated writing requires a well-rounded and politically-engaged education; however, I notice that he has omitted the study of any foreign languages or even sociolinguistics. The inclusion of linguistic concepts isn't to make all creative writing by translingual writers sound overtly

‘translingual’; instead, it would likely contribute to a greater self-understanding so that they can better find solutions to any creative writing problems. Perhaps Nguyen too has assumed a monolingual approach to the creative writing workshop, despite being a proficient bilingual himself. For me the workshop should also address the challenges and opportunities of bilingualism. In the USA, there are a handful of dedicated bilingual MFAs, owing to the large Spanish-speaking population. Perhaps a similar program could exist here (then bilingual Australians wouldn’t have to hack a language-learning audio tape to use in their creative writing process, like I inadvertently did).

In contrast, bilinguals in Australia must sneak their unique linguistic identity into creative writing programs, according to whether they find suitable individuals—mentors, lecturers, tutors, postgraduate supervisors—who have the skills and capacity to support their bilingual creativity. Without dedicated support, each writer has to labour away in isolation, unable to feel the energy and frisson of being part of a cohort of similarly committed translingual authors or scriptwriters. Without a deliberate framework with which to navigate the questions of ‘what to write’ and for whom, or just as importantly ‘how’ to go about capturing ideas that transcend stereotyped depictions of people from minority cultures, these isolated translingual writers may not be able to access the fullest range of human experience because they are too focused on thinking and feeling in only one language.

As soon as I uncovered one problem, another arises. If I connect more with certain Vietnamese words but only write in English (professionally), then how do I convey the feelings and images evoked by Vietnamese in my secondary language? Is it even possible to fully capture the feelings that are evoked by Vietnamese creative writing prompts through the vehicle of English? In short, what happens when I translate the ‘Vietnamese’ feelings or ideas that I sometimes have into English?

Metaphors of Translation

To address these questions, I need to consider what translation actually means and how it is achieved. The English word for translation has as its root the Latin word *translatio*, which means to ‘carry across’. For many people in the Anglosphere, this results in the

misbelief that effective translation involves 'carrying across' the exact words, without addition or subtraction, from one language to another. However, translating only the *words* does not automatically convey meaning because of differences in the source and target languages' underlying assumptions. These include each society's assumed general knowledge (beyond which lies 'knowledge from elsewhere') as well as the assumed interpersonal relationships (as seen in my earlier example of the differences between *cậu* and *chú* in Vietnamese). Indeed, translation scholar David Bellos argues that it is impossible to translate only the words without regard to the context, or genre, in which those words are uttered or written:

> One of the key levels of information that is always missing from a sentence taken simply as a grammatically well-formed string of lexically acceptable words **is knowledge of its genre**. You can only get that from the context of the utterance (Bellos 2011, p. 77 – my emphasis).

This is because, in reality, when we speak (or write) we leave out many things that are assumed to be understood by members of our speech (or reading) community, and this is an efficient and sensible way to communicate within a community where many assumptions are shared. Monolinguals who wrongly assume that one can *simply* translate the words fail to apprehend that social contexts may be so vastly different in other languages that a process of translating only the words will result in a distortion of meaning.

Sometimes scrutinising what translation *isn't* helps us understand what it *is* better. Douglas Hofstadter, a translator as well as cognitive scientist, asserts in an article titled, *The Shallowness of Google Translate* that the use of computer programs to translate is an electronic version of translating only for the *words*, which turns out to be a severely limited approach. Hofstadter examines a passage that has purportedly been 'translated' from Chinese:

> Is this actually in English? Of course we all agree that it's made of English words (for the most part, anyway) …To my mind, because the above paragraph contains no meaning, it's not in English; it's just a jumble made of English ingredients—a random-word salad, an incoherent hodgepodge (2018).

Hofstadter goes on to explain in great detail how he translates for *meaning*, instead. Because of the complexity of this process, I shall quote from it at length:

> To me, the word translation…denotes a profoundly human art form that graciously carries clear ideas in Language A into clear ideas in Language B, and the bridging act should not only maintain clarity but also give a sense for the flavor, quirks, and idiosyncrasies of the writing style of the original author. Whenever I translate, I first read the original text carefully and internalize the ideas as clearly as I can, letting them slosh back and forth in my mind. It's not that the words of the original are sloshing back and forth…I am not, in short, moving straight from words and phrases in Language A to words and phrases in Language B…This process, [is] mediated via meaning (2018).

Hofstadter eschews the translation of words and instead emphasises the need to interpret the meaning of texts, via another language. This approach correlates with David Bellos's in terms of the impossibility of translating the words without any addition or subtraction, rather than translating for meaning. Bellos lays the blame of our cramped understanding of this process on the etymology of translation being 'carrying across' as though freighting cargo across vast seas, which reveals the supposition that this 'cargo' remains largely intact upon delivery. This misapprehension, unfortunately, pervades Anglophone societies.

> The conventions that hold sway among publishers and the general public do not allow translators to add something that is not in the original text. So if you accept those terms of the trade, you could quickly arrive with impeccable logic at the conclusion that translation is completely impossible (2011, p. 81).

However, Bellos goes on to argue, if we think of translation more as transformation, or 'saying the same thing with different words,' or paraphrasing, just in a different language, then everything that *can* be expressed with words can be translated (in terms of meaning).

It seems that the metaphor used for 'translation' gets in the way of our understanding of it as a transformative process. In contrast to the image of 'carrying across' in English, other linguistic cultures draw on different metaphors to describe the process of translation,

and this is evident in their root words for translation. Bellos points out that to 'carry across' or to 'bear across' is itself 'only a metaphor…[and] there are lots of other metaphors available' to describe the process of translation (2011, pp. 26-27). For instance, in Sumerian *eme-bal* is 'language turner', in classical Latin *vertere* is 'to turn', and in Tok Pisin, the lingua franca of Papua-New Guinea, *tanim tok* means to 'turn talk'. These languages describe translation as a process of *transformation* or turning (rather than *'carrying across'*) and therefore provides a more accurate metaphor for the process of translation. It is this understanding, Bellos argues, which better reflects how translation works in real life—whether it is the international news, the subtitling in films, or advertising copy for foreign products (2011).

Since translation is such an intricate and inventive undertaking, it requires multitudes of metaphors in order for us to discuss it comprehensively. In the West, metaphor and translation are etymologically related argues Rainer Guldin, a scholar of German Culture and Language. Metaphor comes from the Greek word *metaphora,* which means to carry across; to transfer. Another similarity is that that they are both binary concepts, which to my mind evokes the 'linguistic relativity' that many translinguals experience.

> When one compares translation and metaphor from a structural point of view, a series of essential similarities appear. Both are binary concepts…[both] possess a dual structure and imply a movement across a border or gap of some kind. One cannot deal with one side of the pair without having to consider the other as well. Attention oscillates continuously between the two, moving back and forth from one component to the other in a weaving motion similar to a loom. This simultaneous co-presence of the two sides is essential to both metaphor and translation (2016, p. 19).

Guldin's proposition that there is a resonance between metaphor and translation may explain my interest in the Salman Rushdie quotation at the start of this chapter. Linguists like François Grosjean have also found that translinguals live in linguistic relativity (or translation, as I call it), which further clarifies Rushdie's suggestion of the migrant entering the 'condition of metaphor'. Rainer Guldin goes on to highlight how both metaphor and foreign words exist as elements that are unfamiliar to their context:

> Metaphor is an alien element within everyday language, the same way a foreign language is alien to domestic speech. As a result, the difference between the proper and the foreign determines the way both metaphors and translations operate (2016, p. 21).

This striking similarity between the metaphor and *words* from elsewhere may help explain why I was drawn to the figure of the alien for my play. Perhaps this is what Salman Rushdie meant with his enigmatic statement. As a migrant, I had entered the condition of metaphor[16].

Thus, limiting ourselves to only one metaphor of translation (to 'carry across') severely restricts our understanding of how translation operates.

> In choosing any one metaphor rather than another...we draw attention to just one thread of the translating process. Only with the assistance of the full range of metaphors available can we begin to describe the extraordinary complex and creative work of the translator as writer (Hanne 2006, cited in Guldin 2016, p. 31).

In short, a purely etymological approach to understanding translation is inadequate because it confines one to only one metaphor in this complex process; by contrast, a metaphorical approach to studying translation is a more productive way to comprehend the intricate processes of translating. The consequence of having only one metaphor for translation, that of 'carrying across', is that we fail to see the diverse and complex processes involved in translation[17]. I will argue in the remaining chapters that the translingual playwrights of this study use a range of creative strategies in order to resist an oversimplified conception of translation (and living in translation).

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[16] I wasn't sure know how I felt about having 'entered the condition of metaphor', so I looked up metaphor in the English-Vietnamese dictionary. Metaphor is a combination of two words: *ẩn dụ*, which are derived from Chinese 隱喻 (Pinyin: yǐn yù). *Ẩn* means to hide, to conceal oneself, to take shelter; while *dụ* means to decoy; to lure; to entice; to seduce; to tempt. Once again, the Vietnamese (and originally Chinese) equivalent seems vastly different compared to the etymology of the English, derived from the Greek for 'to transfer' and 'to bear'. However, *ẩn dụ* turns out to be an apt way to describe metaphor, because, according to Guldin, metaphors function not only highlight and explain, but also to distort and hide. 'By highlighting some aspects and hiding others, metaphors organize our perception of the world' (Guldin 2016, p. 23).

[17] As a result, there is a trend towards studying metaphors within translation studies because of their pivotal role in our understanding the complexity of translation. Guldin argues that there is 'a growing number of translation scholars emphasizing the fundamental importance of metaphors for translation studies' (2016, p. 24).

Before I end this chapter, I want to briefly return to Martha Cutter's refinement to the definition of a translingual as 'someone who crosses into a new linguistic identity'. While this is useful as an *initial* idea to differentiate between monocultural bilinguals (those who study another language without seeing the world anew through that other language), as a definition it can be mired in the English language etymology of *translatio* which can result in translinguals being misunderstood as moving from one linguistic identity to another in a once-and-for-all, one-way process. Instead, as Grosjean argues, research indicates that translinguals live in constant linguistic relativity—that is they live across both languages simultaneously, and move constantly, backwards and forwards, between the two frames of reference. This is evident in the anecdote related by Michael Mohammed Ahmed about his editor, who had insisted that he was *either* Mohammed *or* Michael, and not both Mohammed *and* Michael. The gap in understanding between Michael Mohammed and his monolingual editor demonstrates how the metaphor used for translation in English inadequately portrays the lived experience of translingualism because it fails to illuminate how translation operates. Unfortunately, we observe this incorrect view of both translation and translingualism every day in the way that those living societies with monolingual mindsets misconstrue and alienate translinguals and their unique subjectivity.

Conclusion

Researchers have found that bilinguals live in a state of linguistic relativity, which means that their predominant subjectivity is that of 'translation' (both linguistic and cultural translation). In this chapter, I examined how translinguals might enter the condition of *translation* through three overlapping stages of distress: through their alienation from their surroundings; their alienation from other people, and ultimately their alienation from their inner-reader or -addressee. Examining Eva Hoffman's memoir and case studies of translingualism, I observed the recurring theme of identity performance due to feelings of inauthenticity, coupled with a preoccupation with allegiance, belonging and betrayal.

These feelings are exacerbated due to the pronounced monolingual mindset of English-speaking countries such as the USA and Australia and is further complicated if the

translingual writer is non-Caucasian, and therefore does not pass for a native speaker of English.

I described what it feels like to live in translation in order to make my claim of translingualism's unique impact on the creative writing process: for translinguals, writing from linguistic relativity entails a further set of challenges, beyond those involved in the process of writing creatively *per se*. Drawing on David Bellos and Rainer Guldin's work on the interconnection of translation and metaphor, I confirmed that the literary migrant has indeed, 'entered the condition of metaphor,' as Salman Rushdie had observed[18].

As genre tropes are metaphors that span the length of a literary work, I will argue in the next chapter that we may interrogate the genre tropes/metaphors used by translingual writers to scrutinise their unique relationship to language itself. In other words, to understand the challenges that bilinguals encounter when writing creatively, I argue in Chapters 2 and 3 that we can examine the genre tropes present in their playscripts to better understand translingual subjectivity. I analyse two genre tropes: the spy in David Henry Hwang's play *M Butterfly* and the alien in my own play *Coloured Aliens* to ask why these motifs are particularly effective in embodying the translingual condition of writers of Asian heritage who write in English. I shall argue that these scripts draw on existing stereotypes (through the use of genre tropes and intertextual referencing) in order to interrogate and transform them.

[18] I finally tracked down this quote in the State Library of Victoria. It had appeared in a conversation between Rushdie and Gunter Grass.

Chapter 2

Spies as Translated Characters: a translingual reading of *M Butterfly*

You only live twice, or so it seems. One life for yourself and one for your dreams — Nancy Sinatra[19].

Introductory Section

We have seen in the previous chapter how translingualism promotes a unique linguistic subjectivity, and that the predominant experience of the translingual is that of living in translation, or 'entering the condition of metaphor'. Generally speaking, the use of metaphor promotes understanding of the foreign and the unfamiliar with reference to that which is native and familiar; and does so through an exploration of shared traits that create an experiential model which gives form to paradoxical processes. As translation scholar Rainer Guldin illustrates, metaphors have the power to 'reveal new connections' (2016, p. 11). There is a correspondence between translation and metaphor as kindred processes that, as I showed in the previous chapter, foregrounds the act of transformation or 'turning'. This emphasis on 'turning' can also be seen in the word trope, from the Greek *tropos*, which also means 'to turn'. Thus, the etymology for trope, with its emphasis on turning or transformation, is more attuned to how translation works in real life. Therefore, I propose that we consider an affinity between translingualism and genre tropes via the intermediary concepts of translation and metaphor.

[19] This song is featured in the James Bond movie, *You Only Live Twice* (1967), which features actor Sean Connery as James Bond donning yellowface in order to carry out his espionage mission in Japan.

In this chapter and the next, I use the correlation between translation, metaphor and genre tropes to examine how translingual playwrights manage their linguistically mobile identity through their writing. I study two plays, David Hwang's *M Butterfly* (1989), which I study in chapter two and my own play, *Coloured Aliens* (2017), which I analyse in chapter three, to examine the cultural and linguistic conditions under which they were written, as well as undertake a translingual reading of each plays' dominant genre trope. The tropes I investigate in detail are the spy in *M Butterfly* in this chapter and the extra-terrestrial alien in *Coloured Aliens* in the next chapter. My analysis will draw on Tina Chen's theorisation of imposture and impersonation in the context of Asian-American narratives to support my translingual interpretation of *M Butterfly*. Chen, a scholar of English and Asian-American Studies, is the only scholar I have found who examines the figures of the spy and the alien in relation to the literature created by Asian-American writers; her study examines Hwang's use of 'images of Asian invisibility, inscrutability, and stealth' in *M Butterfly* to recast the stereotype of a Cio Cio San-like 'Butterfly' as a secret agent, 'whose spying activities are problematized by as well as contingent upon his racial identity' (Chen 2005, p. 179). To further support my analysis of *M Butterfly*, I draw on Lawrence Venuti's translation theory (1995) as well as Steven G. Kellman and Ilan Stavans's discussion about a 'translingual sensibility' (2015).

My translingual interpretation is important for several reasons:

- To see if a metaphor/genre trope -centric reading of the plays may be useful to examine non-linguistic strategies (such as code-switching) to convey a translingual sensibility.
- To make the argument that these plays may be interpreted translingually, even though they are largely monolingual texts (that is, there is not a significant amount of code-switching between national languages present in the text).
- To enhance my own creative writing practice — for if I can read Hwang's play in terms of the trope of the spy, then I can better contextualise the use of the trope of the alien in own my play.

Thus, a 'translingual reading' of these plays makes the most sense to me as a writer because it can inform my understanding of how other playwrights manage their linguistically-mobile identity through genre tropes that act as metaphors for living in translation.

This chapter is divided into three sections:

1) **LINGUISTIC CONDITIONS:** I examine the recurring themes that Hwang as a playwright expresses as his predominant concerns. While Hwang does not see himself as bilingual or translingual, I will argue that we can discuss his 'sensibility' as that of a translingual playwright. This section will show that, strategically, Hwang needed to manage the linguistic context in which he wrote *M Butterfly* to be taken seriously as Asian-American artist.
2) **CULTURAL CONDITIONS:** I set up the context of my reading of Hwang's play by investigating how *M Butterfly* reflects the cultural conditions under which it was written; in particular, I examine Hwang's use of intertextual references which speak to these conditions so as to carry out his stated aim to deconstruct the stereotype of the Oriental *other*[20].
3) **TROPE OF THE SPY:** In this final section, I argue that Hwang's use of the trope of the spy achieves more than his stated aim of deconstructing the Oriental stereotype; instead, I interpret the spy trope as an overarching metaphor that embodies the complex processes of translation (linguistic and cultural) that translingual playwrights like Hwang have to negotiate on a daily basis.

These chapter's aim is twofold: firstly, to develop my analysis of the cultural and linguistic conditions under which Hwang wrote *M Butterfly* that led him, as a writer living in translation, to use the figure of the spy; secondly, to demonstrate that Hwang's play uses this trope to foreground the constructed nature of identity performance.

In the first section, I aim to demonstrate that we can interpret David Hwang's *M Butterfly* for what author, lexicographer and translator, Ilan Stavans, in his discussion with comparative literature scholar Steven G. Kellman, calls a text's 'translingual sensibility' (Kellman & Stavans 2015, p. 12). My argument will be that, despite the playwright's own assertions about his monolingualism, Hwang can be considered a translingual playwright, and that his play *M Butterfly* does in fact possess a translingual sensibility. I make this case by studying the unique challenges that Asian-Americans have faced historically in

[20] Other scholars have written critically about Hwang's deconstruction of Puccini's opera (Lee 2015; Moy 1990).

order to contextualise Hwang as a second-generation immigrant whose predominant experience is that of *living in translation*. The evidence to support my claim about Hwang's linguistically mobile identity will be drawn from comments that he and his peers have made in published interviews about his life and work. As we know, Hwang is an important figure in American (and to some extent Asian) theatre. Born in 1957, he is a Chinese-American writer whose early play *M Butterfly* was a finalist in the Pulitzer Prize in the same year of publication[21]. This play opened on Broadway February 10, 1988, and ran for two years. Now an established writer for both stage and screen, Hwang also teachers at Columbia University. With his celebrated play, *M Butterfly*, Hwang became one of the first Asian-American writers to have created a breakthrough work that continues to be studied and remounted today. But what was the historical and cultural context in which Hwang wrote *M Butterfly*? How was an Asian American perceived in the USA in the late 1980s, when this play was written?

In *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian-American Literature and Culture*, Tina Chen states that the stereotype of Asians living in America as 'sneaky,' 'secretive,' and 'inscrutable' is a legacy of historical mistreatment of Asian-Americans, in particular the restrictive immigration policies directed against Asians from entering the US due to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (p. 22). Furthermore, Chen argues that Asian-Americans continue to be burdened by racial stereotyping that casts them as minorities who 'embody the ugly desires of those who insist on their right to know him by virtue of what they think he must be' (p. 4). This, she observes, is a defining experience of being Asian-American, for it entails 'the doubly conscious awareness of playing parts that seem distasteful and unnatural but are perceived by others to be somehow representative of one's identity' (p. 4). Thus, according to Chen, the image of the spy or alien is the most relevant metaphor for Asian-American identity.

> Such characterizations coalesce into the figure of the Asian-American as spy or alien, a figure whose foreign allegiances make it not only possible but probable that his/her claims to Americanness are suspect (xviii).

[21] David Hwang's plays, in particular *M Butterfly*, was also what drew a number of researchers such as Josephine Lee, Dorinne Kondo and Karen Shimakawa into what would later become the field of Asian American Theatre studies (Galella et al. 2022).

Given that as a minority, Asian-Americans are interpreted as sneaky, secretive and inscrutable by white (and monolingual) America, Chen is making the point that this perception can be metaphorised by the trope of the spy or alien. As figures that embody the racialised stereotypes of Asians, these tropes speak to how Asian-Americans like Hwang are viewed as perpetual outsiders whose trustworthiness is thus always called into question. The racial subjugation of Asian-Americans has a historical specificity that lends itself to the applicability of these two particular tropes. Other racially oppressed groups, such as African Americans, have a different history of oppression - and therefore racial stereotyping - and so for these other groupings, the trope of the spy or alien would not necessarily be pertinent. Unfortunately, this stereotype continues to exist today. The racial *othering* of Asian-Americans has merely been exacerbated since the COVID-19 Pandemic, with Asian-Americans once again being the targets of racialised violence[22], in the face of a 'long history of anti-Asian violence in the US' (V Nguyen 2021).

The Linguistic Conditions of David Hwang's life

This section examines the linguistic context that surrounded Hwang when he wrote *M Butterfly*. Firstly, it should be stated that Hwang did not set out to use the trope of the spy to manage his linguistically mobile identity. As a Chinese-American playwright, Hwang did not intend to tackle the nexus of translingualism and creativity in *M Butterfly*. Unlike later Asian-American writers like Viet Thanh Nguyen who uses the trope of the spy in a self-reflexive way in his novel *The Sympathizer* (2015), Hwang has not admitted to consciously using genre tropes to articulate his bilingual identity. As Hwang tells it in the Afterword to *M Butterfly*, he wanted to write this play after he found 'a two-paragraph story in The New York Times' involving a French diplomat and his Chinese lover (1989, pp. 94-95). As a young playwright, Hwang immediately 'suspected there was a play' in that fragment of news. He then 'purposely refrained from further research' because he wanted to have the creative freedom to imagine it as a 'great Madame Butterfly-like

[22] Indeed, the author of the article, Viet Thanh Nguyen, places part of the blame for the increased violence against Asians, especially women, on Orientalist depictions in Western cultural products: 'Ever since Puccini's 1904 opera *Madame Butterfly*, which inspired the hit 1989 musical *Miss Saigon*, Asians have been portrayed in romantic terms as self-sacrificing women who prefer white men to Asian men, and who willingly die for the love of white men. A more brutal version of this orientalist fantasy is found in many American movies about the war in Vietnam. Perhaps the most striking example is Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* of 1987' (V Nguyen 2021)

tragedy' (pp. 94-95). At no point in Hwang's recounting of how he came to write this play does he mention the themes of bilingual identity and the trope of the spy.

Secondly, I aim to make the case that Hwang is in fact a translingual, even though he has not described himself as one. In an interview granted to Slant online magazine, Hwang states that, 'I'm not actually bilingual. I took Mandarin in college, but, if anything, the dialect I speak is Fujianese, my maternal grandmother's dialect' (Hwang & Raymond 2011).

In another interview, this time with the Asia Society, Hwang tells us he does not consider himself to be bilingual because:

> I've spent much of my life navigating across the language barrier. Even as a kid, I had relatives whose English ability was limited, so we were always struggling to communicate (Hwang & Washburn 2012).

On face value, statements such as these may lead one to treat Hwang (and his creative work) as monolingual. However, Hwang's denials about his own linguistic ability reveal a common misconception about bilingualism. His protestations suggest that, like other non-linguists, Hwang believes one of the biggest myths about bilingualism, which is that a bilingual must be equally proficient in both languages, as though he or she were 'two monolinguals' in one body - a perfectly 'balanced bilingual' (Grosjean 2010, p. 20). In the quote above, we see that Hwang assumes that if he were a 'proper' bilingual then he would not have had all the linguistic and cultural negotiations that he had spent much of his childhood on. The misconception that a 'real' bilingual would not need to negotiate each interlinguistic encounter is false; I have discussed in chapter one how some of these myths about bilingualism are discredited by François Grosjean. In reality, the ability to communicate with absolute proficiency in both languages is only true for the smallest minority of bilinguals, for example the handful of simultaneous interpreters employed by the United Nations for international conferences (p. 150); their linguistic ability is as highly trained as that of an elite athlete. This exemplary level of linguistic performance is not the criteria by which linguists measure whether someone is a bilingual or not. Instead, Grosjean defines bilingualism based on everyday usage — with its implied

understanding of using language in a natural setting. He suggests that a bilingual is someone who uses 'two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives,' regardless of their level of fluency (p. 4). This definition, I propose, applies to Hwang's linguistic context.

Examining the question of Hwang's translingualism paratextually, Hwang's family background and upbringing supports my assertion. Hwang' parents were both Chinese immigrants; his father Henry Y. Hwang grew up in Shanghai while his mother Dorothy Hwang was born in southeast China and raised in the Philippines. Despite being American-born, Hwang grew up in a multilingual household where a great deal of linguistic and cultural negotiation took place. Thus, like many second-generation children of immigrants from non-English speaking countries, it is likely that Hwang's *receptive* Chinese — his ability to understand or receive spoken Chinese — is strong, even if his *productive* language skills are not as developed. As he himself states in an interview with Tatler:

> Well, as a first-generation Chinese American born in Los Angeles, I feel I've been navigating linguistic misunderstandings my entire life, particularly with relatives whose English was minimal or non-existent (Hwang & Chueng 2013).

Hwang's experiences of cultural and linguistic translation illustrates that he is highly attuned to the gap between his two languages, and thus can be considered as possessing a translingual sensibility. I have shown in chapter one of this exegesis that cultural and linguistic translations are imperfect most of the time, even by professional authors who translate their own writing.

What can we infer about Hwang's translingualism from the overt themes of his later plays? As a playwright, Hwang's predominant interest is to explore the negotiation of language barriers; his plays are concerned with depicting translated lives on stage. Hwang's oeuvre shows that he remains interested with the question of how to depict translingual encounters theatrically. In an interview granted in 2013, twenty-four years after *M Butterfly*, Hwang reveals that depicting translingualism has been an obsession throughout his life as a playwright, 'I feel like I have struggled with how to represent

bilingualism in a lot of my career' (Marino & Hwang 2013, p. 14). Presumably this interest in representing bilingualism on stage was already in existence when he wrote *M Butterfly,* rather than is a fascination that suddenly arose out of nowhere later in his creative writing career.

One of Hwang's earlier plays, written when he was twenty-three, was *F.O.B* (1980), which follows the story of a rich, 'Fresh off the boat' newcomer to California as he visits his Chinese-American cousins. In the Foreword to *F.O.B., and Other Plays*, renowned Chinese-American author Maxine Hong Kingston comments on the authenticity of the idioms that David Hwang uses and his convincing depiction of Chinese-American English, attesting that, 'David Hwang has an ear for Chinatown English, the language of childhood and the subconscious, the language of emotion, the language of home' (1990, viii). Hwang has an ear attuned to the non-standard English that is frequently heard in America's Chinatowns. *F.O.B* shows that Hwang possess both an interest the narratives of those living in translation and is also highly attuned the nuances of language expressed by Chinese-Americans. Maxine Hong Kingston's high regard for Hwang's ability to depict everyday Chinese as it is used in America further confirms Hwang's translingualism. (In contrast, a genuinely monolingual mind would not be able to depict Chinese American lives in a manner that is convincing). For Hwang, language is not 'invisible' or 'seamless' as it often is for many monolinguals living in a place where they form the linguistic majority; instead, the reality of cultural and linguistic translation is a lived experience for translinguals like Hwang.

Later in his career, Hwang would continue to demonstrate this interest in language and translation. *Chinglish* (2012) is a play about an American businessman hoping to secure a lucrative contract in China in the face of considerable linguistic and cultural differences; it was written at a time when Hwang was likely to have been granted greater artistic freedom due to the outstanding critical and commercial success of *M Butterfly*. In *Chinglish*, we see that Hwang is utterly preoccupied with the challenges arising from a linguistically-mobile identities and the representation of these on stage. Hwang's translingual preoccupation is confirmed in the interview with Slant magazine, where he describes the different layers of translation in *Chinglish*, encompassing both its literal and cultural aspects:

> On the most superficial level there is language; we literally don't know what the other person is saying. But even when they do understand the words, sometimes there are cultural values which are different, and things that we believe are intrinsic, which are, I think, much more culturally conditioned (Hwang & Raymond 2011).

Chinglish demonstrates Hwang's commitment to exploring translingual encounters. Similarly, in the same interview, Hwang's describes the genesis of this play, which reveals his continued interest in the politics and ethics of translation:

> On one occasion I visited this brand new art center. Everything was gorgeous—it was all Italian marble, Brazilian woods, a Japanese sound system—but there were these really badly translated signs. The handicapped restroom said 'Deformed Man's Toilet.' So I began thinking about doing a show that would be about doing business in China today—a little bit like [the 1984 David Mamet play] *Glengarry Glen Ross*, but with the focus on language. Because it seems to me negotiating the language barrier is such a huge part of that experience (Hwang & Raymond 2011).

Once again, the quote above shows how Hwang is preoccupied with characters living between and across different national languages. Those who work alongside Hwang also confirm this: an artistic collaborator goes as far as stating that 'Language is a character in that play' (Marino & Hwang 2013, p. 14). Thus *Chinglish*, we see a recurring concern with the nature of language itself. Hwang's paratextual information gleaned from interviews as well as the recurring themes in his body of work all strongly suggest that Hwang himself is translingual.

Having proposed that Hwang is a translingual, now I ask why it was that he did not use code-switching in *M Butterfly* to create what Steven G. Kellman calls an 'internally translingual work' (2000, p. 15). To code-switch, explains Grosjean, is to alternate between two languages whether it is 'a complete shift to another language for a word, phrase, or sentence' before reverting back again to the base language (p. 51). It seems that

Hwang's fascination for representing bilingualism on stage does not extend to *M Butterfly*, which is a largely monolingual script. There is no evidence that Hwang attempts to characterise bilingualism, with its concomitant lived experience of translation in this breakthrough play of his. My question is significant given the interlinguistic and interracial nature of the narrative in *M Butterfly*: a love affair between a French diplomat (Rene Gallimard) and his Chinese lover (Song Liling), which is represented on the American stage, largely in American-English. It is striking to me that the story of a French diplomat conducting a love affair with his Chinese lover is represented on stage mostly in English (with only a few *Messieurs* and *Mademoiselles* and some Italian, in reference to Puccini's Opera, peppered throughout). The whole play proceeds as though the three languages involved (French for Gallimard, Chinese for Song, and English for the audience of Hwang's play) are all unproblematic: no one misinterprets another and the words in different languages are presented as though they are mutually interchangeable. This artistic decision presents us with a world where translation is seamless and invisible, or as translation scholar and historian, Lawrence Venuti would say, where the translation is 'domesticated' (1995, p. 5). Venuti, himself a practicing translator, coined the terms 'domestication' and 'foreignization' in his book, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*.

> A fluent translation is immediately recognizable and intelligible, "familiarised," domesticated, not "disconcerting[ly]" foreign, capable of giving the reader unobstructed "access to great thoughts," to what is "present in the original." Under the regime of fluent translating, the translator works to make his or her work "invisible," producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion: the translated text seems "natural," i.e., not translated (p. 5).

Applying Venuti's concepts to *M Butterfly,* we see that linguistic difference, translation and its attendant questions of power asymmetry, do not exist - at least not at the level of sociolinguistics through the substantial passages involving code-switching or self-translation. In Hwang's rendering of the dialogue between Gallimard and Song for Western audiences, he makes his own translational processes invisible. Without Hwang's strategy of resistance (through his deployment and subversion of the trope of the spy,

which I discuss later in this chapter) the apparent fluency of the dialogue in *M Butterfly* would be problematic. Venuti argues that producing cultures in Anglophone countries are:

> aggressively monolingual, unreceptive to the foreign, accustomed to fluent translations that invisibly inscribe foreign texts with English-language values and provide [the audience] with the narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other (p. 15).

For Venuti, translated texts that render the process of translation invisible have the effect of erasing cultural difference; this insidious erasure allows the dominant-culture audience to believe that the world is homogenous and domesticated.

In my analysis of *M Butterfly*, I co-opt Venuti's concepts, which he developed to analyse the ethics of (literal) translation of literary work. I borrow Venuti's terms in order to undertake a translingual interpretation of Song Liling as a translated character who tries to resist the 'domesticating' practices of stereotyping Asians on Western stages. To date, the Chinese-American playwright's decision to write *M Butterfly* as a largely monolingual work has not attracted critical attention as a strategic artistic choice. Hwang had written *M Butterfly* at a time when the world was much less interconnected through technology and travel. Hwang's linguistic choice to craft *M Butterfly* as a largely monolingual work is evidenced by his confession that, 'generationally, I grew up with this idea that that if I am going to write a Chinese character, I cannot write broken English. That broken English is demeaning (Marino & Hwang 2013, p. 17). Hwang's assessment of the negative reception of any non-standard use of English on theatre stages may have been exacerbated by the USA's history of exclusion, or contested belonging, with regard to Asian immigration to America.

Tina Chen's research into Asian-American history sheds light as to why Hwang might have been conditioned to limit the language in *M Butterfly* mostly to standard American English with some sprinklings of other prestigious European languages such as French and Italian. Chen argues that due to legislation enacted in 1882 to restrict Chinese immigration to the USA, Chinese people were forced to rely on imposture to get around the racially-biased laws. This, in turn, led to the stereotype in the United States that Asians

are 'sneaky' and 'inscrutable'. Chen explains this historical context as follows: while Chinese individuals had immigrated to the U.S.A. as early as 1785, it was only with the California gold rush of 1849 that Chinese immigration rose to significant levels. In the thirty-three years between the gold rush and the government legislating the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, ‘approximately 300,000 Chinese were recorded entering the country’ (p. 22). The racist laws significantly restricted Chinese immigration into the United States and forbade those who left to return. It was also from this time that Chinese immigrants were placed under a tremendous amount of government scrutiny. The immigrant population who remained, composed mostly of men, lived their lives in 'segregated Chinatowns' (p. 22) and faced the unenviable choice of either living without the families they had left behind in China or constructing, through imposture, an ‘an elaborate family of paper children whose claims to citizenship were predicated on a series of interconnected performances of family obligation and identity’ (p. 22). A reduction of anti-Chinese sentiment occurred due to an increase of immigrants of other nationalities and the political context of the United States and China being allies in World War II (p. 194). As a result, Chinese Americans enjoyed a more favourable regard from the mainstream community during the 1950s, which was 'supplemented by reports of low juvenile delinquency rates among Chinese Americans and of incredible Chinese American accomplishments in science and engineering' (p. 194). It was in the Second World War that saw Chinese-Americans experience, briefly, some approval by the wider population.

> According to Ling-chi Wang, the term “honorary whites” first “began during World War II when American attitudes toward Chinese slowly and generally turned more favorable because Chinese in China were deemed allies of the U.S. in the fight to defeat Japanese imperialism (p. 194).

Thus, Chinese Americans enjoyed positive regard during WW2 relative to Japanese Americans. During and after World War II, the negative stereotype of Chinese Americans shifted slightly - depending on geopolitical tensions ('anti-Chinese' sentiment was inversely correlated with 'anti-Japanese' sentiment, indicating how the two racial minority groups were played off against each other).

Ironically, Chen points out, this resulted in the situation of Asian-Americans being simultaneously *invisible* (as most white Americans find it difficult to differentiate between these two communities) and yet highly *visible* (relative to other American immigrants who were white or black); thus Asian-Americans are both *unknowable* and yet thoroughly *knowable* in their supposed distastefulness (p. 10). I agree with Chen's assertion that this self-contradicting cultural expectation of Asian-Americans is best characterised by the figures of the spy and alien, and in the next chapter will argue that these stereotypes also apply to Asian Australians. Furthermore, Chen argues that these stereotypes are so pervasive that there is no room outside of this cultural script of Asians as being 'sneaky' and 'untrustworthy'. At the heart of this stereotype[23] is the belief that Asians are not, and cannot be, American - and so any Asian claiming to be American is obviously faking his or her identity.

After the conclusion of WWII, however, the relatively positive perception of Chinese Americans was replaced, once again, with the stereotype of this community as being aggressive and untrustworthy, thanks to the Cold War.

> After the war, America's public perceptions of the Chinese ran on two separate and conflicting tracks: demonization and assimilation. The Cold War drastically reversed the wartime favorable images to vicious, aggressive, untrustworthy, and menacing images (Chen 2005, p. 194).

Thus, the historical exclusion of Asian Americans, including Chinese Americans, from the USA led to 'the pervasive idea of Asian-Americans as somehow never being able to be 'American" enough' (xviii). Indeed, the terms 'Asian' and 'American' have often been perceived to be incompatible, and those who happen to be both are thought of by the (white, monolingual) mainstream as, 'threatening the sanctity of national belonging through a pretense of docility and obedience' (p. 18). Furthermore, 'such perceptions constitute Asian-Americans as frauds who pretend to claim American belonging by

[23] Robert Lee's book, *Orientals* (1999) is a text that juxtaposes the racialised content of films, popular songs, short fiction, newspaper articles against the words of Supreme Court justices, eugenicists, labour leaders and politicians in American history to show how a convincing likeness of the 'yellowface' mask had been forced upon the countenance of Asian Americans. In other words, Robert Lee confirms what Tina Chen shows, which is that the cultural script had been written for Asians in America from the beginning.

performing, with an intent to deceive, the rights and responsibilities of citizenship' (p. 18). The common thread that can be seen in these various periods is the U.S. government's continued interest in the legitimacy of Chinese-American identity, which 'extended to the 1950s and a Cold War program of surveillance' (p. 24).

It is in such a socio-linguistic atmosphere of continual suspicion about being 'illegitimate Americans' (Tuan 1998, cited in Chen 2005, p. 18) that Hwang wrote *M Butterfly*. Given the intolerance to cultural or linguistic diversity in the late 1980s, it would have been almost impossible to write a commercially viable play that emphasised the messy process of translation (and translated lives), or indeed one that featured extended passages in Chinese, a much less prestigious language in that Cold War era. At that time, any deviation from standard North American English spoken by Asian Americans was deemed to be 'broken English' and this would have been interpreted by the monolingual mainstream as further evidence of Asians being forever alien to the USA. It is entirely understandable, then, that *M Butterfly* should hide its translingual sensibility in terms of its linguistic features.

If *M Butterfly* is a largely monolingual text (in *linguistic* terms), does this mean we should consider it as a work that sits outside of translingual literature? Can we consider it a work that is informed by Hwang's translingualism if it does not use bilingual dialogue in a substantive way? Is there a way to glean the playwright's translingualism in a text that eschews the knotty specifics of translation (and *mistranslations*)? The question of whether readers can sense whether the writer may be translingual if they do not have access to the author's linguistic biography is debated in an email exchange between comparative literary studies scholar Steven G. Kellman and translingual author, translator and lexicographer Ilan Stavans. Is there a certain marker within the text itself, even if the work is primarily monolingual, that hints at the writer's translingualism?

Here, I argue that Hwang's play does possess a 'translingual sensibility'. To support my claim, I invoke Stavans's proposal that translingual literature can follow the older debate about what makes a literary text 'Jewish'. The answer is more complex than it first appears because the works of authors like Franz Kafka, written wholly in German, do not explore any themes to do with Judaism or Jewishness. To illustrate this point Stavans states that,

'Kafka doesn't mention the word Jew anywhere in his fiction…[y]et I don't think there is a writer more Jewish than him' (p. 12). Instead, Stavans argues that 'Jewish literature is Jewish not because of its themes but because of its sensibility'. This, Stavans argues, is the 'appreciation, the response, the disposition one has — largely because of cultural empathies — toward a certain worldview' (p. 12), that '[p]erhaps a genuinely translingual sensibility is one that…is permeated by an awareness of the relativity of languages…[and possesses] a built-in reflexive sense of the gap between [the writer's two languages]' (p. 13). While both scholars acknowledge that this idea of a translingual sensibility is 'an evasive, elusive concept' (p. 15), they agree on its merit in encompassing texts that exhibit 'an awareness of both the power and the limitations of its own verbal medium,' including some works written by monolinguals (p. 6). As I aim to demonstrate in the last section of this chapter, Hwang's play *M Butterfly* is a work that, despite its lack of code-switching between Chinese and English, does possess a translingual sensibility.

What about the cultural context in which Hwang wrote this play? In the next section, I look at what the expectations of Asians were on American and other Western stages at the time *M Butterfly* was written.

The Cultural Conditions that led Hwang to write *M Butterfly* using intertextuality

In writing *M Butterfly*, Hwang's stated intention was to address the stereotype of the subservient and devoted Asian woman who is embodied by Cio Cio San from Giacomo Puccini's 1904 Opera, *Madame Butterfly* (Hwang 1989, p. 95). This section will demonstrate that Hwang found the cultural script problematic for Asian-Americans like himself. After providing some background information on Hwang's process writing of *M Butterfly*, I examine how the play responds to the cultural conditions of the USA through its intertextual references to the Opera.

My analysis of the cultural conditions Hwang draws attention to through his use of intertextuality in *M Butterfly* will be laid out as follows:

i. the **title** of Hwang's play, which functions as a 'verbal echo' (Miola 2004, p. 13) of the Opera;

ii. the **dialogue** in key moments in the play where the Opera is explicitly referred to;
iii. the **stage directions** of *M Butterfly* when Gallimard recounts to the audience the plot events in the Opera.

Each of these strategies serve to subvert received stereotypes of Asian women in particular, and of Asians in general. Given the space limitations of an exegesis, my intention is not to provide an exhaustive list of intertextual referencing in Hwang's play but rather to provide the context in which the trope of the spy may be examined as part of Hwang's subversion of Orientalist depictions of Asian identity on Western stages. I will also critically engage with David Cowart's analysis of *M Butterfly* because it is an example of a typical response from a non-Asian scholar.

While generations of theatregoers have viewed Puccini's Opera as a harmless tale about a naive 15-year-old girl's hopelessly romantic devotion to a foreign swindler, Hwang interpreted the work differently; he sought to deconstruct the harmful racial assumptions underpinning the Opera's apparent romanticism. He argues that these assumptions rely on racist stereotypes that came into existence due to colonialism (1989, pp. 98-100). Furthermore, *M Butterfly* is based on the real-life story of Bouriscot, a French diplomat's two decades-long love affair with a beautiful Beijing Opera performer who was revealed to be not only a spy for the Chinese government but also male. 'At the trial, a surprise twist [sic] occurred when [the Chinese lover] revealed that she was not actually a woman but a man. Shocked, Bouriscot claimed that throughout their entire affair, he had never suspected that his lover was a man' (Boles 2013 p. 54). This is indeed a tantalising narrative hook for a play involving espionage fiction elements because it supports the sense of 'intrigue' that is vital in this genre.

As a narrative, however, *M Butterfly* borrows only lightly from this popular genre. The plot twist is not held from the audience (nor the play's protagonist — Rene Gallimard — when we first meet him), as one would expect in a more traditional spy narrative plot line. Moreover, Tina Chen argues that 'Hwang's play—despite being inspired by a "real" situation—isn't concerned at all with notions of the "real" that exist beyond stereotype. All of the minor characters of *M Butterfly* are drawn as stock characters and the two major characters, Rene Gallimard and Song Liling, are shown to be constructed entirely as

vehicles of stereotypical desire' (p. 72). Examining Gallimard's stereotypical desire (and Song's exploitation of Gallimard's underlying presumption of exoticism and oriental subservience) is what Hwang is really interested in, rather than the mechanics and/or logistics of how such a deception took place.

Right from the opening scene, set inside a French prison cell after the affair and charges of espionage have been brought to light, we see Gallimard addressing the many questions about how this deception could occur for so long. In his direct address to the audience, as though they are a part of the sophisticated international set that gossips about the court case, Gallimard maintains that he had not known that his lover, Song is male. Not many people who heard about the real-life case believed such a defence (Hwang 1989, p. 98). However, Hwang could imagine how such a misinterpretation might take place, especially given the many misunderstandings that occur between East and West. In the Afterword to the play, Hwang argues that 'given the degree of misunderstanding between men and women and also between East and West, it seemed inevitable that a mistake of this magnitude would one day take place' (p. 98).

Notwithstanding the bizarreness of the real-life case, however, Hwang felt that the conundrum of sexual intrigue did not yet constitute the makings of a satisfying script. The interiority of the main character, Gallimard, was missing if the premise of the work was merely about why he was hoodwinked for so long. Gallimard's inner life cannot be answered satisfactorily by presenting to the facts the real-life case *per se*. Hwang asked himself: 'What did Bouriscot think he was getting in this Chinese actress?' The answer came to me clearly: 'He probably thought he had found *Madame Butterfly*' (Hwang 1989, p. 95). It was only when Hwang decided to juxtapose his narrative against Puccini's Opera, *Madame Butterfly* that this character's inner life became animated.

The playwright's epiphany to intertextually reference Puccini's Opera allowed Hwang to examine the cultural conditions that predominate for Asians living in the West. In *Madame Butterfly* Cio Cio San is beloved by Western audiences because of her selfless (and irrational) devotion to a worthless cad like Pinkerton. Under the Western gaze, Asians are to be understood as either a subservient Cio Cio San, an untrustworthy spy or a repugnant alien. Thus, Hwang decided to set his play against *Madame Butterfly* 'which

has had many incarnations by Western authors, Giacomo Puccini's version had become the representative model of the doomed relationship…Hwang saw [the French diplomat in the real-life case] and Pinkerton as similar in many ways' (1989, p. 95). Hwang overtly references this venerated Opera so as to deconstruct it. In the following analysis, my use of the term 'intertextuality' borrows from Classics scholar Robert S. Miola, who views it as applying to 'distinct and separate texts interacting', but not instances of 'collaborations, different voices in the same text, or purely linguistic expressions' (2004, p. 13). Intertextuality in all its forms always contains three aspects: a 'verbal echo' of the earlier work; the significance of audience recognition of the earlier text in the later work; and how much the appropriation is used to foster debate (Miola 2004, p. 13).

In his analysis, Miola states that there is a continuum of various relationships that can exist between an earlier text and subsequent texts that reference them which highlight numerous possible 'textual transactions' (2004, pp. 13-14) including copying, paraphrase, compression, conflation, expansion, omission, innovation, transference, and contradiction' between artistic works (2004, p. 19). I follow Miola's categorisation, which he freely admits 'is open to reduction or addition' of new groupings as they 'all appear on a continuum with various shadings and overlappings' (2004, p. 13). Like the process of translation itself, the title and the content of Hwang's play is an eloquent symbol of the back-and-forth exchange between the two works. The three modes of intertextual references to Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* creates a space of textual doubling of the orientalist ideas promulgated in opera that serves Hwang's project of subversion these stereotypes.

i) Intertextual subversion via the title of Hwang's play

The first intertextual reference is in the title itself: *M Butterfly*. Hwang's aim of deconstructing Puccini's Madame Butterfly is also stated by the playwright: 'The idea of doing a deconstructivist Madame Butterfly immediately appealed to me. This, despite the fact that I didn't even know the plot of the Opera! I knew Butterfly only as a cultural stereotype' (1989, p. 95). Critics at the time of the play's premiere in 1988 at the National Theatre (Washington D.C.) could not have missed Hwang's intertextual references which serve as a 'verbal echo' (Miola 2004, p. 13) to the famous Opera. Indeed, Hwang had

originally wanted to name the piece Monsieur Butterfly, in a clear contrast to Madama Butterfly as a way to subvert the Oriental female stereotype, but his wife intervened and suggested the much more enigmatic '*M Butterfly*'. With this single letter, 'M', Hwang's subversion is further emphasised as it is unknown whether the person in question is male or female, or whether 'M' stands for a character's initial first name. This destabilisation of a person's gender identity (through the use of differential pronouns) signals to audiences that Hwang's play is situated on more ambiguous semiotic terrain.

ii) Intertextual subversion in the content of the dialogue

In addition, intertextual references to the Opera also occur in the content of the characters' dialogue. The lines in Hwang's script makes it clear that we cannot understand the main character of *M Butterfly* without understanding the Opera. Gallimard proclaims to the audience in the form of a direct address:

> In order for you to understand what I did and why, I must introduce you to my favorite opera: *Madame Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini (act 1, scene 3).

This is followed up three scenes later, when we witness Gallimard confess the same operatic preference in a flashback to their first encounter. This time, however, there is a response, which is not deferential: Song immediately rejects the Opera's rendering of Cio Cio San which centres the ideal spectator in North American culture as 'white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male' (Dolan 1988, cited in Chen 2005, p. 219). Indeed, Song powerfully makes the following accusation, emphasising the word 'favorite' through its repetition:

> It's one of your favorite fantasies, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man ... Consider it this way: what would you say if a blond homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it's an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner-ah!--you find it beautiful (act 1, scene 6).

Hwang's strategy of subverting stereotypes works because Song is both an Asian *and* a spy and as such can see the Opera for the ridiculous fantasy that it is. The race swap in Song's statement is arresting to both Gallimard and the Western audience members of *M Butterfly*, asking them to revise their understanding of, and affection for, Puccini's beloved Opera. In effect, Song is proposing that Western performances of 'Oriental women' take the liberty of depicting them as 'deranged idiots', if we were to look at the rationality of Cio Cio San's actions.

However, because the West have been so successful in its colonial projections onto the Other, its audiences willingly receive them as acceptable representations. Hwang's overt intertextual references to *Madame Butterfly* through the play's dialogue sets up the third method by which he uses intertextuality, which we look at now.

iii) Intertextual subversion in the stage directions

The final approach that I discuss in this section is Hwang's deconstruction of the portrayal of Asian women on Western stages through the use of stage directions, specifically those that accompany Gallimard's recapitulation of key scenes from the Opera. Hwang's intertextual referencing of *Madame Butterfly* thus encourages us to compare how the Asian characters in the two works, Song Liling and Cio Cio San, are depicted in relation to each other — and the audience are invited to contrast the plot of the Opera as summarised by Gallimard against Hwang's stage directions with regard to its (intertextual) re-enactment.

While Gallimard's recounting of the Opera occurs early on in Hwang's play, the moment that it refers to occurs towards the end of Puccini's Opera. The moment Gallimard describes is after Cio Cio San learns that she is pregnant while she awaits her husband, Pinkerton, to return from his journey overseas (during which time, unbeknownst to Cio Cio San he has married a real 'American' wife). In the scene, Cio Cio San identifies Pinkerton's ship coming into port and instructs her maid, Suzuki, to help her change into her wedding outfit — as though re-affirming her commitment to her man when he comes to her. In Hwang's play, Gallimard recounts the operatic moment to us:

> This is the moment that redeems her years of waiting. With Suzuki's help, they cover the room with flowers (act 1, scene 5).

However, Gallimard's words are contradicted by the play's stage directions, which instructs that:

> *Chin, as Suzuki, trudges onstage and drops a lone flower without much enthusiasm* (act 1, scene 5).

The re-enactment of this moment from the Opera is accompanied by half-hearted acting as prescribed in Hwang's stage directions, creating an ironic distance between Gallimard's account of (and enthusiasm for) his favourite opera and its re-enactment within *M Butterfly*. The disparity between how the plot of the Opera unfolds versus the reluctance with which the scene is enacted serves to undercut Gallimard's retelling of the Opera. According to David Cowart, this 'play within a play' manages to contain 'in miniature the whole of Hwang's 'deconstructivist' strategy' (1993, p. 117). This strategy of contrasting points out a vast discrepancy between how audiences are traditionally asked to view the scene as an extravagantly romantic moment and how Hwang implores them to (re)examine it through its (re)presentation. As such, the contradiction between Gallimard's lines and the stage 'picture', or what we are told and what we are shown, creates a dramatic irony that reveals to us, the viewer, that Gallimard lives in a fantasy world that does not match reality.

Of the three strategies of intertextuality examined in my exegesis, this third one is the approach that most impactfully encourages a comparative stance between the depictions of Asian subordination in the two works. It is Hwang's use of intertextual deconstruction that enables the script to playfully critique Puccini's Opera in an ironic way. It becomes clear how, taken together, the earlier two intertextual references through the title and dialogue strategically allow Hwang to finally set up his dramatic point that Gallimard is betrayed not just by his Chinese lover, who is a spy, but also, by his own irrational attachment to the stereotype of the selfless Asian beauty that sacrifices herself for a powerful Western man. Indeed, in his dialogue with Song Liling, Gallimard confesses that the romanticism inherent in *Madame Butterfly* is vital to his sense of self (act 1, scene

3). However, by the end of Scene 6, his commitment to the Opera is challenged by Song and, ultimately, it is Gallimard's own orientalist mindset that also contributes to his own downfall.

In his critical review of *M Butterfly*, Cowart goes further to say that the plots found in most operas are ridiculous, and that 'Operas about the East make especially extravagant demands on good sense…[such an opera is a work of] fiction that dances on the brink of absurdity' (p. 108). Cowart concludes that *Madame Butterfly* remains an acceptable work if we do not ask of it 'the kind of serious critical interpretation' of say a Wagner opera, nor indeed should we to look to them 'for sophisticated treatment of the cultural Other' (p. 108). In my perspective and for the purpose of a translingual interpretation of these plays, I maintain that Cowart's argument for a 'close reading' of Puccini's operatic text amounts to an evasion of the cultural impacts of the racial stereotypes found in *Madame Butterfly*. Cowart argues that Hwang's play doesn't invalidate *Madame Butterfly* as a self-contained opera that somehow stands apart from audience responses, especially as Puccini himself possessed a more sophisticated understanding of Japanese culture than Hwang may have presumed (p. 107). However, Cowart's assertion does not acknowledge how the Opera functions in the broader culture[24]. His defence of the Opera does not address how its racial stereotypes affect the subconscious mind; it betrays a privileged position as part of the white majority that does not suffer as a result of the Opera's depiction of racial minorities. A strictly close reading of *Madame Butterfly*, in this context, preserves cultural prejudice, in particular white supremacy, in the minds of the Opera's audiences, while hiding its discourse to make such a translation of the cultural Other invisible (and in turn is therefore 'natural'). Cowart's argument does not consider what goes on in the minds of monolingual, Western audiences in relation to the racial stereotyping of Asian peoples because of the Opera, or what Tina Chen calls 'the subsequent circulation of Puccini's heroine as a cipher for Asian femininity (p. 72). Yet we do not live in a world devoid of 'reader' or 'audience' responses, just as we do not consume live performances in some idyllic, post-racial world.

[24] Japanese American scholar Dorinne Kondo argues that 'when Gallimard's French wife laments Chinese inability to hear Madama Butterfly as simply a beautiful piece of music', Hwang is suggesting that what is required is 'a committed, impassioned linkage between what are conventionally defined as two separate spaces of meaning…aesthetics and politics' (Kondo 1990, p. 29). Thus, Cowart is wrong to dismiss Madame Butterfly as a 'mere' opera, and to not demand too much politics from it.

It may be that Cowart's choice to disregard the impacts of such negative stereotyping on racial minorities arises from his position as a white male living in the United States for whom representations of fictional white male characters on stage are diverse and nuanced. Thus, his personhood is not reduced to a racial stereotype because of depictions that are unconcerned about the 'sophisticated treatment of the cultural Other'. Unfortunately, it is all too common for members of the dominant group to be unaware and unconcerned about the consequences of a plotline that 'dances on the brink of absurdity' (p. 108) on the racial others that *Madame Butterfly* claims to depict and represent.

Hwang's play counters Orientalist stereotypes (or domesticating 'translations' of racial others) by illustrating how such depictions have repercussions on interpersonal relationships, even the understanding that exists between nations (Hwang 1989, pp. 98-100). *M Butterfly* achieves this through the intertextual strategies discussed in this section. The invisibility of Asians in the Western Gaze has implications for translingual subjectivity, as I shall argue in the section on Hwang's use of the trope of the spy. The intertextual references in *M Butterfly* reminds us that in real life, people are affected by racial stereotypes that are portrayed in pre-existing works: our perceptions of people outside of a theatre or opera house are influenced by the repeated depictions of similar-looking fictional characters.

Having examined the cultural and linguistic expectations that an Asian-American playwright such as David Hwang has to heed, I now will analyse the *theatrical* script that Hwang writes in response. I examine how his play *M Butterfly* uses the trope of the spy to explore its creator's preoccupation with living in translation. Hwang understands that a spy needs a cover story, and for Song Liling, performing an identity based on an archetypal character (Cio Cio San) provides the perfect cover for her/his espionage work. In the next section, I discuss how the trope of the spy (and its variants) can be read as a metaphor for Asian-Americans living in translation.

Decoding the Metaphor of the Spy in *M Butterfly*

As I argued in the first section of this chapter, even though Hwang was not conscious of his translingual sensibility when he wrote *M Butterfly*, this can be inferred from the play's recurring concern with identity as performative. Using Chen's framework of Asian-American identity performance, I will argue in this section that *M Butterfly* functions as a vehicle for Song Liling to announce her/his strategy of impersonation in increasingly obvious ways. When Song finally fulfils this intent, the play shows the audience the negative consequences of such a revelation about identity performance.

M Butterfly addresses the theme of identity performance through a number of sub-tropes that function as metaphors for the translingual condition. Underneath the overarching trope of the spy in *M Butterfly* are the 'Acting', and 'Changing Clothes' metaphors, which further the play's metaphorical exploration of living in translation. In Hwang's play, we see the use of all three of these metaphors used: the spy, the actor, and the action of changing clothes. Each of these is explored in Rainer Guldin's book *The Metaphors of Translation*, where he demonstrates how both translation and metaphor operate structurally, as each concept refers to two poles of signification simultaneously (2016, pp. 18-21).

Guldin categorises the acting metaphor as pertaining to the art and craft of translation (p. 36), thus emphasising the effort and skill involved in this translingual activity. The acting metaphor also highlights the way that a translator is similar to that of an actor, as she or he is interpreting the lines of another, in order to create a convincing and fluent performance. Interestingly, Guldin places the spy metaphor for translation in the spatial category (p. 36), emphasising border crossings and transgressions of national boundaries. While the events in *M Butterfly* do occur in different geographical locations, it is not something that Hwang draws especial attention to, in the same way that he does with the acting metaphor.

Through these metaphors, I contend, we can interpret Song Liling as a spy figure who reveals the challenges that Hwang faces as an Asian playwright working in a

predominantly white and monolingual North-American theatre industry. Indeed, as Japanese-American theatre researcher Dorinne Kondo cogently points out, the narrative in Puccini's opera disavows any attempt by a Japanese character to become a 'real' American. In the plot of *Madame Butterfly*, Puccini 'reinforces our own conventional assumptions about personhood. [Cio Cio San's] attempts to blur the boundaries and to claim for herself a different identity – that of an American – are doomed to failure. She is disowned by her people, and she cleaves to [her rakish American husband] Pinkerton, reconstituting herself as American, at least in her own eyes. But the opera refuses to allow her to "overcome" her essential Japanese womanhood' (Kondo 1990, p. 10). Cio Cio San's fate, to me, parallels how David Hwang and other Asian Americans are also disbelieved in terms of their sense of belonging to the USA. Thus, in my analysis, it is the tension between expectations about identity arising from a person's race and the meta-theatrical illustration of 'identity as performance' that demonstrates the effectiveness of Hwang's use of genre tropes.

I will examine four key moments in *M Butterfly* to illustrate my reading: the first two moments help set up the idea that Song is able to operate as a spy primarily because of her ability as an actor to perform an identity that is not her own (discussed below in subsections titled, 'The spy who is an actor' and 'The spy and his greatest acting challenge); the third moment has Song reveal the artificiality of this performance by literally removing her disguise before the audience, in order to transform into a male identity (see subsection titled, 'The Spy who changes clothes'). The final incident that I examine draws its power because it is the culmination of all three previous moments: it illustrates the consequences when Song finally reveals his true identity to in the Court of Law to Rene Gallimard (see subsection titled, 'The Spy attempts to be an untranslated man').

i) The spy who is an actor

From the very beginning of *M Butterfly*, when Gallimard is in a French prison 'in the present,' (act 1, scene 1), we learn of Song's betrayal -- by being a spy, but more embarrassingly, by *being a man*. This secret has already been revealed to the world before

the start of the play, with both Song's espionage and 'gender masquerade' being an ‘open secret’ within the narrative of the play (Chen 2005, p. 179).

Using the framework of imposture and impersonation developed by Tina Chen, we can see that Song’s betrayal is an act of imposture, which ‘at its heart [is] about mendacity and duplicity’ (p. 8). The difference between these two concepts, Chen argues, is that:

> …imposture depends upon a particular belief in the power of the authentic. As such, deception of this kind requires a seamless performance; the object is to fool others, to “pull one over” by convincing your audience (and maybe even yourself) of the rightness of your performance. Impersonation, on the other hand, challenges the notion of the seamless performance; it is a paradoxical act whereby the notions of authenticity and originality are simultaneously paid homage to and challenged. Impersonation, by its very nature as an act of divided allegiance (p. 7).

The narrative of the play then goes into flashback, back to 1960, so that we may find out why Gallimard had been able to be duped for such a long period of time. These flashbacks are mostly recounted from Gallimard’s perspective, whose direct address to the audience makes him both the protagonist and narrator of the story. Even though the audience does not always identify with his laughable/lamentable fate, the use of direct address creates a sense of intimacy. This also means that we only hear about the things that Gallimard is interested in - such as recalling his first encounter with Song, which is also told in flashback. At this stage, we see Song exclusively through the 'gaze' of Gallimard, a French diplomat posted to Beijing in the 1960s. We thus initially apprehend Song according to how Gallimard wishes to see her - as a reiteration of Cio Cio San from Puccini's Opera. Therefore, Song is a translated character, and within the framework of Lawrence Venuti's analysis of the ethics of (literal) translation, I would say that *at this point in the story*, Song exists purely as a 'domesticated' translation whose seamless performance is there to make the act of 'translating' her foreignness, her otherness wholly invisible to the reader/spectator.

Not surprisingly then, in these early scenes, it is Gallimard who likes to paint himself as the powerful translator — he is the figure who helps Anglophone audiences understand

the Italian libretto (or sung lines) of Puccini's Opera, which are dutifully re-created within *M Butterfly*. In these re-enactments from the Opera, Song stands in for Cio Cio San, a fifteen-year-old orphan with limited economic prospects and an unwavering attraction to Pinkerton. Song is shown as largely silent in these reproductions of scenes from *Madame Butterfly*, where she is interpreted by Gallimard as the symbol of 'the perfect woman' (act 1, scene 3).

When Song conforms to the stereotype of Cio Cio San from the Opera, she is able to make herself the perfect spy. When Song acquiesces to the Orientalist view that Asians are emasculated or feminised, she is, in effect, an invisible character who serves to give Gallimard (and the audience) the license to participate in voyeuristic thrills. Here we see an effective overlap between the Orientalist gaze from the Opera with the spy fiction genre that Hwang has used to drastically re-interpret the legacy of Cio Cio San. Hwang's premise is that Gallimard allowed himself to be duped for two decades because Song was able to manipulate the stereotyped image of an Oriental woman, as embodied by Cio Cio San; Hwang even states that in real life, the diplomat on whom Gallimard is based on 'must have fallen in love, not with a person, but a fantasy stereotype' (1989, p. 94). Tina Chen argues that the 'standard concerns of the spy story — (are) a fascination with the trope of undetectability; an exploration of the license and voyeuristic thrills that characterize the "fantasy of invisibility"' (p. 155).

In Act 1 Scene 9, Gallimard waits below Song's window wondering if indeed he has a chance of a sexual/ romantic relationship with her. The question is raised as to whether Gallimard will become Song's lover – specifically, will he see her naked. Hwang's script raises this narrative question by teasing us with the moment when Song's 'robe comes loose, revealing her white shoulders and the next moment, when Song, 'her back still towards us, drops her robe' (act 1, scene 9). At this stage, we only see Song's naked body from behind, and she is silenced, inviting both Gallimard and the audience to enjoy the voyeuristic thrill of watching a naked Oriental woman, all the while, allowing the spectator to hold the powerful position of invisibility; to be able to watch (the Other) while simultaneously remaining unwatched, un-analysed. To possess the white gaze[25].

[25] Gallimard's moment of fantasy is ended abruptly by a phone call, so this voyeuristic thrill is left unfulfilled, interrupted, like a question that is raised but is yet to be answered. Later, in the third example

But as the play goes on, we realise that Gallimard is a problematic interpreter of his own narrative. He continually avoids harsh truths, especially about his own physical and emotional inadequacies - and the likelihood that a 'perfect woman' like Song would bother to put up with his, at times, cruel behaviour. Gallimard's tendency for fantasy ultimately leads to the unravelling of the 'story' that he has constructed (with the help of Puccini's Opera) about Oriental women. In order for the play to reach the truth of Gallimard and Song's two-decades love affair, another point of view must be given stage time. Oddly for an espionage story, it is Song — in the meta-theatrical space of the present — who reveals elements of the story that Gallimard does not wish to confront, namely that Song is a male spy who had acted duplicitously against Gallimard. Song does this by wresting control of the narration from Gallimard for two moments in the play.

By Act 2, Song takes over the narration of the play in order to present a more complete story. From Song's telling, we are finally able to see the risks (both personally for Gallimard, and nationally, for France) arising from Song's actions as a spy. The first time we see Song with her spy handler Chin is in Act 2, scene 4, when Song momentarily takes over the telling of her side of the story. In short, this is the first time that the narrative of *M Butterfly* exists beyond the control (or even presence) of its white male protagonist. It is a scene performed as a flashback — to the moment when Song reports State secrets back to her spymaster. Here is the first moment that Song displays her own *double agency* - as both the mistress of her own narrative, as well as a spy - when we see her reporting to Comrade Chin. Theatre researcher Josephine Lee argues that, via Hwang's adept scriptwriting, the 'stereotype becomes an enactment rather than a state of being, for the characters are explicitly actors, playing stereotypes by choice or out of compulsion (1997, p. 98).

Creating Song as a spy is potentially a risky moment for Hwang, who as an Asian-American playwright, wishes to dispel demeaning stereotypes[26] of Chinese characters.

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of my analysis, the possibility of answering this narrative question returns, though ironically transformed, when Song changes out of her female costuming while remaining both well-lit and onstage.

[26] Similarly, theatre scholar Josephine Lee argues that Hwang's *M Butterfly* 'illustrate[s] the ways in which Asian American playwrights might incorporate stereotypes, using rather than ignoring their theatrical power' (1997, p. 92). She contends that the strength of *M Butterfly* is Hwang's deliberate use of racial stereotyping's 'theatrical power'. And while Lee is speaking of the stereotype of the Asian as a submissive

What if this performance of a Chinese spy on the stage is interpreted by North American audiences as a reconfirmation of the stereotype of Asians as sneaky and untrustworthy? Tina Chen argues, however, that Hwang uses this genre trope to embrace the '*stereotype's effectiveness in staging the conditions by which a collective, pan-ethnic coalition is performed into being*.' (p. 61, emphasis in the original) That is, Hwang's play asks the Asian actor to inhabit the stereotype of the spy in order to displace it, for a 'stereotype must not only be acknowledged but also *inhabited* before it can be undermined or displaced' (p. 64). Hwang intends to foreground, and make explicit, Song's imposture not to depict Asian fictional characters as untrustworthy frauds. Instead, Hwang's strategy is to illustrate how the stereotypes of Asians are so predominant in the Western imagination that such a blatant, decades-long act of imposture can, and does, occur.

I wish to emphasise that Song's imposture (as a fictional character in Hwang's play) differs from the impersonation that the real-life actor playing Song (B. D. Wong in the premiere season). While Song deceives Gallimard, particularly in the early scenes of *M Butterfly,* she/he actively divulges the truth of the narrative – and her/his identity performance to the audience. Both imposture and impersonation are happening simultaneously in *M Butterfly*. Hwang is able to achieve this overlap of imposture and impersonation by having Song repeatedly draw attention to her own skill and ability to act or perform her expected role. The content of Hwang's play is at pains to equate the function of actors in general with that of spies. As Song reports back all the intelligence that she has learned from Gallimard, she is interrupted by Chin, who asks, 'how do you remember so much?' Song replies 'I'm an actor' (act 2, scene 4). This equates Song's skills in espionage with her profession as an actor.

This moment is not essential to the unfolding plot events of the play. Indeed, it is hardly believable that Chin, as Song's handler, does not already know that Song, being a Chinese opera singer, is also a performer. The discussion about how Song is able to remember exact troop numbers is neither believable nor required for the dramatic tension in the scene. Hwang's use of the spy figure has less to do with conforming to the espionage

'Butterfly' here, I argue that it can equally be applied to the preconception of Asians as sneaky and untrustworthy - that is, the stereotype of Asians as spies.

genre in terms of uncovering tightly held, national secrets as it is an excuse for him to highlight the challenges of living in translation through the metaphor of acting.

In my reading of the play, Comrade Chin is a flat character whose function is to feed lines to Song, who then can answer those questions in a way that allows the play's key themes to be foregrounded. Chin elicits from Song answers that serve to demonstrate Hwang's authorial interest in the theme of identity performance in *M Butterfly.* In a translingual reading of this play, I argue that Hwang uses the figure of the spy to emphasise Song's identity performance as an Asian on a Western stage. Tina Chen asserts that Asian-American playwrights have 'staged acts of impersonation in order to address the complicated relationship that exists between Asian-American performance and the re-enactment of stereotypes like that of the dragon lady and the effeminized Asian-American man' (xxii). Chen's point here is that writers like Hwang have created opportunities in their theatre scripts to call attention to the act of impersonation; such dramatists do this so as to address the tension between performance on the stage and the problematic issue of re-enacting negative stereotypes of Asians in America.

Hwang's use of the spy genre is designed to correlate the Asian stereotype of spying by inherently performing an identity which is not one's own. Such self-reflexivity in the play's narrative is an act of impersonation, not imposture. David Crane 'differentiates imposture from impersonation by focusing on the visibility of the act; '(true) imposture---unlike impersonation--can't be seen too easily' (1995 cited in Chen 2005, p. 9). The difference between imposture and impersonation, I propose, can be seen more clearly if we compare the depictions of Cio Cio San (in the Opera) and Song Liling (in Hwang's play). The narrative in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* tries its best to make the audience believe that Cio Cio San is who she is - a young Japanese woman who's unable to undergo change in the face of actions taken by a cruel white male. In contrast, the dialogue of Hwang's *M Butterfly* strives to let the audience know that Song's performance is an impersonation of an Asian stereotype.

One example of this operation drawing attention to Asian identity performance is when Comrade Chin interrogates Song about why he wears dresses. 'How come every time I come here you're wearing a dress? Is it because you are an actor or what?' Comrade Chin,

as Song's handler, intends to imply homosexuality[27], which is both taboo and illegal in Maoist China. The main purpose of Chin's questions is to create a space in the text for Song to enunciate that, 'it's a disguise', that her costuming as a female allows her to undertake her espionage work: ‘it helps me in my assignment’ (act 2, scene 4). The dress, used to hide Song's true identity, is vital for Song to remain undetected by Gallimard as she extracts state secrets from him. In these exchanges, the play's 'spy equals actor' correlation is explicitly spelt out. Hwang draws attention to the fact that Song is, as both actor and spy, performing an identity that does not belong to her. The prominence of the spy and actor tropes allow Song to simultaneously engage in her espionage work (imposture), while also drawing attention to its artificiality and virtuosity (impersonation) for the benefit of the audience. The theme of acting is touched on again in Song's line of dialogue, 'You write faster, I'm the (performance) artist here' (act 2, scene 7), reaffirming its significance as a motif in Hwang's play.

Asian American theatre scholar Karen Shimakawa argues that by the second last scene of the play, Song has not only refused to convincingly ‘play the role [that Gallimard] has scripted for her’, but that Song has ‘effectively taken over as director as well’ (1993, p. 359). She does this by stripping for him while announcing that she is helping him ‘to see through my act’ (act 3, scene 2). Once again, Hwang consciously uses the trope of the spy as actor to explore identity performance. Song’s use of the words ‘see through’ in the phrase above does not imply invisibility, but rather a desire by the playwright to make translingual subjectivity to be seen/visible.

Chen reminds us that ‘imposture and impersonation do not always result in qualitatively different kinds of acts...that this site of potential overlap is critical to keep in mind’ (p. 9). Acts 1 and 2 of Hwang's play are examples of such sites. Espionage narrative scholar,

[27] My analysis is only based on the script, so I can only be guided by what is written. As with most well-crafted scripts, the stand-alone dialogue may be interpreted in various ways, leaving much of the meaning as the subtext, because otherwise the dialogue can sound 'on the nose' or very 'wooden'. The job of a professionally trained actor or director is to choose a plausible —yet interesting— interpretation of how that character says that line based on the overall intention of the script. If we were to read this line just on its own, it is ambiguous whether comrade Chin genuinely knows that Song is having a homosexual relationship with Gallimard, but taken in context, it is both more plausible and more interesting dramatically that Chin *does* know about the homosexual nature of Song and Gallimard's relationship but is just bringing it up in order to humiliate Song in this particular exchange.

Allan Hepburn argues that 'in effect a spy belongs nowhere' (2005, p. 11). The dramatic action of deciphering meaning from codes used in spy narratives is a metaphor for the continual process of translation (and linguistic relativity) which is the lived experience for translinguals. In effect, Hwang equates the spy trope with both the 'acting' and 'changing clothes' metaphor.

However, it is the body of the spy itself which is the most enigmatic and engaging of these codes. In my reading of this scene, there is an emphasis on performing an identity, where the 'ultimate code of spy fiction may therefore be the body itself: indecipherable, multiply storied, costumed, scarred, agonized, kinetic' (Hepburn 2005, p. 76). Song's performative ambiguity is a visual metaphor for the translingual Asian writer's sense of belonging nowhere.

ii) The spy and his greatest acting challenge

While donning costumes or disguises to assume other identities is a prevalent trope within the spy genre, in many respects *M Butterfly* does not conform to a conventional espionage narrative. In the examples above, we have only witnessed Song speak about her spying to her handler, Comrade Chin, while Gallimard himself is not present in the scene. The effect this has is that Song enacts imposture on Gallimard while the play itself lets the audience in on Song's secret. The examples above set up in the audience's mind that Song is an actor/spy which emphasised the artistry of Song's act of imposture against Gallimard.

In the next example, I examine how the line that separates these two 'tracks' is blurred in order for the play to demonstrate Gallimard's collusion in his own deception. This can be seen in Act 2, Scene 7, most of which is told in flashback. Song is with Comrade Chin once again, this time demanding that a Eurasian baby be provided so that Song's espionage assignment can continue; Song can present the baby to Gallimard as though it is their love child (which, in the given circumstances, is biologically impossible). When the flashback ends, however, the stage directions tell us, 'Song turns upstage, towards Gallimard'. *This* Gallimard, imprisoned in a French cell, has been viewing the event from the play's 'present' time period. Present-day Gallimard says to Song, ‘I would forget all

that betrayal in an instant, you know, if you just come back and become Butterfly again' (act 2, scene 7). The meta-theatrical exchange problematises the previous instances of imposture. Present-day Gallimard is, in effect, asking Song to lie to him once again, to conform to the irresistible Oriental stereotype once more. Despite Song's betrayal, what is important to Gallimard is that Song resumes her role as a returned Cio Cio San. To be his Butterfly, again.

Song's response, though, shows us how Hwang, once again, draws attention to Song's act of identity performance: 'I'm an artist, Rene. You were my greatest…acting challenge' (act 2, scene 7). In contrast to the earlier examples of Song talking about spying with Chin, this time, the revelation of Song's performance is directed towards Gallimard himself. The assertion that their two-decades love affair was one great 'acting challenge' carries greater dramatic tension due to the intimate relationship between Gallimard and Song. It is also now being described in the past tense: 'You *were* my greatest acting challenge', as though preparing the audience to face the present. After twenty years of imposture - with the intention to deceive Gallimard – this is the first time that Song explains to Gallimard what a feat of identity performance Song has been able to enact.

Song's character arc is that of someone who goes from appearing as the perfect Oriental woman in Gallimard's eyes to eventually that of someone who wants Gallimard to see and acknowledge her/his true identity, at times against Gallimard's own yearning to not confront this reality. It is Song who wants the audience to see her/his transformation from the Oriental disguise (similar to Cio Cio San from the Opera) into a Chinese male spy. Her greatest acting challenge is not on the stage of the Chinese Opera, but rather, occurs offstage, in her daily life as Gallimard's lover. As Hwang himself surmises, the real-life Chinese spy's imposture was only possible with the diplomat's willing participation and collusion (1989, p. 94). Hwang illustrates his supposition in *M Butterfly* in a flashback to the moment when Gallimard is finally given the chance to see Song naked but refuses to. Then, the present-moment Gallimard muses from his jail cell about his earlier motives:

> Did I not undress her because I knew, somewhere deep down, what I would find? Perhaps. Happiness is so rare that our mind can turn somersaults to protect it (act 2, scene 6).

Gallimard's self-reflection demonstrates the Hwang's intention for the audience to consider why Gallimard participated in his own deception about Song's true identity. The point that Hwang wishes to make through his play is that the misperception is a two-way street between the East and the West - with both sides mutually making choices about how they construct reality. In an interview, Hwang states, 'I would like to think that the play is fairly even-handed in saying that the East also misperceives the West. The East is guilty or complicit in this dual form of cultural stereotyping. The West, having had the advantage of being the colonial power and of being the more powerful of the two over the past couple of hundred years…I think both parties are equally guilty' (Hwang & DiGaetani 1989, pp. 141-142).

Here I wish to pause to clarify the distinction between Song Liling (a Chinese fictional character) and David Hwang (a Asian-American playwright) because a large part of my argument is that Hwang's translingual sensibility can be discerned from his portrayal of Song; she is a character who, in terms of the spy genre, is not required to continually draw attention to her own performance; and yet Hwang has created her as doing just that. Song's obsession with announcing her own identity performance to the audience is I would argue, part of Hwang's translingual preoccupation. As Chen argues, the historical context for Asian-Americans have left them with little choice but to be attentive to the performance of their own identity:

> …embedded within the performance of Asian-Americanness exists the awareness of the ways in which such an identity has, from its earliest moments in U.S. legal and social history, been constituted as an oxymoron but comprises the conflicted reality that those who have been ascribed this identity must nonetheless embody, confront, and adapt to their own ends (p. 19).

Asian-American identity is deemed oxymoronic. In *M Butterfly*, Hwang seems concerned with, and attentive to, the need for such convolutions/contortions of identity performance. The creation of Song Liling, is a character who must 'embody, confront, and adapt' the stereotyping of Asians by the Western gaze 'to their own ends' (Chen 2005, p. 19). Hwang's play initially sets up Song's disguise (the Asian stereotype of both the Butterfly

and the spy) so as to later reveal their workings to the audience. As a translated character, Song's revelations about her performance, or identity work, start to make the usually 'invisible' work of translation 'visible' to spectators. She thus moves from being a 'domesticated translation' to what Venuti might call an 'undomesticated' translation (1995).

The next example from *M Butterfly* completes Hwang's project of making Song's identity performance 'visible'.

iii) The spy who changes clothes

In *M Butterfly*, the following plot events occur between the moment discussed above (when Gallimard reflects on why he did not undress Song when he was given the chance to finally see Song naked) and the one which I will analyse next: China enters the period of the Cultural Revolution, making it impossible for Gallimard and Song to continue their romantic liaison, for their 'flat was confiscated. Her fame and my money now counted against us' (act 2, scene 9). Gallimard is sent back to his native France, disgraced after all of 'intelligence' Song had supplied him about China and the Vietnam War proved to be utterly wrong. Song, branded a class traitor, is sent to the countryside to do hard labour, but after four years of toiling in the fields of Hunan, Song is recalled by her handler, Comrade Chin, to make her way to Paris to reunite with Gallimard so as to extract more state secrets from him. The script briefly gives us a taste of the lovers' emotionally touching reunion on French soil. This moment, however, is cut short as Song once again wrests narratorial control from Gallimard to assert her version of the narrative. When Gallimard complains against this by saying, 'You have to do what I say! I am conjuring you up in *my* mind' (act 2, scene 11, emphasis in original), Song retorts, 'Rene, I've never done what you've said. Why should it be any different in your mind? Now split—the story moves on, and I must change' (act 2, scene 11). Song's use of the word 'change' is both figurative and literal – she gets us ready to move the story entirely forward to the present, which she does by literally changing her costume on stage.

At the end of this scene Song tells us:

> The change I'm going to make requires about five minutes. So I thought you might want to take this opportunity to stretch your legs, enjoy a drink or listen to the musicians. I'll be here when you return. Right where you left me (act 2, scene 11).

During this interval Song changes clothes from that of a woman to a man. The stage directions in the play then tells us that:

> Song goes to a mirror, in front of which is a wash basin of water. She starts to remove her makeup as stage lights go to half and house lights come up (act 2, scene 11).

Hwang portrays Song's metamorphosis from female to male in front of the audience; it is not hidden from us by a lighting blackout or a lowering of the theatre's curtain.

Song's act of un/dressing at interval fulfils a narrative promise, or tease, that had occurred in act 1, scene 9 when Gallimard had caught a glimpse of Song naked, ‘her back still towards us, drops her robe’, which had been interrupted by a phone call. Chen argues that:

> As both discursive and kinesthetic strategy, performance proves an extremely effective analytical tool for illuminating the effects of the gaze as a determinant of Asian-American bodily expression. After all, the omnipresence of the gaze implies constant witness, an audience always already waiting to “see the show” (p. 5).

Or, to put another way, this is a subversion of Cio Cio San as a figure of Oriental desire into the spy fiction's license to experience 'voyeuristic thrills' (Chen 2005, p. 155). However, Chen also warns against the dangers of such seduction:

> …the fantasy of the stereotype can seduce both actor and intended audience, and exploitation of a desire for stereotype can easily turn into the production of stereotypical desire (p. 72).

The importance of inserting a distance between the spectacle (Song Liling) and spectator (the audience) is greater for Asian actors performing the (stereotyped) figure of the spy on Western theatre stages. Such an actor is at risk of seducing not only the viewer but

also himself as to the truthfulness of that racial stereotype. To avoid this, Chen argues, Hwang prevents further Orientalising the Asian actor by his meta-theatrical strategies to examine 'the cultural stereotypes that undergird the performance of Asian-American identities' (p. 72). Song's overly signposted costume change at interval is but one example of Hwang's effective use of Brecht's alienation effect *(Verfremdungseffekt)*[28]. Thus, the use of alienation techniques help support 'an audience's awareness of the ideology behind any performance is also what keeps the actor "safe" from his own enactments [of a racial stereotype]. This is doubly true in the case of the spy' (Chen 2005, p. 176). I agree with Chen's concern about keeping Asian-American actors safe from being further racialised in the context of continued colonialisation of Asian identity in the United States[29]. In this moment, Song tries to reject imposture but has not yet embraced the gesture of impersonation, as Song, now presenting as male, attempts to be himself - no longer a spy for the Chinese government, nor a performer for the Peking Opera who exploits the stereotype of an Oriental Butterfly in order to gain access to secret information through Gallimard.

In *M Butterfly*, we see the trajectory of Song's character which goes from appearing as a performer in the role of Cio Cio San in Gallimard's recollection of the opera *Madame Butterfly*. Next, we see Song as a Chinese actor who flirts with Gallimard but is largely inscrutable to him. Finally, we get to meet Song Liling as a male and former spy being cross examined in court. Song's character trajectory, to me, is that of what Venuti would argue is the necessary step for an ethical translation – which is one that rejects a wholly 'invisible' approach to translation in order to explore a more 'visible' one. By the end of the play, Hwang's spy character reveals his method of deception: Song explains to the judge how, in pandering to a stereotype of an Oriental, he was able to deceive Gallimard (act 3, scene 1). In this scene, I would argue that Hwang, like Venuti, warns of the dangers of invisible translations that make it difficult for the audience to understand what the

[28] German dramatist Bertolt Brecht resisted the conventions of theatrical illusion which he had inherited. *Verfremdungseffekt*, also known as the 'estrangement effect', was used to distance the audience from the play so that they could view the characters and situations in his plays critically.

[29] I would add that outside of the theatrical sites of intervention such as Hwang's play, the risk of 'falling for' or being 'taken in' by one's own racial stereotyping is the norm rather than the exception. This places an extra burden on translingual Asian artists living in countries such as the USA and Australia. They have to be mindful of this danger in a way that white and monolingual playwrights are not required because white actors are not racialised.

underlying realities of the source ‘material’ are. Both argue for the importance of visibility in translation so as to highlight the decisions made when carrying across knowledge, or persons, from one linguistic context to another. In my interpretation of *M Butterfly,* I suggest that Hwang is preoccupied with articulating the identity performance that is demanded of Asian Americans in order for them to be taken seriously, to be heard, to be considered sincere (rather than inauthentic or insincere).

The next example from *M Butterfly* shows us what happens when Asians do not perform according to the stereotype (of an Oriental) that has been foisted upon them -- when they refuse both imposture and impersonation.

iv) The spy attempts to be an untranslated man

The climax of this reading of the spy trope in *M Butterfly* centres on the moment that Song gets his day in court. Clearly, the Judge is interested in Song's explanation as to why he was able to deceive Gallimard about his gender for so long, given the sexual nature of their decades-long relationship. To answer the Judge's questions, Song explains his 'take' on East-West relations. Now dressed as a male in a 'well-cut suit' (act 3, scene 1), Song is a transformed figure, which makes him an even more alluring character in the narrative because '[k]nowing that his identity is historically contingent, the spy plays up the theatricality of his role and the pliancy of his affiliations' (Hepburn 2005, xiii). The questioning continues, with the stage directions telling us that 'Song remains a man, in the witness box, delivering a testimony we do not hear' (act 3, scene 2). One interpretation of this moment is that it’s the play itself, via Hwang’s stage direction, that renders Song silent (even as he continues his testimony from the witness stand). However, I propose that this moment has less to do with 'silencing' Song and more about setting up the narrative for the examination of Gallimard's reaction to Song as a man. The scene is set up so that we see Gallimard be forced to watch Song in a wholly new light - one that, as we have seen previously - both Gallimard and Song put a great deal of effort to try to avoid through their jointly created illusion of a Butterfly-like ideal woman. Now, however, Gallimard must confront Song's true guise - which is unequivocally male. Song is also a very capable former secret agent whose presence is a clear refutation of the ‘Cio Cio San’ stereotype that represents a disempowered Asian female who lacks agency.

To apply Tina Chen's framework to this moment of the play, I interpret Song Liling as a figure who no longer has to enact imposture on Gallimard as part of a spying mission - for the secret is already out - but who is yet to embrace the strategy of impersonation. The stereotype of the Asian, Chen contends, must be '*inhabited* before it can be undermined or displaced' (p. 64). Song had previously inhabited the stereotype of the Butterfly, as embodied by Cio Cio San. But now, before both Gallimard and a French judge, he behaves as the modern, Asian male that he is. In this moment, Song acts unashamedly as himself. How is this received by his courtroom audience?

What happens next seems to confirm Chen's theorisation: Song's witness statements are immediately rendered suspect, first by the judge, who proclaims that, 'Your armchair political theory is tenuous Monsieur Song' (act 3, scene 1). Then Gallimard takes over the narration once again. He tells the audience, 'in my moment of greatest shame here in this room with that person up there telling the world what strikes me especially is how shallow he is. How glib and obsequious…completely without substance' (act 3, scene 2). The word 'glib' here is interesting because it suggests that - when Song finally stops masquerading a stereotype, he is perceived by Gallimard as being inauthentic. My reading of this accusation of inauthenticity at the very moment when he appears on stage as himself suggests Asian identity performance before a Western gaze must entail either imposture or, as Chen argues, impersonation. This interpretation rests on the assumption that although Song is a Chinese character within the narrative of *M Butterfly*, it's possible to correlate how Song is viewed in the French courtroom with how the Asian-American actor playing Song is viewed in the USA. Chen writes that:

> With the pervasive ideas of Asian-Americans as somehow never being able to be "American" enough, the very nature of Asian-American identity might be thought of as one that requires one to impersonate fundamentally oneself (2005, xviii).

In the narrative, because Song has left behind imposture but has not embraced impersonation, his testimony is rejected by Gallimard as being tenuous, glib and inauthentic. When put on the stand and examined without his feminine disguise, Song is described by Gallimard as being fluent but insincere. In my translingual interpretation,

Gallimard evaluates Song's linguistic performance at this moment as proficient but insincere. Gallimard's sudden re-evaluation of his former lover's linguistic abilities reveals an implicit expectation of how an Asian person *should* present themselves to conform to pre-existing stereotypes so as to be *understandable*. It is difficult for Gallimard, who stands in for Western audiences used to watching Cio Cio San, to be able to comprehend Song Liling when he 'performs' an identity outside of the viewer's expectations of a translated person. Song's identity - now stripped of its feminine disguise – is, ironically, deemed by Gallimard to be fluent but inauthentic[30]. Song's attempt to be an untranslated figure are, ironically, what makes him no longer credible.

Now I view the implications of this moment of Song's resistance against being a 'translated figure' through the framework proposed by translation theorist, Lawrence Venuti.

v) Venuti - the dangers of invisibility

Throughout *M Butterfly*, the audience is led to believe that the narrative occurs in a world where, for the most part, translation is seamless, even invisible. The falsehood of seamlessness in translation (which in chapter one I demonstrated is anything but) is confirmed by Lawrence Venuti, who warns against the practice of 'invisible translation' because it hides power imbalances between languages and culture for the benefit of the dominant language and culture, through the 'privileging of a fluent domesticating method that masks both the translator's work and the asymmetrical relations— cultural, economic, political—between English-language nations and their others worldwide' (p. 38). The concern raised by Venuti is something that Asian-Americans are acutely aware of, due to their lived experience of such cultural/linguistic power asymmetries. Venuti cautions against translations that remove all traces of foreignness because they imply that the whole world is knowable through the dominant culture's linguistic frame of reference. In other words, translation 'is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target language

[30] This, however, doesn't stop Gallimard from again trying to create his ideal of the perfect woman in the mould of Cio Cio San, this time with fatal consequences for himself. Karen Shimakawa (1993, p. 351) notes that, the 'collapsing of this space between the "male" Gallimard and the "female" Song makes possible Gallimard's final transformation into his own "Perfect Woman".'

reader' (p. 18). Not only do such violent 'domestications' of foreign texts and subjectivities disavow the reality of translated lives, they also enable the dominant culture to avoid having to examine its own linguistic and cultural narcissism.[31] Gallimard's stubborn attachment to Song's identity as a *Butterfly-like* ideal is the consequence of a broader culture habituated to having foreign subjectivities rendered 'familiar,' and 'domesticated'. Thus, when Song finally asserts his true identity – as a former secret agent – he finds that he is rebuffed.

The irony that Song is taken to be insincere when he no longer conforms to a stereotyped image is studied by Tina Chen in her research into Asian American identity performance. Chen concludes that the only option available to Asians living under such circumstances is to embrace the inevitability of being stereotyped and therefore to embrace the strategy of impersonation, whereby one draws attention to the performativity of one's own identity (2005, xvi-xx). This is what *M Butterfly* does throughout. Audience members leave the theatre impacted by a theatrical event that has utilised the strategy of impersonation to resist the Orientalising effects of racial stereotyping. Hwang's play successfully embraces impersonation to acknowledge and subvert stereotypes of Asians.

However, this is not a 'one and done' deal. Chen argues that the project of de/posing stereotype is never-ending, and continually 'in process':

> Impersonation, as these texts and authors demonstrate, helps us to understand how the process of de/posing stereotype is indeed always *in process*, a reflection of the twinned project of creating a self through and in response to the vexed representational history of Asian America (p. 85, italics in the original).

For an individual this caveat suggests constant vigilance and the need to be adaptable. For a playwright, this means each new work by and Asian writer in America, or Australia,

[31] Lawrence Venuti is not without his critics. Australian translator and historian, Linda Jaivin is sympathetic about Venuti's concerns about 'domestication' of texts as she is 'on guard as a translator and reader against such tendencies. The fact remains, however, that if a translation reads too strangely to its target audience, it risks not being read at all' (2013, p. 33).

needs to re-articulate and resist the dominant culture reading of Asian characters as racial stereotypes.

Conclusion

In this translingual interpretation of *M Butterfly*, I discerned a number of artistic strategies that Hwang uses in order to discuss the effects of living in translation. These approaches include Hwang's use of intertextual references to Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* to conjure the stereotype of the subservient Cio Cio San in order to subvert it. Another is Hwang's use of the spy genre tropes which allows his character Song Liling to articulate the constructedness of her/his own identity performance throughout the play.

In the court room scenes towards the end of Hwang's play, Song is not required to continue with her/his imposture (as a Cio Cio San like 'perfect woman') but is yet to embrace Tina Chen's proposed strategy of impersonation. When Song articulates what he really thinks, when his asserts his undisguised masculine identity before Gallimard, he is viewed as nothing more than a glib and inauthentic spy. Within the narrative of *M Butterfly*, this serves as a warning about what may happen when an Asian character ventures beyond an established stereotype.

Using Chen's framework, I find that within the narrative of *M Butterfly*, Song enacts the strategy of imposture against Gallimard in order to fulfil his/her function as a spy. Taken as a whole, however, Hwang's play enacts the strategy of impersonation with its viewing audience. Overall, it employs an artistic strategy of having Song announce the constructedness of her/his identity in a way that reminds us how we, like Gallimard, sometimes willingly participate in our own delusions about racial Others.

Finally, I considered the effect of Hwang's play on its Anglophone audience from a Venutian perspective. The plot of *M Butterfly* is structured the way in order to resist what translation scholar Lawrence Venuti might call a 'domesticated' translation of Song as an Asian character on a monolingual, North American stage. What differentiates Puccini's Cio Cio San from Hwang's Song Liling is that the latter draws attention to the conditions of her translated identity for the audience to understand; applying Venuti's framework of

translation ethics, Song disrupts Gallimard's interpretation of the narrative to assert her/his separate identity.

As a result of Hwang's artistic strategies of resistance, *M Butterfly* represents an early and important moment in the creation of a viewing culture that is more curious about cultural differences between East and West. The play's effect on the audiences in the United States is to a) assert the theatre itself as a site of historical misrepresentation, or mistranslation, of Asian characters for the benefit of a narcissistic Anglophone audience; b) to articulate the labour of identity performance in response to Orientalist stereotypes (as represented by Cio Cio San), and in doing so, c) makes space for other complex and empowered translated figures to occupy the western stage.

In the next chapter, I examine the figure of the extra-terrestrial alien as a metaphor for the translingual condition of Asians living in Australia. I will do this by applying Chen's research to my own play, *Coloured Aliens* (2017).

Chapter 3

Aliens as Translated Characters:

a translingual reading of *Coloured Aliens*

When you can no longer tell
if you're liberating yourself through expression
or selling your oppression

-- Poet Bao Phi *Sông* I Sing

Introductory Section

In chapter three, I continue the analysis of the correlation between metaphors and translingualism by turning my critical attention to my own play, *Coloured Aliens* (2017). This chapter examines the following: firstly, I describe my own encounters as a translingual with monolingual Australian society, taking into consideration my time at high school, university and early years writing plays. To contextualise these lived experiences, I outline the history of Asians in Australia, including how Australian theatre came to be so white. This allows me to discuss in detail how my play *Coloured Aliens* tries to counter the centrality of whiteness in Australia and how the artistic team behind its premiere season enhanced the themes in the script. Lastly, I critically engage with the responses from the theatre critics to my play to reflect on what they reveal in terms of the centrality of whiteness in this sector.

Is the predominant experience of Asian translinguals in Australia that of the translated figure? If so, what might the metaphor of the alien reveal about it means to live in translation in the context of Australia in general, and Australian theatre, in particular?

In Australia, 'white' is a shifting category historically. Ghassan Hage, building on Pierre Bourdieu's thinking, observes that even though 'not all white-skinned people or English background people define themselves' in this way, whiteness is indeed 'a symbolic field of accumulation' where many attributes 'can be accumulated and converted into' naturalised and normative markers of racial superiority (1998, p. 232). The white gaze assumes that the cultural and linguistic practices of white people in Australia are taken as natural and universal, thus free from any ethnic markers (Liu & Baker 2016, p. 424). Whiteness, as theorised by Hage, is not an essential trait but an aspiration; it is also contextual, shifting in response to new waves of migration (p. 60). In this chapter, I use the terms 'white'[32] and 'whiteness' not in the sense of an essence but as an attitude of superiority, and what African-American poet Audre Lorde calls the 'mythical norm' (1984, p. 116) whereby those have a combination of traits such as being white, male, able-bodied, middle-class, cis-gendered and heterosexual have priority over those with none, or fewer, of those traits. In tandem with the mythical norm is Lorde's approach to intersectionality[33], in which a black lesbian will have a different experience of both patriarchy and racism to a white, heterosexual woman or an Asian male; as I will show in this chapter, these concepts are useful ways to understand Australia's main constructed racial categories: white, black, and yellow. As Lorde proposes, identity should be considered as an intersection of class, gender, culture and other identity categories.

This chapter is structured as follows: **Section one** looks at the linguistic conditions under which I became a writer, taking into account my memories from high school, university and early playwrighting experience of encountering white-centric, monolingual mindsets; **Section two** examines the cultural conditions that has led to Australia viewing itself as a predominantly white and monolingual nation, and therefore a white-centric theatre

[32] In response to Lee Lewis's Platform Paper on the centrality of whiteness, Julian Meyrick argues that the term 'Anglo' is more appropriate in Australian theatre due to its links to a British theatre tradition. While I appreciate the need to avoid conflating all white peoples into the same category, the differentiation between the categories of Anglo and European seems more productive when discussing artform issues such as text-based versus director-led theatre traditions. In Australia, when we say 'white,' it is understood as being equivalent to "Anglo-Celtic" (in a contemporary context); I follow Lee Lewis's usage of 'white' to highlight the current global antiracist movement against white supremacy.

[33] The term 'intersectionality' was coined by law scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and was added to the Oxford Dictionary in 2015. However, the idea that oppression due to race, gender and sexuality intersect had been discussed much earlier than that by African American feminists and scholars in the 1970s. One such scholar is poet and feminist Audre Lorde, whose work I reference in this exegesis.

industry; **Section three** delves into strategies that I used to respond to the whiteness of Australian theatre in order to create my play *Coloured Aliens,* produced in collaboration with fellow artists.

The Linguistic Conditions in which I became a Writer

I have not been a monolingual since I was six years old. That was before my family left our relatives and friends to leave our native country as refugees in the late seventies. Even as a monolingual child in Vietnam, I was aware that I was a part of the dominant culture because all the advertising on the billboards, in the magazines, on the television were directed at people who looked and sounded like me and my family members. Through the radio and other media, they all spoke to us in only one language, and that was our mother-tongue, Vietnamese. Of course, this was not so great for linguistic minorities in Vietnam, but when you are part of the majority, it is easy to remain blind to your own cultural and linguistic privilege, as my family and I had been at that time. Well, that was a long time ago.

When we left Vietnam, I had to confront a foreign language, English, which felt completely alien in my body as I learnt to speak it. In my short memoir*, The Uncanny* (2013), I describe the sensorial experience of speaking my first and second languages as follows:

> From the time I knew any language at all, I had dreamt and thought and spoken in Vietnamese. The music of it was like rain dropping on tropical leaves growing at different angles, making variously pitched staccatos and then tinkling down into rivulets. My first contact with English was exposure to the strange resonances it made inside my mouth; the adding of ‘s’ on the end of everything, so it seemed at the time; the collapsing of all social relationships into the single pronoun ‘you’ and its mirror ‘I’ (p. 82)

Nowadays, I would call myself a translingual (in chapter one I explained how and why I use the terms bilingual and translingual interchangeably). To illustrate the complexity of my translingual identity, and how this can be misunderstood by people who are predominantly monolingual, I shall give the example of the 'translation' (or

transplantation) of my name. The name I was born with, Vũ Thị Mỹ Chi, with the surname first and my personal name last, was rearranged to Chi Vu when my family arrived in Australia in order for it to fit the naming convention of our adopted home. While it's not as significant a name change as adopting a Western 'Christian,' or first name, such as *Susan* Vu, or *Elizabeth* Vu, it was still an estranging moment that marks the beginning of my identity as a translated person.

To English speakers, 'Chi Vu' sounds foreign, perhaps a touch 'French' yet a little bit bewildering: is the *last* syllable part of the *first* name, or is it a name by itself?
'How do you spell 'Vee-uu?', they would ask.
'The letter V and the letter U', I would reply.

Paradoxically, to Vietnamese speakers, even in today's globalised world, this arrangement of 'Chi Vu' also sounds *foreign* - as though it's a name belonging to someone who is not to be trusted. One elderly lady unwittingly suggested to my mother, that this 'Chi Vu' must be a newfangled 'Communist name'. When the Communists took over South Vietnam in 1975, they imposed drastic changes to society: its economy, legal system and even the language that was to be used in the South so that it would conform with the North. Even now - nearly fifty years later - Vietnamese refugee communities continue to deal with the legacy of trauma, including the paranoia of being infiltrated by the Communists; and hence the older lady's mistaken interpretation of 'Chi Vu'. When names are 'translated' into foreign contexts and back again, they can become so foreign, so '*alien'*, that it is hard for monolingual speakers of either language to know where each part of a name belongs. My name has been chopped and changed to fit into different linguistic frameworks, even though the individual words that make up my name have not changed. Thus, for a translingual like me, the question of identity and belonging is complicated — as evidenced by something as simple as the ordering of my name.

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Nations like the USA and Australia are language graveyards according to Macquarie University's Ingrid Piller (Fukui 2019). This is because Australia is where languages other than English go to die. The startling statistic revealed in the same article is that five out

of six children who start primary school as bilinguals go on to lose their heritage language by the time that they finish secondary school according to Dr Ken Cruickshank of the University of Sydney (Fukui 2019). Or to put it more forcefully: what happens in Australia is that 'multilingual kids go to school to become monolingual kids' (Fukui 2019).

Australia is one of the most multilingual countries in the world, and yet the linguistic diversity of its population is not represented by its institutions; the privileging of English monolingualism in the institutions of power, such as our education system, is called Australia's 'monolingual mindset' (Clyne 2005). Historically, Australian institutions used English monolingualism as a tool to dispossess Aboriginal people of their lands in order to further the colonial project. According to the National Archives of Australia:

> Before British colonisation, over 250 languages and 800 dialects were spoken in Australia. Colonisation and government policies suppressed the speaking of these languages, resulting in most becoming endangered or lost. The third National Indigenous Languages Survey…found that 123 Indigenous languages are spoken in Australia today. 109 of these are considered endangered, and all are under threat (2023).

In contemporary times, many Australians continue to believe that English is the only language needed for daily life; they often see additional languages as an inconvenience and a liability to Australian institutions. This belief is based on the incorrect understanding that language is simply a tool to convey objective information about a world in which meaning is impervious the language a speaker uses to describe their reality. In her book, *The Multilingual Subject*, linguist Claire Kramsch argues that the choice of language that we speak not only describes reality but contributes to how it is shaped and perceived:

> [L]anguage has been taught and learned mostly as a tool…for the description of a stable and commonly agreed-upon reality. It has not been taught as a symbolic system that constructs the very reality it refers to, and that acts upon this reality through the categories it imposes upon it, thereby affecting the relation between speakers and the reality as they perceive it (Kramsch 2009, p. 2).

Kramsch argues that different languages impose different ways of categorising reality, thus affecting how its speakers perceive reality; her argument is that there is a nuanced variation in sensory perception which arises from whether a bilingual uses one language or another. As a result, different languages do not feel interchangeable to a translingual writer. As I have written in chapter one, the implication for linguistically mobile playwrights is that they may make new and creative associations when they write in their other language. It is therefore unhelpful to me as a translingual to proceed as though my additional language is a superfluous duplication of my dominant language. As a researcher and creative writer whose main language has become English, I am interested in how theatre scripts written by translingual Asian Australians may be used to describe the unique consciousness arising from their linguistically mobile identity. What concerns me in this chapter is how translingual creative writers can write more confidently and consciously from this identity.

Before I became a translingual Australian writer whose professional experience spans over two decades of writing and producing theatre works in professional, educational and community contexts, I was a translingual Australian student in a monolingual education system.

i) I am translingual in a monolingual system - at school

As a teenager I had no aspirations to be a creative writer; I knew nobody personally who made a living as an artist or writer. Indeed, most of the books in my school library were written by male authors with European names, so I had no reason to think that my writing would matter to anyone. Unfortunately, there was not the plethora of identity-based anthologies such as '*Growing Up Asian in Australia*' available at that time (Pung 2008) for me to relate to. Other than the experience of reading Kenneth Cook's brilliant novella, '*Wake in Fright*' (1961) about a city born and bred schoolteacher who finds himself trapped in the remote Australian town leading to his nightmarish descent into brutality, I found most of the texts set for English literature alienating.

In addition to my emotional disconnection with the Anglo-centric curriculum, I was at risk of being educated out of my heritage language. Without support tailored to my linguistically mobile identity, I experienced a sense of bewilderment at having to navigate two contradictory sets of assumptions about the world. Unfortunately I had to negotiate this alone because my bewilderment was not understood by adults on either side of the language and cultural divide. Bilingual students often fall between the (cultural and linguistic) cracks, as they say.

> Submersion education is also known as ‘subtractive language learning,’ where ‘learning a second language means losing the first.’ Stunting development of the home language by switching exclusively to the dominant language has negative effects not only on language learning but overall cognitive development and academic achievement (Piller 2016, p. 124).

Not only does Australia has a 'subtractive’ learning model, where the education system is set up so that bilinguals not only lose their first language but is also encumbered by a suboptimal method of learning in all academic subjects as well. Instead, the research shows that bilingual students do better in *both* of their languages – both the mother tongue and English – when provided with bilingual education (Piller 2016, p. 124). I will now briefly discuss the reason for this lack of support in autobiographical terms because, unfortunately, there had not been the support to help me articulate and synthesise my feelings of extreme cultural and linguistic disorientation as I went into secondary school. By the time I was sixteen, I'd only been in Australia for ten years - and so while I sounded like other Australian kids, my thinking, at times, reflected the expectations that I had implicitly received from my parents. Piller argues that such students are often misdiagnosed in terms of their language proficiency because they appear fluent. The prevailing belief is that because these students *sound* like native-speakers, ‘their need for reading and writing support is overlooked…[which] results in poor academic performance’ (p. 123). As I sounded fluent and appeared to be succeeding, so I was not given targeted support that would have helped put me on a more equal footing compared to my monolingual peers.

Looking back on my highschool years, I realise that my teenage mind was in fact filled with exemplars of grammatically correct *Vietnamese* sentences[34]; there was not a bridging program that helped me identify why the grammatical rules I was adhering to were incorrect in written English. The problem with the monolingual education I received was that grammar, on the few occasions it was explicitly taught at all, was presented as though the minds of students receiving the instruction were blank pieces of paper; for bilingual students, this assumption is incorrect. The education system I encountered did not recognise the need to teach me a *comparative* grammar so that I could learn and develop both frameworks in order to compare and contrast them against each other so as to apply them to the relevant language. In short, I was *living in translation*, but without the tools to do so; without access to support tailored to the needs of bilinguals, I was placed in a situation of pedagogical disadvantage. In an ideal scenario, I imagine that in a bilingual education system, the Vietnamese-language teacher, herself a translingual, would bring this to students' attention. I give this example from my adolescence to show how difficult it is for bilingual learners to operate in an education system designed for monolinguals. Unfortunately, ignorance about the needs of translingual students remains prevalent today.

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Outside of the classroom, I found that my experience as a translingual, as an Asian in Australia, as a female was also absent from the culture, in particular in the mainstream media. There had been only two Asian faces on Australian television (the fashion designer Jenny Kee and the television personality Annette Shun Wah) in all of that time. I felt a

[34] Nowadays the opposite is true - so that I am mostly in danger of speaking Vietnamese using an English grammatical structure. Some of the differences in grammar between the two languages are: Vietnamese does not require for there to be a coordinating conjunction between independent phrases; it is not compulsory for a Vietnamese sentence to have a subject, as most of the time this is implied by the context; there is no requirement to have subject-verb agreement because in Vietnamese the plural form of the word is the same as its singular form, etc. Adhering to these finer points of grammar are not crucial in conversational English (and indeed you would sound quite 'stiff' if you did speak like that in daily life) but they are vital in academic English.

psychic damage of not seeing myself represented onstage or on-screen. The deeper psychic trauma of white supremacy stemmed from the spate of 'Vietnam War' movies that came out in the early 1980s, a period when Hollywood was trying to deal with the Vietnam-US war. These films, such as *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *Full Metal Jacket* asked the viewer to identify with the protagonists, who were all young, American, white males. I found it confounding that the Vietnam War on the big screen had no depictions of ordinary people from South Vietnam, and the only Asian characters represented in these movies were undifferentiated North Vietnamese soldiers or Vietcong (VC) guerrillas. Crucial battle scenes from these movies portrayed the VC fighters as inscrutable monsters, ambushing and butchering conscripted young white men. But for viewers like me, existing outside the mythical norm of the Australian imagination, the battle was one of representation.[35] Novelist and scholar, Viet Thanh Nguyen writes that 'All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory' (2016). In addition, Nguyen argues, 'the Pentagon's war of attrition in Vietnam was matched by Hollywood's Apocalypse Now and its entire celluloid campaign to refight the Vietnam War on global movie screens (pp. 13-14). As I watched these films, I realised that these Asian extras were othered by the white gaze not only in how they were depicted within the story but in their casting as well. Such films about the Vietnam War sometimes did not even have Vietnamese-speaking people in them, because the extras playing the VC were speaking gibberish or another Asian language that I did not understand.[36] As Australians, we complain when an American actor fails to replicate the Australian accent, so imagine how jarring it would be if the equivalent happened to Australian characters in a war film that is as important to the Australian psyche - say *Gallipoli* - where the Australian soldiers sent off to the trenches are played by a random variety of 'white' people - Russians, Spanish, Italians, Norwegians and Frenchmen, running around jabbering in gibberish or some obscure non-English language while they were supposed to be Australian soldiers. In the cinemas of Melbourne, I experienced the white gaze as I watched how Hollywood transformed people who looked like me into monsters and aliens.

[35] I write about this struggle in terms of a linguistic and generational contest in my paper 'The 1.5 Generation Vietnamese-American Writer as Post-Colonial Translator.'

[36] The ethics of casting are brilliantly rendered in Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* (p. 152), which itself makes a reference to Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers, edited by Frank Chin et al., because the cry "Aiiieeeee" is the sound Asians make when they are depicted in the literature of the mid-twentieth-century United States (as opposed to articulating intelligible dialogue).

Having recounted how I had been excluded from seeing myself as someone able to contribute to the cultural life in Australia, what happens next is the exception rather than the rule for secondary school students like me. I share the following memories to show how unlikely it is for someone like me to become a writer in Australia. I didn't intend to be a writer and only started writing either poetry or short stories because I was asked to do so at high school. Ingrid Piller writes that those, 'who are excluded from full community participation are rarely excluded on the basis of language alone. Linguistic injustice works hand in glove with the injustices of gender, class, and race. Out of all these, linguistic injustice remains the only one where victim blaming is still widely considered acceptable' (Piller 2016, p. 162). Thus, it seemed that I was destined for a non-literary or even artistic career. Fortunately, from year eleven onwards, I had an amazing English teacher, Mr Bernard Slattery, who encouraged me to be an author. We had this incredible intellectual struggle, which perhaps only strengthened his belief that I should write with the aim of publication because I at least had an original point of view. One day he said, *I want to send some of your writing to Overland* - which was a leftist literary magazine publishing from Melbourne's working-class Western Suburbs, although I did not know this in Year Ten, when this event took place.

A few months later I received a rejection letter from Overland, and my reaction at the time was: *What have you done to me? I didn't even want to do any of this, and now I've been rejected.*

Mr Slattery was not dismissive of the editor: *It's a handwritten rejection letter,* he said, *so that's a nice rejection letter.* When he saw that I was still unsold on the idea of any rejection, he said: *You're going to get a lot of rejection if you're going to be a writer.*
As I look back on this experience now, I realise just how extraordinary his confidence in me had been, given the cultural conditions in Australia at that time. There were low expectations and exclusion of people who looked like me.

ii) I am translingual in a monolingual system - at university

Then it was the nineties; I got into a prestigious sandstone institution of higher education, Melbourne University. Suddenly class was an issue as well as language and ethnicity. I took creative writing subjects and was surrounded by students who had been to private schools in Melbourne's leafy eastern suburbs; they were mostly white or at least 'first-world looking' (Hage 1998). I found that our creative writing styles were completely different; I didn't particularly enjoy what they wrote, they probably didn't enjoy what I wrote either. At the time, I put a lot of this down to class differences, but now I look back and I also see that the monolingual/translingual divide was likely there too; I wrote how I spoke, and I spoke like a young person from the multicultural Western suburbs, albeit a bookish one. I felt socially alienated in that very white, monolingual and middle-class context. I didn't feel like I had a cohort of fellow non-white translingual writers that I could connect or collaborate with; to talk about the *condition of being in translation*, for example. (It was interesting because the teaching staff at university were great - very encouraging of my creative writing. Because postmodernism was all the rage at that time, the lecturers and tutors really liked my style of writing, which was chop and change[37]. And so I received very high marks). But at least in university, I was being exposed to more writers whom I connected with.

In my arts subjects we read at least a novel a week, watched weekly arthouse films at the cinema in Carlton; then we would try to speak about them intelligently in the tutorials. The literary works that burned inside me during those years were ones written by, or about, immigrants and polyglots - Italo Calvino's depictions of translingual conversations between Kubla Khan and Marco Polo in *Invisible Cities*, Virgil's refugee, proto-Romans in a translation of *The Aeneid* and Vladimir Nabokov's alliterative *Lolita*. The writers I admired played with language so much that they made it strange, and then used metaphor to transcend it. Scholar and lexicographer, Ilan Stavans would describe them as having a 'translingual sensibility' (Kellman & Stavans 2015).

[37] One of the lecturers, George Papaellinas, was even a published non-Anglo writer - a rare creature in the mid-1990s; he was very supportive of my short stories, and I owe my first publication to his insistence on sending it out into the world.

Oh, and another highlight was that time Polish-Australian poet Ania Walwizc came and read her poem *Australia - You Big Ugly…* to a lecture theatre full of stunned students in the Old Arts Building. Brilliant. It was memorable to hear a poem which broke the grammatical rules of Australian English so flamboyantly to portray an *alien* and *alienating* culture through the voice of an '*Othered*' or NESB[38] consciousness.

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As part of my undergraduate degree, I also took a pivotal subject from the Linguistics department of my university - it was called 'Cross Cultural Communication' and it was in that semester that I learnt about code-switching and *pragmatics* - how language is meaningful not because the words held meaning in themselves, but rather meaning is encoded by each culture through context and usage. I realised I knew this deep down, and so had always watched the speaker's body language, facial gestures and listened for the tone of voice (all the elements of acting) to determine meaning, rather than strictly listen to the words of the speaker. In this subject, I felt like I had finally found a science that explained what I lived - and had to negotiate - each day since coming to Australia. I was feeling my way towards a '*translingual sensibility*,' even though the academic literature on this field did not exist at the time. Unfortunately, the creative writing department of the University did not offer any subjects about how to connect bilingualism with creative writing (and this gap remains the case today in Australia; in the USA there are bilingual MFAs offered). I was having to figure out how to describe my linguistically unique subjectivity alone. I was 'feeling' my way towards a translingual writing practice in the dark.

Part of the dilemma for a translingual writer is which audience to write for, given that you could be writing for one, or the other linguistic group, for both, or for purely oneself. Each audience requires a different persona—a new writer's identity—in order to carry out the task satisfactorily. The translingual author, whether consciously or not, is asking herself - who is the person viewing this piece, and (therefore) who is the person *writing* this piece?

[38] The governmental acronym at the time: NESB stands for Non-English-Speaking Background.

In decades of writing creatively, and then later on when I was mentoring younger bilingual writers, I have found again and again, the need to negotiate one's writing self with these two sets of 'inner readers'. Bilingual author Eva Hoffman, in her memoir *Lost in Translation*, describes the anguish of losing her primary inner reader but spending years before she felt that she felt emotionally comfortable with writing solely for her English-language inner reader (1989), because up until that point, it felt like an act of betrayal to do so. If one cannot locate this inner addressee, one can become speechless or blocked creatively (pp. 106-108). For translinguals like me, each specific writing project demands a new negotiation between my two competing linguistic selves, even if I only write in one language: English.

Sometimes the necessary authorial identity did not exist in English, and so I had to go searching for it in Vietnamese, and there I would find it (watching and waiting for me all this time) in the limited Vietnamese that remains inside me despite the decades of neglect because of an education system that kills off other languages in its students.

And sometimes, when the necessary *translingual* 'authorial identity' did not exist in either English or Vietnam, I had to invent one: an authorial identity that exists outside of either language. One example of this is when I experienced a form of writer's block when I was trying to figure out who my readers were when I was writing my novella, *Anguli Ma: a Gothic Tale* (2012). The problem, which I describe in a paper published in Kunapipi, is:

> The Vietnamese diaspora is not only dispersed geographically but also linguistically. After settlement, Vietnamese migrant communities increasingly adopt the dominant language of the host country. Generally, first generation migrants do not become as assimilated as their second-generation children. The linguistic diaspora therefore occurs both geographically, as well as across the generations within each country of settlement (Vu 2010).

There are unique problems faced by translingual writers which do not exist for monolingual writers. At that time, I felt stuck between two very separate audiences – the mainstream and the first-generation Vietnamese. I felt the tension of writing for two groups of readers simultaneously: the broader monolingual English readership and my

own Vietnamese minority community. For this novella, I wanted to avoid acting as a Vietnamese cultural 'informant' for the entertainment of the broader Australian book buying public. The novella is based on an ancient Buddhist tale but set in the Vietnamese refugee community in the west of Melbourne in the 1980s. The ethical dilemma in terms of finding the appropriate translingual authorial identity is this: how do I write about a Vietnamese murderer (Anguli Ma, whose victims are fellow Vietnamese refugees) *in English*[39] – while not playing into the hands of Australia's anti-immigration racists? Writers from linguistically diverse backgrounds are charged with some level of responsibility towards their communities, but they also need to operate with artistic freedom in order to write creatively. It was only when I *invented* a suitable authorial identity - by imagining a translingual readership which did not exist at that time - was I able to overcome my writer's block to complete the novella[40]. Negotiating my translingual authorial identity is what I have had to do for *every one* of my significant written works. This invention is perhaps what Salman Rushdie meant when he suggested that the migrant has entered the condition of metaphor, because this transformation of self is a part of being a translingual writer.

iii) I am translingual in a monolingual system – starting out as a writer

When I completed my undergraduate degree in the 1990s, I embarked on a career in a monolingual and very white theatre industry (which I discussed in the Introduction of this thesis). Given a history of exclusion of linguistic and racial others in Australia's mainstream media, the work of a translingual writer like me becomes harder than that of a white and/or monolingual Australian playwright. I had to fight to depict my own translingual consciousness; this was difficult, both artistically and financially — because the 'market', as I show later, *was* and *is* not interested in depicting Asians from an Asian perspective. It wasn't just me that felt shut out of a centrality of Australian whiteness. Another Vietnamese-Australian writer, Hoa Pham notes that Asians in Australia struggle

[39] If I were able to write a literary work such as *Anguli Ma: a Gothic Tale* in Vietnamese rather than English, then the problem of a linguistic dissonance between the reader and the characters depicted in the work would be irrelevant.

[40] It went on to be published by Giramondo and was shortlisted for a N.S.W. Premier's Literary award 2013.

with an imagined (white) Australianness which excludes people like her: 'I identify as being Asian Australian, in a way that I do not identify as being Australian' (2018, p. 88).

Australian theatre scholars Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo state that as:

> …subjects of representation, Asia and Asians essentially disappeared from the Australian stage in the 1920s with the decline of melodrama as a form of popular entertainment, and only re-emerged in significant ways in dramas about the Vietnam War in the late 1960s. In such texts, Asia was often depicted as a site of repressed trauma and unresolved conflict, reflecting Australia's anxieties about both Asian communism and American neo-imperial intervention in the region…With the notable exception of Alan Hopgood's *Private Yuk Objects* (1966), which proffered Vietnamese perspectives on the war, plays in this genre were marked by the relative absence of Asian characters. John Romeril's attempt *in The Floating World* (1974) to present a more nuanced picture of Australian–Asian regional relations represents an important turning-point; however, the play's intervention into racial representation was circumscribed, in the final analysis, by its focus on white nationalist masculinity (Gilbert & Lo 2007, p. 94).

By the late 1990s when I started my playwriting career, there were so few Asian-Australians plays in existence, which suggested that non-white writers were still being excluded from Australian stages. This glaring lack of representation for Asian Australians was highlighted as late as 2014, when, under a new artistic director, Playwriting Australia scoured thousands of Australian plays in search for published scripts that had been penned by Australians of Asian heritage: at that time, it found only **five scripts** that met that description (Watts 2014). The underrepresentation of Asian Australians is bewildering given that approximately 10 percent of the Australian population is of Asian heritage (Australian Bureau of Statistics). In fact, my first play, *A Story of Soil* (2000), was one of the five plays that Playwriting Australia had found in the literature review.

Why did mainstream Australia become *so white* and *so* monolingual? The next section looks at Australia's history of racial exclusion and its legacy.

The Cultural Conditions that led me to write *Coloured Aliens* using intertextuality

In this section, I look at Australia's colonial history to explain what had led Asians to be excluded the way that they were/are from Australian culture. I study this because I want to describe the political and cultural context which has led me to write *Coloured Aliens*. Understanding these cultural conditions will help me articulate the artistic decisions that were made in the writing of this script and its production.

This historical contextualisation of Australia's race relations has not always been widely disseminated since the time of the legal fiction of *terra nullius*. I focus on Australia's history of colonisation because I think that knowing how to make sense of the past will help us understand the present. Many of us in contemporary Australia work alongside peers who come from very different countries, each with their own history of political, economic, and cultural struggle. Understanding how diverse humans can work together *authentically* and *ethically* — without pretending that cultural differences do not exist — is a skill we all need more of going into the future. Historically, Australia has wanted to see itself as a white and monolingual nation.

i) Australia sees itself as a white and monolingual nation

My play, *Coloured Aliens* is inspired by Australian history. The title of the play comes from official documents at the time of Australia's Federation, which described non-white immigrants as 'coloured aliens'.

Despite the mainstream belief that Australian theatre is largely white, Aboriginal performance had been created and performed on this continent prior to white settlement. After colonialisation, audiences had the chance to watch non-white theatre, even if in less-than-ideal contexts. Theatre researchers, Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo argue that:

> In fact, colonial audiences – and presumably aspiring practitioners – did have some opportunities to observe specific kinds of Aboriginal, Maori, Chinese and Japanese performance, if not necessarily in establishment venues… Such events, we argue, constitute the beginnings of an Australasian theatrical cosmopolitanism, albeit one marked by racism and a sense of cultural incommensurability (2007, p. 21).

However, when a newly Federated Australian Parliament debated the restriction of immigration, politician John Watson warned that businesses conducted by ‘Chinese, Syrians and other coloured aliens’ had taken over ‘whole streets in Sydney’ (Australia, House of Representatives 1901, p. 4633). During colonial Australia, regulation of other non-whites was enabled through their classification as 'coloured aliens.' Chinese immigrants in particular were depicted in the news bulletins of the day with exaggeratedly slanted eyes, buck teeth, and long pigtails, while their skin, described as yellow, was equated with immorality and disease.

The Lambing Flat Riots of 1860–61, in the goldfields of New South Wales, saw white miners killing or injuring their highly successful Chinese competitors; support for the riots was the impetus for restricting Chinese immigration to Australia. Anti-Asian sentiment, and a fantasy of whiteness, as cultural theorist Timothy Kendall argues, was seen as a prerequisite for a modern, federated nation, because ‘the evolution or whitening of Australia symbolised the transformation of the colonial settler society into a nation’ and ‘the marginalisation and objectification of the Chinese became an expression of Australia’s national modernity’ (2007, p. 23). Kendall states that Australia as a Federated nation defined itself in terms of its opposition to the coloured races; Australia could see itself as modern only if it was white. Whiteness, therefore, became inherent to Australia's conception of itself from that moment. Thus began the idea that non-white immigrants did not belong in Australia.

As a result, not only was immigration restricted for the Chinese, but there was also a fear of racial mixing (or miscegenation) between whites and non-whites. John Watson also asserted:

> As far as I am concerned, the objection I have to the mixing of these coloured people with the white people of Australia…lies in the main in the possibility and probability of racial contamination…we should be foolish in the extreme if we did not exhaust every means of preventing them from coming to this land, which we have made our own (Australia, House of Representatives 1901, p. 4633).

This ideal of a 'white Australia' was a lie erected to try to erase 60,000 years of Aboriginal culture and language on a continent which, at the time of white settlement, had over 250 Indigenous nations, each with a distinct language. Contemporary race relations bear the legacy of dispossession of Aboriginal peoples and attempts to eradicate Indigenous cultures and languages. The fiction of *terra nullius* (in Vietnamese, this is *đất hoang; đất vô chủ*) was used to legalise the British colonisation of Australia, resulting in massacres of Aboriginal peoples, land grabs, cultural destruction, and stolen generations. (Indeed, it was not until the referendum of 1967 that Indigenous people were finally allowed to vote and be counted as fellow citizens of Australia).

As part of Australia's Federation in 1901, a 'whites-only' immigration policy was officially put in place, with various methods such as tax and property laws and European language tests used to discriminate against non-white immigrants. The centrality of whiteness built into Australia's constitution allowed anti-Asian and anti-Aboriginal racisms to become legal. These practices 'were conceptually unified by their unshakeable belief in European superiority' (Edwards & Shen 2003, cited in Gilbert & Lo 2007, p. 33).

China scholar and fiction writer, Linda Jaivin provides a broader context the anti-Chinese sentiment at that time, that coincided with Western colonisation:

> By 1894, bubonic plague spread from China's southwest to Guangzhou in the east, where it killed some 60,000 people. The plague reached Hong Kong, and then, via the British, to India and beyond, with an eventual global death toll of fifteen million. The pandemic exacerbated rising anti-Chinese sentiment around the world, including in the United States, which had already banned Chinese immigration, and Australia…As would happen again in 2020 with Covid-19, fear of disease combined with prejudice to fuel a virulent racism. In the 19th century this drew, without irony [given the Opium Wars in which opium was pushed onto the Chinese], on an image of the Chinese as sickly opium addicts (2021, pp. 145-146).

Jaivin argues that, ironically, the racist stereotypes of Chinese people as an inferior race prone to opium addiction and disease were the result of Western imperial forces taking

advantage of a weakened China. However, to justify the plunder of Chinese resources in the 19th century, the West relied on an ideology of white supremacy.

> Just a century earlier, Voltaire and other European philosophers had considered China to represent civilisation at its best. The racialist logic of imperialism, which justified exploitation and colonialism on the basis of supposed white superiority, changed all that (Jaivin 2021, pp. 145-146).

This wider project of imperialism described by Jaivin explains why both the United States and Australia had instituted restrictive immigration policies aimed at keeping non-white immigrants, in particular the Chinese, out.

Although what was called the 'white Australia policy' was finally removed in 1972 by the Whitlam Labor government, racial hierarchies continue to linger in Australian culture. After the end of the Vietnam War, an estimated two million people fled Vietnam, with more than eighty thousand settling in Australia in the decade that followed[41]. It was in the context of these changes to Australia's immigration intake that my family arrived in Melbourne in 1979. At the time, given how little nuanced representation of people from Asia, little was known about us by broader Australian culture. The stories of people like members of my family have been silenced and even suppressed.

Scholar and Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Viet Thanh Nguyen writes in his book, *Nothing Ever Dies* that 'all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.' However, the memorialisation of the fallen soldiers on all sides of a conflict is difficult because 'memory, like war, is often asymmetrical' (2017, p. 153). For the men and women from the former South Vietnam, this observation is even more poignant because South Vietnam was not America's enemy in the Vietnam War, but its ally.

[41] This was due to Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser's leadership in allowing Vietnamese refugees to be resettled in Australia. Member for Fowler, Chris Hayes notes that: 'Malcolm Fraser is rightly credited for Australia opening its doors to thousands of Vietnamese who became refugees in the 1970s as a consequence of the Vietnam War. Following the fall of Saigon… the first wave of Vietnamese fled their homeland driven by hopes of achieving freedom, liberty and a better life for themselves and their families… This was a brave and courageous decision at the time, a decision that was based in compassion' (Phillips 2015).

As recorded in *One Crowded Hour*, Australian combat cameraman Neil Davis believed that 'the impression given to the world was that the Americans were doing almost all of the fighting [in the Vietnam War], while the inefficient and cowardly ARVN [Army of the Republic of South Vietnam] were sitting back and doing nothing. That was not true, and the international press should accept responsibility for not telling the truth. It was inaccuracy by omission' (Bowden 1987, p. 121). Similarly, historian Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen states that 'South Vietnam was a central participant in the Vietnam War, but its history and the histories of South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians have largely been erased in the vast historiography of the war' (Australian Historical Association 2018).

Closer to home, my resilient and brave sister, Châu was primary school aged during the wartime period. This is how she recalls the days leading up to the Fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975: 'We went up to the rooftop garden and saw bullets firing - lights - in the area of Tân Sơn Nhất airport. On television, we watched the images of US helicopters taking off with people dropping off.' She watched as people were unable to cling on to the bottom skids of the overloaded choppers (Vu 2003, pers. comm., 5 June). This was how the evacuation – codenamed 'Operation Frequent Wind' – commenced for any remaining Americans and 'at-risk' South Vietnamese people (those who served or worked with the Americans). It is estimated that ten thousand people clamoured outside the embassy gates to try to escape. Meanwhile, South Vietnamese air force pilots flew helicopters loaded with their families on board and landed on the decks of American ships.

The vast majority of refugees, however, fled Vietnam in the years after these historic events. Over the following two decades, 'the extent of state repression that occurred in post-war communist Vietnam led to the mass exodus of more than two million people from Vietnam,' explains Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen (Australian Historical Association 2018). Repression by the state included internment and torture in 're-education' camps for former members of the South Vietnamese army and forced labour on collective farms in the 'New Economic Zones' for residents of Saigon, which had been renamed Ho Chi Minh City. Vietnamese asylum seekers risked their lives despite the threat of predation by pirates and drowning as a result of overcrowded, makeshift boats. Those who managed to reach refugee camps in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, or the Philippines were

eventually resettled around the world, including more than a million in the United States and 80,000 in Australia. Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser is credited with making the politically courageous decision to allow Vietnamese refugees to resettle in what was still a very white Australia.

The political implications of Australia's image of itself as a white nation re-emerged as recently as 1996 when Pauline Hanson's maiden speech in Parliament asserted that she and most Australians wanted 'multiculturalism abolished' because Australia was 'in danger of being swamped by Asians,' who 'have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate' (Australia, House of Representatives 1996, p. 3862). Hanson's divisive speech was a throwback to Australia's Federation.

So how does this historical context translate to the Australian stage? Because Australia sees itself as a white and monolingual nation, this profoundly affects how its arts and culture sector operates. The legacy of colonialism remains in how Australia imagines itself especially on its theatre stages.

Despite Australia allowing entry to non-white immigrants from, countries such as Vietnam, the artistic and cultural representations of those who were deemed Australian still centred around white protagonists and iconic figures. Academic Tseen Khoo argues that Australia is often represented by bodies that are 'indelibly white and generally male…. These traditional images disavow and disallow Asian faces and bodies in national semiotic representations' (2003, p. 55). This legacy is a key reason why there was a lack of relevant and appropriate Asian Australians on Australian screens and stages when I was growing up.

The centrality of whiteness in Australian theatre is most striking to artists who have been away from it for a time, as they are able to see Australia's racial hierarchy with fresh eyes. Theatre director Lee Lewis, upon returning to Sydney in 2001 after ten years in New York City, was distressed by how starkly white Australian stages are: 'I was shocked by how White the casts of mainstage productions were. I had grown accustomed to New York's mixed-race casts and was astonished that the ethnic diversity that was so apparent on the streets was not replicated on Sydney's stages' (2007, p. 1). Lewis points out how

Australian theatre's whiteness is not only out of step with international developments in casting, but also does not match Australia's demographic diversity. The 2021 Census counted 25,422,788 people in Australia, excluding overseas visitors. It found that 'more than half of all Australians are first or second-generation migrants, figures from the census have shown' (Bahr 2022). This means that over fifty percent of Australians are immigrants themselves or have at least one parent from a migrant background. Given that the stories and bodies that are presented on Australian mainstages are white-centric stories, played by white (or white-passing) actors, then it is hardly surprising that majority of the audience who attend Australian theatre shows are also white. This conundrum led to a lack of representation of Asian Australians on Australian stages. A consequence of this is that when Asians do appear on stage, their function is to uphold the existing racial and linguistic hierarchy which centres whiteness and the monolingual mindset. In the next section I ask: in such a context, which roles are available for Asian Australians?

ii) Australian theatre sees itself as a white and monolingual artform

Given that Australian theatre functions as a white and monolingual artform, how does this affect the way that Asian Australians are presented, and worse, present themselves, on stage as being the targets of humour. In Western countries, Asians have often appeared on stage as the target of (racist) jokes. Scholars have noted that in comedy, Asians have typically been the target of humour as 'comic Objects, not comic Agents' (Hong 2019). While Hong's study observes the persistence of stereotypical depictions of Asians in the United States, parallels can be made with Asian communities in the United Kingdom and Australia.

Australia is not unfamiliar with immigrants who take the initiative to write and/or perform in comedy themselves. Think of examples from the 1980s and 1990s such as 'Wogs out of Work', or the ground-breaking Vietnamese Australian comedian Hung Le with his iconic joke that goes:

> *How do you know if your house has been robbed by a Vietnamese?*
> *Because your homework is done and the dog is missing* (Le n.d., cited in Gluckman 1997).

Hung Le was allowed to make this joke because he himself had been a newly arrived Vietnamese refugee. And so the self-deprecating humour seemed to work perhaps because it was about naming, in an unexpected way, the racist assumptions that mainstream Australia already held about Vietnamese people who had started settling there from the late 1970s onwards.

More recently, comedic works by siblings Benjamin Law and his sister Michelle Law have been produced and presented on stage and on television. These commercially successful writers tend to specialise in jokes about bodily fluids with the shock value being that an older Asian older woman (the protagonist's mother) would knowingly or unknowingly say such offensive things out loud; it aims to be funny by subverting the 'model minority' stereotype of Asian women being meek and discreet – the very stereotype of modesty that Song Liling used to deceive Rene Gallimard in *M Butterfly*.

Even though the representation of Asian characters on Australian stages may appear to be more promising with the increased participation of Asian-Australian comedians, there are caveats. A danger exists when racialised comedy simply replicates societal racism onstage. The representational risk is that the comedy works to merely validate the racism against Asians that exists in parts of Australian society. Even if more plays are written by Asian Australians, it may still be highly problematic if the content of the work still privileges the white gaze.

What are some factors that scholars have identified which might make a work more even-handed? Sociologist Simon Weaver argues that a Foucauldian reverse-discourse is needed so that Asian comedians are not simply giving a predominantly white audience permission to laugh at the minority group that they are from. This occurs, according to Weaver, when hyphenated Asian comedians do not adequately transform racial slurs used in their shows to access more surprising meanings. Weaver uses Umberto Eco's analysis of the way comedy functions like metaphor, that is, through polysemicity: the idea that a word (or, rather, its homophone) can have multiple meanings (2010).

As an example in Australia, theatre scholar Helena Grehan describes how a 2003 '*Black and Tran*' performance, which involved Hung Le in a collaborative comedy performance

with Ningali Lawford, similarly failed to transform the racial slurs through a 'double irony,' a concept that parallels reverse discourse. By Grehan's analysis, the transformation was not strong enough, so the show lacked political teeth. Worryingly, what the audience felt instead was a sense of being 'sanctioned' by the show to be racist. A transformation of racist stereotypes through what Grehan calls a 'double irony' had not happened in this performance. The result was that, once again, mainstream Australian audiences were given permission to laugh *at*, rather than *with*, the non-white performers onstage (2003, p. 119). When this problem is not adequately solved, the result is not merely a matter of ineffective comedy writing or performance making. In a white-dominated country like Australia, such failed attempts to transform the ingrained racist stereotypes serve to reinscribe the centrality of whiteness; it thus position Asians as 'acceptable targets of joking or solely as objects of humor' (Hong 2019). This is a deeply concerning state of affairs, especially when all involved mistakenly believe they are helping the cause of decolonising Australian theatre when in reality they may be reinforcing it.

In my own writing, I have always felt the danger of inadvertently creating another opportunity for mainstream audiences to continue this 'tradition' of seeing the Asian character/s as the target of comedy, rather than its instigator. So how to apply these considerations in my own creative writing practice?

Decoding the Metaphor of the Alien in *Coloured Aliens*

By the time my play, *The Dead Twin*[42] had been successfully presented at Footscray Community Arts Centre (2015), I was ready to start looking around for ideas for a new theatre work. Rather than examining repressed linguistic identity within the family home through the metaphor of the dead or lost twin, as explored in *The Dead Twin*, this time I wanted to explore what it feels to be an Asian Australian today in a naturalistic play. I felt that this new work would be a very different 'migrant memoir' to my first play, *A Story of Soil*. I hoped to examine how much the position of Asians in Australian theatre had changed in the nearly two decades since I had taught myself to write a full-length play. As I grappled with how to write this play, I wanted to avoid sanctioning the audience to

[42] I wrote *The Dead Twin* as part of my Victorian College of the Arts Masters of Writing for Performance, 2013.

laugh at the brown and/or Asian character (or, more specifically, to laugh only at the Asian or minority character). The next section examines the many factors that were taken into consideration as I wrote and produced *Coloured Aliens*.

i) How I wrote this play - I did this by gathering allies

I knew I wanted to write a play that addresses the centrality of whiteness in Australian theatre, an industry I had been working in for decades. However, to avoid being easily dismissed in a culture that belittles the harmful effects of racism by calling it *casual* (as though it's a collection of loungewear), I knew I wanted to gather some strong allies within the sector.

Theatre is a very collegial industry. Part of the reason stems from it being a collaborative form - you need to draw on your networks in order to find actors, designers, publicists etc. However, the way that we fund theatre productions also plays a part in this collegiality. Funding decisions are usually (and rightfully, I argue) made by a panel of peers - that is fellow theatre professionals. Even though I cannot think of a better system to determine where public funding goes, this peer-review system does create an atmosphere of an industry which is reticent to publicly criticise its own.

In the rare instance where criticism was direct and targeted it was carried out by long-term Artistic Director Rachel Maza of Indigenous Theatre company, Ilbijerri. As someone in a position that is relatively more secure than most freelance artists, Maza is able to, and indeed needs to, point out systemic issues in the theatre industry. She did exactly just that in 2015 – point out the problematic representations of renowned Aboriginal people as dying out and incomprehensible in the Sydney Theatre Company stage adaptation of Kate Grenville's novel, *The Secret River*. Maza exhibited great leadership with her keynote at the Australian Theatre Forum (2015). However, the event was memorable because direct criticism of specific productions occurs so rarely in public forums. Theatre artists, especially writers, directors, or actors from underrepresented backgrounds, are often freelancers, tend shy away from such direct criticism for fear of being labelled a 'troublemaker'.

The issue is more than simply just the lack of cultural diversity as represented by black and brown-looking actors on stage. As actors are generally not trained to construct and defend their own arguments, they do not necessarily have the critical skills to articulate why a certain representation of an Asian character is problematic; actors are hired as freelancers, auditioning for each acting gig, thus making them the most economically vulnerable of all the artists in a theatre production; this impacts on their willingness or ability to raise issues that may delay the (expensive) rehearsal process. This type of cultural and linguistic intervention is the role of a culturally sensitive dramaturg, someone that Stavans might call a script editor with a 'translingual sensibility'. In Australian theatre culture there is a lack of culturally-informed dramaturgical practices, along with its counterpart, the scarcity of culturally-informed theatre criticism – means that we face a more insidious and more nuanced problem than simply counting the number of non-white actors on the stage.

As a freelance playwright, I was unsure about how would I go about criticising the theatre industry from such an unrooted position in my play *Coloured Aliens*. The danger of such a position is that could be easily dismissed by insiders, gatekeepers, traditionalists. As a result, I felt I needed some dramaturgical help from an established script editor/dramaturg in order to build (or 'wright', with its emphasis on craftsmanship) this play, so that my criticism would not be dismissed as simply one 'Non-English-Speaking-Background' (NESB) migrant artist's personal gripes (or 'sour grapes') against this industry. I asked myself whether I ought to write a play that is - at the very least - *uncomfortable* to mainstream audiences, or perhaps even *alienating* to many viewers.[43]

That was why I sought out support for the writing of the script (Playwriting Australia[44], through the Lotus program; I applied to be a part of the Lotus Program so that I could access a highly experienced playwright to help dramaturg (or script edit) the play. I requested the well-loved and renowned playwright, Patricia Cornelius, who became my dramaturg and helped me to shape *Coloured Aliens* into a more developed script than I

[43] Later in this chapter, I discuss the theatre reviews of *Coloured Aliens* to consider whether I pushed things too far.
[44] In 2021, Playwriting Australia (PWA) merged with Australian Plays (the trading name of the Australian Script Centre) to become Australian Plays Transform (APT).

would have been able to achieve on my own. I loved her provocative sense of humour, her total commitment to supporting another playwright and her exceptional knowledge of the craft of playwrighting.[45]

Later on, when I had finished writing *Coloured Aliens*, I needed to consider finding a presenting venue. I chose La Mama because it is an established theatre with a reputation for undertaking riskier (both artistic and political) work. For this script, I wanted a theatre house that was such an integral part of the Melbourne theatre scene that it would have the cultural capital to make and support such a critical look at our industry.

It is the perfect combination of being both subversive yet accepted for the arguments within *Coloured Aliens* to be taken seriously by the sector (In contrast, if I had just put it on as an independent artist at a 'pop up' venue, or a less established theatre newly opened in the suburbs, then it would not have the history of artistic and cultural subversiveness that was needed to make the points that needed to be made). Together with La Mama's then Artistic Director, Liz Jones and Caitlin Dullard, we came up with the idea to present *Coloured Aliens* as part of the Melbourne International Comedy Festival (MICF), to emphasise the work's quintessential 'Australianness'.

More broadly, I partnered with Theatre Network Australia (TNA), the national industry development organisation for small to medium and independent performing artists so that there would be a wider resonance to the premiere season. TNA's explicit goal is to increase the diversity workers that contribute to Australian stages. As a writer/producer, I approached TNA for a Letter of Support for my funding application. The Executive Director at that time, Nicole Beyer, was highly supportive; she saw it as an opportunity 'to engage the sector in a way that is artistically as well as conceptually appealing' (2016, pers. comm., 15 August). Because of the lack of diversity in Australian theatre, a production of *Coloured Aliens* would be an opportunity for the Australian theatre sector to examine these issues through a creative medium. With the support of these industry partners, the play received funding to be presented at La Mama in 2017.

[45] There were, however, some issues to do with the way that the Lotus Program had been initially designed, which were later rectified. I describe these in my article, *Australian Theater's White Gaze in the Making of Coloured* Aliens, published in Antipodes (2019)

Before I discuss the performance season of *Coloured Aliens,* I want to analyse the contents of the script. *Coloured Aliens* is a narrative about an Asian Australian writer in which I wanted to complicate the very idea of identity itself. I will now undertake a close reading of this script, beginning with a description of the play's synopsis and two main characters.

ii) A close reading of the script *Coloured Aliens*

In this section I describe the **synopsis** of the play I would end up writing and its two main characters, Mai Nguyen and Kevin O'Sullivan.

Synopsis

Coloured Aliens is a meta comedy about an interracial couple navigating their romance in the historical context of Australian racism. Mai Nguyen is a Vietnamese-Australian playwright. 'white Australia' wants her to write the ethnic play, but that's exactly the kind of story she no longer wants to tell. Feeling she's trapped by a limited role inside a 'migrant-does-good' narrative, Mai tries to escape expectations, of other people as well as the theatrical form, by going away to a silent meditation retreat. Her partner, Kevin, is a security guard who projects his own frustrated creativity onto Mai's career; he gives her well-meaning, sometimes pithy, advice. In Mai's absence, Kevin decides to write a pitch and submit it using Mai's name - perhaps having an ethnic name will help 'their' chance of success.

Mai Nguyen

Mai is the putative 'coloured alien' who refuses to see herself as such. She seems to write plays that are misunderstood by a mainstream Australia. She refuses to perform the role of the Asian. Her writing career is not going that well, and her health is poor because she is an independent artist earning miniscule sums of grant funding for her projects; her most recent play had been a work about Vietnamese beef noodle soup, *Phở.* In her writing practice, she has a strange relationship with the Irish-Australian voice, Moira, that's on her computer. Indeed, she has a set of strange habits in order to access her creative ideas. She is aware of the gap between how she wants to be perceived (as an educated, creative artist) and how she is often perceived in Australia (as an Asian female - which evokes profession such as the cleaner or the wait staff, or worse still, racist stereotypes such as those mentioned by the characters in the script.

MAI: Fuck! I'm so sick of Asian actors.

KEVIN: (Ironic) They just want to play stereotyped roles?

MAI: Viet Cong.

KEVIN: Prostitute.

MAI: Fu Manchu.

KEVIN: Ming the Merciless.

MAI: Boat person.

KEVIN: Drug peddler.

MAI: People smuggler.

KEVIN: Yellow Peril.

MAI: Sexy monk, Tripitaka.

KEVIN: (In character) The Nature of Monkey is irrepressible… (2017, act 1, scene 1).

Kevin O'Sullivan

Mai's boyfriend, Kevin O'Sullivan, is fifth-generation Irish Australian. This evokes not only a colonised background in Ireland but also a family history of incarceration that led to the transportation of Irish convicts to Australia. Ingrid Piller writes that many 'of the Irish convicts shipped out to Australia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries would not have spoken any language other than Gaelic. As Catholic rebels against the British colonization of Ireland, they were under blanket suspicion in Australia, too' (2016, p. 147). Indeed, during Australia's early settlement, the Irish Catholics were deemed to be 'very dangerous members of society' by the chief Anglican clergyman of New South Wales, Samuel Marsden (Hughes 1986, cited in Piller 2016, p. 147). Some prejudice against Catholics lingers today, despite this sub-group having been largely absorbed into mainstream Australia (p. 147).

Kevin works as a causal security guard. Given the dangerous and under-resourced nature of his work, Kevin channels his job-induced anxiety into strenuous gym workouts while needing to continually consume huge amounts of calories to fuel these workouts. In an earlier time period, the couple's romantic union would have brought up fears of miscegenation—the creation of racially impure bloodlines that challenges the whiteness inherent in Australian colonialism. As Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo suggest, 'the

preservation of white kinship would be dependent not only on the regulation of Others (Aboriginal and Asian) but also, and more tellingly, on self-regulation and restraint in terms of cross-racial desire,' which the authors argue 'adds a biological dimension' to the history of Australian cosmopolitanism (2007, p. 33). I will return to white Australian fears about miscegenation later when I analyse the script for *Coloured Aliens*, especially Kevin's 'play within a play' section.

As well as their backgrounds as descendants of those who had been colonised, the bohemian couple's connection is also through their creativity (writing scripts in Mai's case, and through a background in 'spoken-word poetry' and 'prog rock' in Kevin's). What this shows is that Kevin had at some point been similar to Mai, in that he had once seen himself as a creative person too. On a more societal level, Kevin is perhaps what Mai would be like if she was five-generations in Australia, rather than being a first-, or second-generation immigrant. Now working as a security guard, Kevin projects his frustrated creativity onto Mai's writing career. Thus, Kevin tries to support Mai by giving her well-meaning advice about how to market herself as an Asian playwright. *Coloured Aliens* explores the playful teasing between two people who know each other well; because of this it can explore racism — and its reverse, deeper understanding between people from different cultures — in a more sustained and nuanced way.

iii) Subverting the production of 'authentic' identity

Coloured Aliens uses the popularity of the memoir to critique Australian theatre's obsession with supposedly 'authentic' immigrant identity. The creative approach I use to do this is to start with the migrant memoir but transform the play's genre through the use non-naturalism (specifically, science fiction) in order to problematise the idea of racial identity itself. The structural pattern that occurs in many migrant memoirs published in Australia and the USA is to first highlight how different the protagonist is from the rest of the population, and through much struggle and high jinks, these authors are able to succeed in this new country to take on their role as a model minority. Rather than fulfilling this racial expectation, my script focuses on the 'identity performance' expected of a Vietnamese-Australian female playwright. This strategy resists the expectation that migrant playwrights have to be 'native informants' and explain their own culture to the

people in power in order to be accepted; it also defies the pressure to represent an entire group (the 'Vietnamese') in a single narrative as though Vietnamese people in Australia share the same values and dilemmas.

By the end of *Coloured Aliens*, the realism often associated with the migrant memoir is disrupted by a mix of genres, including science-fiction narrative tropes. Ultimately, *Coloured Aliens* subverts the tropes found in conventional migrant memoirs through Mai's transformation into a literal extraterrestrial alien. The shift out of naturalism occurs in the play-within-a-play sequence, in which Kevin's act of forgery sees him write into being Mai's transformation into the alien. I will discuss how I problematise the categories of racial identity through genre, by shifting from naturalism to science fiction and back again in the second last section of this chapter. Now, I will examine how the play uses the strategies of translingual wordplay and intersectionality to problematise Asian-Australian identity.

I complicate the idea of Australian identity through shared Translingual Wordplay

In the dialogue of *Coloured Aliens*, I have the two main characters use translingual English, even though only Mai Nguyen is *technically* bilingual. While Kevin would appear monolingual, I decided to write him as a white Australian figure who exhibits a translingual sensibility. This is demonstrated through his adventurous and irreverent wordplay across both English and Vietnamese. The translingualism of *Coloured Aliens* occurs in contrast to my first play, *A Story of Soil*, where the code-switching only occurs between the Vietnamese-Australian characters so as to engage both linguistic groups of audiences when in reality, the characters may only be speaking with each other in Vietnamese.

Why did I insist on both characters code-switching?[46] As I demonstrated in chapter two, bilinguals of Asian descent living in the USA, and by extension Australia, tend to feel that

[46] In linguistics, a new approach using translanguaging is gaining prominence, particularly in the education sector. Translanguaging involves encouraging bilingual students to draw from their full linguistic toolkit through the facilitation a non-hierarchical use of both of the students' languages. A prominent advocate of this approach, Ofelia García states that, '[t]ranslanguaging approaches take a critical stance towards named languages' and have 'transformative potential because they are able to go beyond the socially constructed boundaries of named languages' (Language on the Move 2023). In this exegesis, I use the term 'code-

it's demeaning to depict Asian characters speaking non-standard, or 'broken' English on stage. This arises because of the prevalence of the 'deficit' model when monolinguals think about bilingualism.

In *Coloured Aliens*, I make use of code-switching through the two main characters' translingual wordplay; this is the play's strategy of defamiliarising identity. I make a point of having both Mai Nguyen and Kevin O'Sullivan as equal partners in the verbal games played between them. As literary studies scholar Mimi R Gladstein notes in her study of bilingual wordplay, translingual authors and readers are 'especially in tune with the funny side of bilingualism', including how bilingual communities 'abound with jokes based on the pitfalls of literal translation…[or] the vagaries of idiom, another source of fun' (2006, pp. 83-84). In *Coloured Aliens*, both Kevin and Mai fluently pun across English and Vietnamese. The statement I wish to make *in Coloured Aliens* is that Kevin is someone who is willing (and able) to meet Mai halfway in a shared translingual world. Language, whether English or Vietnamese, is deemed to an object to play with, rather than a sacred set of rules to be followed. In this play, I wanted language to be used in a way that reduces its power as 'identity markers' that rigidly determine whether someone is 'Australian' enough or not.

While at first glimpse it can appear that Kevin is a white, male, English-speaking oppressor, and Mai a non-white, female translingual who is oppressed, my script complicates this through Kevin and Mai's shared history of colonialism – and therefore shared linguistic oppression. Neither character can claim English as their ancestral language; Kevin's Irish ancestors lost their Gaelic language in the Australian 'modernising' project, which occurred alongside the destruction of Aboriginal languages and culture. To me, Mai and Kevin are both affected by systems that seek to destroy bilingualism because it is deemed to be threatening to 'British' English. As theatre scholar Marvin Carlson notes, the drama of the postcolonial world foregrounds language and is 'often highly self-reflexive' (2006, p. 124). This impulse is in keeping with what Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka observes about translingual writers writing in the coloniser's language: such writers are not content to merely replicate the dominant language. Instead,

switching' because it has been in use for decades and adequately describes what occurs in the dialogue between Mai and Kevin.

when they ‘borrow an alien language…[they co-opt] the entire properties of that language [and in doing so, tend to] stress such a language, stretch it, impact, and compact, fragment and reassemble it with no apology’ (Soyinka, cited in Carlson 2006, p. 111). Mai and Kevin’s translingual wordplay, therefore, is a form of shared resistance against Australia’s monolingual mindset.

When writing the script, I was careful to make the characters alternately likeable and unlikeable at various times in the play. And rather than emphasise Mai and Kevin's difference, the lines of dialogue in *Coloured Aliens* aim to highlight their similarity. They jointly and transgressively *challenge* the idea of ‘national languages’ in order to render it less powerful, less invasive, less colonising in their lives. The banter between Kevin and Mai is playful, irreverently *translingual*. Through their inter-linguistic punning, we see that they care for one another and can fluidly move between various sociolects as well as dialects. Readers can see Mikhail Bakhtin’s heteroglossia[47] at work in their conversations – how any national language is made up of many sub-languages (or sociolects) that reveal one’s class, gender, level of education. Mai and Kevin's coded speech illustrates how they have a shared emotional world that is underpinned by each character's colonial displacement, albeit separated by several generations as to when this loss of country/culture/ancestral language took place. As a pair of interlocutors, they refuse to use 'domesticated' speech in either English or Vietnamese; theirs is a translingual world.

I complicate the idea of Australian identity through Intersectionality

A second strategy I use to defamiliarise the stereotype of migrant is to complicate the picture of which character is the rescuer and which is the rescued, who might be the oppressor and who is the oppressed. I created Kevin and Mai as characters who complicate the picture of binary oppositions. In *Coloured Aliens*, Kevin and Mai each display various aspects that lie outside the mythical norm (able-bodied, young, English-speaking, white, cis-gendered, heterosexual male from a middle-class background): whereas Mai is the *racial* Other, Kevin is the *financially insecure* (working class, less

[47] Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin coined the concept *raznorechie* (‘different-speech-ness’) in an essay in the 1930s. In English translations, this term appears as ‘heteroglossia', from the Greek words *heteros* (for ‘other’) and *glōssa* (for ‘tongue’ or ‘language’). Heteroglossia describes the presence of two or more voices in a text or artistic work.

formally educated) *Other*. In the 1970s, African American feminists such as Audre Lorde identified that the way that feminism had surfaced in America, it had surfaced in a way that was purely focused on the needs of white feminists and that for black feminists, there were a slightly different set of concerns and challenges. Lorde argues that looking at the intersection of both being black and being female is a useful tool[48].

I intentionally write both Mai and Kevin as taking turns being sympathetic and unsympathetic, politically correct and incorrect, at various points in the script. This problematises and complicates the idea that in Australia, white males are necessarily more privileged than Asian females; I show that at various times, other factors (such as the privilege to access higher education which Mai has) can tip the scale of oppressor/oppressed depending on the circumstances at hand; Mai had the privilege of accessing higher education and thus has cultural capital. This is a feature of the dominant society in Australia that consistently and continually grants privilege to those who most conform with the mythical norm.

However, it is not all about translingual understanding and intersectional allyship. Their banter does sometimes lead to hurt feelings, and not necessarily in the way that viewers might expect:

> *Kevin*: (*Gently*) You know, when you talk about how evil white people are, I think you're attacking me.
> *Mai*: (*Shocked*) If I thought you were evil, I wouldn't be telling you these things (act 1, scene 10).

In fact, as the excerpt from the script above shows, the inadvertent wounding that takes place between Kevin and Mai occurs both ways. According to Kevin, sometimes it is Mai who is insensitive one by unconsciously lumping all white people together when she is ranting against racism. And yet, the play aims to ask: How is one supposed to raise

[48] While Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality as a legal term in 1989 to ask profound structural and systemic questions about discrimination and inequality, other writers had explored the corresponding lived experiences well before that. These writers include feminists of colour such as Audre Lorde, Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Angela Davis who entered academic environments in the 1980s, bringing with them writing and scholarship about these experiences.

awareness of injustice (and the corresponding forms of privilege) without pointing the occasional finger? It is not the play's job to the answer to this, because as a writer, I want the audience to decide for themselves. This question is one that theatre critics grapple with when discussing the level of didacticism of the play, which I will discuss towards the end of this chapter.

The narrative of *Coloured Aliens* then asks:

> *What happens when playful banter…*
>
> *leads to ironic teasing…*
>
> *leads to identity theft?*

Within the plot of *Coloured Aliens*, when a scriptwriting opportunity arises with a mainstage company for Mai, she is uncontactable. As mentioned briefly earlier, the emotional toll of being constantly misinterpreted leads Mai to flee her cramped inner-city life for a silent meditation retreat that cuts her off from outside contact; in seclusion she finds a freedom from others' expectations.

While Mai is away, however, Kevin learns about this script opportunity at Everyman Theatre Company. Dennis Worthington, one of its board members, is a likeable, older white male who represents the establishment. His misguided attempts to encourage Mai write the financially viable mainstage play may be seen as the actions taken by a high-status white saviour. Australian scholars on whiteness and leadership Liu and Baker argue that media discourses about white leaders tend to portray them as representing the human norm, allowing them to assume a 'neutral' position, 'from which they could best decide how to improve society'. As with Tseen Khoo's observation about the whiteness of Australian identity in popular media, Liu and Baker find that this neutral positioning is, 'predicated on a unitary, homogenous construction of Australian society, where white people's perspectives, interests and indeed, leadership, are paramount' (2016, p. 424).

I deliberately paint Dennis Worthington as a minor character who is nuanced because he appears genuine in his attempt to improve the situation of a dearth of Asians in Australian theatre, even if he is unable to recognise the structural issues involved to embrace what Steven G. Kellman describes as an 'aesthetics of alienation' (2000, p. 7). Despite this, my

play also draws attention to the immense power difference between Dennis and Kevin or Mai, in terms of financial security, social networks and cultural capital as defined in Australia. Writer and community activist, Alia Gabres argues: ‘diversity without the acknowledgement of inequality is useless. In gaining an understanding of inequality, it is vital with heal the harm and rectify the imbalance’ (2020, p. 29). Even though Dennis appears both genial and benevolent, his leadership rests on the ‘assumption that white leaders speak for [all of] Australian society’ (Liu & Baker 2016, p. 432).

In contrast to Dennis Worthington, Kevin O’Sullivan’s identity is more complex. Rather than allow Mai to lose out on the chance at artistic recognition, Kevin decides to submit a script using Mai's name. In assuming Mai’s writerly identity, Kevin metaphorically steps into the theatre world as her textual double; he offers a version of an Asian female playwright who has no qualms about playing to audience prejudices – whether racial or sexual. Kevin literally begins to wear her clothing in order to assume her identity (act 1, scene 12).

For me as a writer who places Kevin in this narrative dilemma, I am careful to emphasise the similarities between him and Mai in terms of their varying ‘advantages’ and ‘disadvantages’ in terms of the mythical norm. While Mai is clearly Asian, and therefore *other* in the Australian context, Kevin as a fifth-generation Australian of Irish heritage has achieved the status of *relative* whiteness. Unlike Dennis, Kevin sits less comfortably in the spectrum of ‘whiteness’ given his Irish Catholic heritage, which along with Jews and immigrants from Italy and Greece, has historically been described as ‘off white’ (Liu & Baker 2016, p. 431). Indeed, the renowned director Jim Sharman labels Australian theatre a middle-class, white ghetto (cited in Lewis 2007, p. 2). Even with his relative whiteness Kevin’s position within the theatre sector is still tenuous.

Having examined these characters, what is the play *really* about? It’s about the structural issues that non-white and translingual people face in Australia, as well as those that are unique to a theatre industry which, despite good intentions, remains white-centric and monolingual.

> *Dennis*: (*Hands over his business card*) We're due to have our programming meeting next month. There are so few "diverse" actors on stage and funding bodies like to see representation, given that everyone pays taxes but only a certain group of people actually go, mostly to watch people like themselves. . . . So it's a form of public subsidy for us "whiteys" if we don't diversify (act 1, scene 9).

By making the main characters of the play a Vietnamese-Australian playwright and her white Australian boyfriend, I allow audiences to take a behind-the-scenes look at the theatre sector itself, while presenting it in a theatre show. My aim in *Coloured Aliens* is to craft a narrative that raises questions about the nature of authenticity and identity. The work is therefore meta-theatrical and shares the same impulse that Hwang's play has, which is to foreground identity performance by commenting on performance from within the frame of a performance.

Through the narrative of my play, I wish to emphasise is how a stereotyped expectation of Asian Australians by a white mainstream, leads to a limited 'framing' of someone like Mai Nguyen, which in turn abbreviates how she is able to be understood. Whereas white people occupy the powerful status as the human norm who has the authority to speak for all humanity, raced people are only allowed to speak for their own race (Dyer 1997, cited in Liu & Baker 2016, p. 424). In *Coloured Aliens,* Mai is asked to write about her Vietnamese identity, but she is at pains to ask what that is, when she has lived in Australia for most of her life. The creation of Kevin and Mai as translingual characters thus raises the question as to why Mai is not asked by Everyman Theatre Company to write about being Australian. The danger in the mainstage script opportunity is that, if handled incorrectly, it may lead to Mai being excluded from 'speaking for all humanity'.

Another structural problem that *Coloured Aliens* examines is the conflation of various racial backgrounds into a monolithic identity of being 'Asian'. Mai discusses this issue with Kevin when she compares how she is 'read' in Australia as a 'generic Asian' without personal context, and therefore more likely to be targeted with microaggression; this is in comparison to how a white man is interpreted as an individual, who - as the mythical norm - is presumed to have agency and power.

> MAI: You have no idea how it feels to be treated purely on your skin colour, on your race, and not actually be an individual, for people to not actually see Kevin? For people to go, "Oh, there's that white man, he must do that thing...he must eat heaps of burgers, and...and work...with a 'white' collar".
>
> KEVIN: Don't exaggerate.
>
> MAI: When I cross the road, I feel threatened because I think if I don't cross the road fast enough I'm going to get run over. Whereas, if I were Kevin, I would have all the time in the world. Because deep down, no one gives a shit about the Asian girl walking down the street - she probably doesn't know anybody, she wouldn't know what her rights are, she should feel lucky to even be in this country (act 1, scene 1).

Ultimately, Mai is not able to escape from her expected performance as an Asian, except for the brief period when she is secluded from society while on a meditation retreat. The narrative ends with Mai being rejected by the mainstage company, and as a result begins to contemplate a range of low wage casual jobs that have little to do with her extensive postgraduate studies.[49]

In choosing to withdraw, Mai is pursuing an opposite strategy to that of Song Liling, the spy figure in Hwang's play; when confronted with the pervasive stereotype of an 'Asian', Song attempts to provide his testimony before a French court *as himself* rather than as a version of Cio Cio San from Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*. Where Song attempts to assert his untranslated identity[50], Mai chooses instead to remove herself from the narrative altogether – from both her own theatre writing career and her romantic relationship with Kevin. Her great disappointment is that he too had misinterpreted her true needs. In the next section, I analyse why Kevin and Mai were unable to support each other in the context of whiteness.

[49] This narrative ending is followed by a short epilogue, which I will discuss in the last section of this chapter.
[50] Unfortunately, Song's attempt to assert his identity is ineffective because Gallimard fails to understand Song as an untranslated man.

iv) Mai refuses to perform the role of the Asian Playwright, leaving Kevin to impersonate the Asian Playwright

Despite Kevin and Mai's intimate bond, it is clear that she has had some lived experiences that he cannot comprehend. While Kevin's background as a 'prog rock' musician allows him to participate in the translingual wordplay (his musical ability permits him to manipulate language patterns without being fluent in Vietnamese), he does not and cannot experience the world as Mai does. In short, their intersectional allyship does not result in a shared conception of disadvantage and powerlessness.

In this exegesis, I argue that Mai's creative hesitation is tied to her dual allegiances with regard to the intended audience. In a monolingual culture, she is unable to figure out how to navigate her translingualism in the face of such antagonism which severely curtails her sense of self. Thus, Mai goes into seclusion to map out her own translingual subjectivity. Kevin's dismissal of Mai's artistic equivocation suggests that he disregards Mai's value as a translingual playwright who has successfully written and produced her plays *despite* the centrality of whiteness in Australia; all Kevin can see is that Mai has failed (or refuses to) to impress the critics. His dismissal of the difficulty of her task underplays the fact that Mai has survived the loneliness and uncertainty of writing as an Asian in Australia - including being misunderstood by monolingual and white-centric theatre reviewers. Kevin's willingness to leap to Mai's rescue, while appearing well meaning, shows that he too views her through a deficit model – that she is not 'monolingual' enough to make it as a playwright in Australia. Instead of helping her change the system, he steps in to 'improve' her complex narrative so that she can better perform the role that is expected of her as an Asian Australian. Kevin even states that he, a white male, can do a better job of writing about the Asian Australian experience than she can (act 1, scene 11), simply because he can do so without the hang-ups that she has, without the qualms that she has (which are to do with her negotiating which audience she is writing for). In dismissing Mai's attempts to negotiate her translingualism, Kevin falls for the lie that it must be a simple to write a play about being Asian in Australia. It's so simple that a white man *can*, and *should*, do it. Thus, we can conclude that Kevin's action is that of identity theft, rather than a misguided form of offering benign support. So, what does Kevin write about when he pretends to be Mai?

Kevin writes about Aliens in his Play within a Play

When Mai is uncontactable during a ten-day meditation retreat, Kevin takes it upon himself to write a pitch for a play using her name. He makes use of her personal computer, whose presence in the narrative is represented by an AI-generated voice with an Irish accent. Moira the computer voice seems to help write Kevin's play in a collaborative manner.

Coloured Aliens was written in 2016 and staged in 2017, so this was before ChatGPT and other Generative AI models were released; for me, Moira the computer voice represents how both the subconscious and our linguistic sensibilities (*translingual* or otherwise) are present during the act of creation in a way that is beyond the absolute control of the conscious brain. Creativity at its best is a little bit unpredictable, especially in the earlier phases of a creative project.

With Moira's help, Kevin writes a play that inevitably connects with his lived experience as a security guard whose job it is to 'run towards the alarm' (act 1, scene 3), while everyone else is running in the opposite direction. However, rather than a naturalistic account of his job, Kevin writes his play set in outer space; presenting a version of himself that charged with protecting the spaceship from alien life forms.

We follow the narrative into Kevin's play. As with David Hwang's use of the play-within-a-play (used to compare and contrast the story of Puccini's Opera with Hwang's authorial intervention, which appear in the form of the play's stage directions that are in ironic contrast to Pinkerton's statements), Kevin's science-fiction play is a meta-theatrical device that exerts influence on the audience's experience of the overall play.

In Kevin's script a science-fiction character named Kevin (hereafter called Space-Kevin) is trying to win the affections of Mai (hereafter called Space-Mai), a Sigourney Weaver-esque space worker on the same interplanetary craft. It features a futuristic world where security guards and ordinary workers like Space-Kevin and Space-Mai have to defend themselves from deadly aliens during their commute between planets (act 1, scene 12). However, after an alien attack that Space-Kevin helps quell, he makes the heart-wrenching discovery. In a clear reference to James Cameron's blockbuster movie, *Aliens*

(1986), Space-Kevin learns that Space-Mai has been infected with alien blood and will soon transform into an extra-terrestrial alien. The dilemma that in Kevin's play-within-a-play is the choice between duty and love. In this narrative world of binary oppositions, Space-Kevin must choose between either protecting the woman he loves or rescuing the spaceship by annihilating her.

Kevin's play subsumes Mai's cultural and linguistic alienation into science fiction genre tropes. It breaks the naturalistic setting of the broader play that it is nested in. The genre trope of the extra-terrestrial alien metaphorizes the marginalisation of non-white immigrants to Australia. The dramatic conflict in Kevin's play hinges on a binary opposition between humans and aliens, and this corresponds with the themes of the broader play which addresses colonial Australia's exclusion of 'coloured aliens', including the prevention of racial mixing. At the same time, it raises questions about how Australia might treat those deemed to be 'alien' in the future.

Beneath the romance and valour that surrounds Space-Kevin's narrative dilemma lies a conception of identity that is mutually exclusive. The story that unfolds rests on categorisation of 'us' and 'them' that echoes Federation-era Australia. Kevin's play within the play links the present to both to the past and the future. Thematically, it touches on the anxiety of miscegenation from colonial Australia: in an earlier period, Kevin and Mai's relationship with Mai would have been forbidden (act 1, scene 12). In those circumstances, someone white passing like Kevin would have been considered 'one of 'us' and someone like Mai would have been deemed a 'one of them' that needs to be ejected from Australia or even exterminated[51].

I now briefly analyse the impact of using science fiction in the play, followed by an analysis of the production of *Coloured Aliens* at its La Mama season in 2017.

As a translingual playwright, I discovered that despite the cliched-ness of a science fiction narrative (which exists in Kevin's play within the play), it seemed to be a hugely enjoyable

[51] The consequences of casual racism are not as harmless as many suppose. The author and scholar, Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that the 'acceptability of microaggressions, racist jokes, casual sexual fetishisation lays the groundwork for an explosion of racist and sexist violence that can be literally murderous' (V Nguyen 2021).

section for the audience. I attribute this pleasurable response to its accessibility. Translingual writers like me face the problem of writing from the position of *otherness* which, if done correctly, can be so unusual to mainstream audiences that it requires considerably more description and explanation to make it comprehensible. This approach is the theatrical equivalent of providing copious footnotes to explain a translated text. In a book, such explanatory notes can disrupt the experience of reading; in a play, however, when a mainstream audience is confronted with too much unfamiliar content, viewers cannot go back to re-read passages that may be outside their expectations. Thus, when they encounter a section in *Coloured Aliens* that is recognisably genre-driven, they breathe a sigh of relief at the ease of traversing familiar territory. I use science fiction to explore emotional alienation through the figure of the alien. *Coloured Aliens* intermixes space aliens with immigrants and refugees to enquire how far Australia has (or hasn't) come since Federation. Just as Tina Chen investigates why Asians are conceived of 'as somehow perpetually alien' in the United States (2005, p. 31), my script raises the question of whether Asians will forever be imagined as 'alien' in Australia. The use of the alien trope helps the audience encounter this theme in a more vivid and embodied way.

When I completed writing the script for *Coloured Aliens*, a multilingual team of artists then helped to further defamiliarise the stereotyped figure of the 'generic Asian' on stage.

v) Cross-racial casting in the production of *Coloured Aliens* at La Mama

Faced with the impetus to make a work that was pointedly funny rather than ethnically 'authentic', the play's director Beng Oh proposed that we use cross-racial casting, and I agreed to do so for this production. In this casting approach, the Asian female playwright character, Mai Nguyen, was played by a white actress, Annie Lumsden, while her white security-guard boyfriend, Kevin O'Sullivan, was played by an Asian male actor John Marc Desengano. The director was particularly interested in defamiliarising Mai's words through casting for two reasons. Comedy works by distance: it explores character pain that does not *really* hurt (McKee 1997, p. 87). As theatre researcher Donatella Galella notes, 'Although both theater and race are imaginary, they have real impacts…Anti-racist cross-racial casting practices wield possibilities to change systems and symbols' (2019, p. 190).

In addition, extreme casting choices highlight the way that society authorises or denies minority groups' access to power.[52] Similarly, University of California-Berkeley scholar Antonia Nakano Glenn builds on Elin Diamond's concept of a feminist mimesis to define theatre casting as a politically significant communal act of 'authorizing representation' (2007, p. 414). Rather than just replicating existing societal hierarchies in casting actors, Glenn proposes what she calls a 'transgressive mimesis' that reveals 'the social construction of identity through [the practice of] playful and resistant casting practices' (p. 419).

With this in mind, Beng Oh and I proceeded with cross-racial casting of Mai and Kevin. I want to emphasise that this decision was intended to be wholly different from the casting practices of intercultural theatre, in which race is simplistically deemed unimportant; theatre and performance scholars have argued that this seemingly progressive approach reinforces white privilege by literally staging a supposedly 'postrace' world (Galella 2015; Lei 2018). Despite our agreement on the casting strategy for *Coloured Aliens*, the consequences of such an artistic decision can never be known until a play is performed live. Given the history of yellowface, it was hard to predict whether doing racial inversion would achieve our intended aims.

Cross-racial casting is contentious because it reveals asymmetric power relationships that exist in wider society. Theatre researcher Angela Pao argues that this casting practice is controversial because it speaks to the heart of national identity. She compares two separate productions of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* performed by cast members with Asian features: the key difference is that one was produced by a Chinese company playing to Chinese audiences and the other was an Asian American theatre company performing to United States audiences. While in the Chinese production, the Asian appearance of the actors playing white characters was considered benignly 'neutral,' this same choice 'takes on a contentious edge when inserted into discussions of non-traditional casting at home' (Pao 2001, p. 403). The divergence in theatre critics' reactions demonstrate that cross-racial casting debates are really about an anxiety over national

[52] For example, in Melbourne's theatre scene, this type of deliberate miscasting has been undertaken by independent theatre companies such as Sisters Grimm and The Rabble, both of which aim to subvert heteronormative and/or male gazes through their non-normative casting.

identity. Furthermore, it illustrates how the same use of cross-racial casting (Asian actors playing white characters in *Death of a Salesman*) indicates how the white imaginary of a settler nation such as the United States precludes Asian actors from being considered 'neutral.' To resist this imbalance, non-white theatre makers might take control of the means of production to cast themselves 'into a variety of roles that might otherwise be denied them in mainstream American theatre' (Glenn 2007, p. 414). This is what Oh had sought to achieve with his suggestion to cross-racially cast my play – he wished to expand the kinds of roles that mainstream Australian theatre would allow Asians to play.

The effect of reverse-racial casting on *Coloured Aliens* was that it not only made the political points clearer but also sharpened the comedy. Lines such as 'You know, when you talk about how evil white people are, I think you're attacking me' became funnier, in a viscerally transgressive way. Kevin's sense of hurt about being lumped with all 'evil white people,' (act 1, scene 10) appropriately played straight, is an uncanny breach of racial boundaries, due to its simultaneous familiarity (at the sentiment being expressed) and unfamiliarity (at the face and body of the actor expressing it).

In addition, this casting choice suggests the transitory nature of racial labels such as white, black, and yellow in the context of history's shifting kaleidoscope of bigotry. When Mai, played by Annie Lumsden, states, 'It's hard to say what Vietnamese even is' (act 1, scene 1), her lines take on a heightened, almost absurd meaning; when spoken by a white actor, these words should make white audience members question what assumptions about Vietnamese ethnicity and culture they bring with them and whether they think the play should affirm them. Likewise, Mai's dismissive line to an upset Kevin, 'I don't really see you as white anyway,' (act 1, scene 10) takes on a heightened, almost ridiculous meaning when Kevin is in fact played by a Filipino Australian actor, John Marc Desengano. His 'whiting up' helps achieve the 'reparative work to make white privilege visible (Galella 2019, p. 195). Had both characters been played by white actors, this would have entered the realm of yellowface, but because Kevin and Mai are cross-racially cast, it too wished to convey a cosmopolitan intention to present what Gilbert and Lo calls a 'culturally open disposition, or a commitment to continued East-West engagement' (Gilbert and Lo 2007, p. 30).

Cross-racial casting infused the production with a double reality in which the actors' corporeality—which cannot *not* signify race[53]—informed the audience's reading of the story with an ironic double-consciousness. This destabilised received Australian racial hierarchies, because 'cross-racial casting [is] a struggle over power—representation and the redistribution of roles' (Galella 2019, p. 190). Indeed, Galella argues that the 'Color-conscious use of whiteface reveals both the invention of race and persistence of racism' (Galella 2019, p. 195). The effect was an uncanny doubling due to the reversed representations of self and other. The materiality of theatre and performance of identity were therefore foregrounded in this casting approach. The production intentionally 'failed' at mimesis, preventing that delicious suspension of disbelief that allows audience members to be fully immersed in the play. This deliberate defamiliarisation prevented audiences from losing themselves completely in the narrative—and in the case of the racial politics in *Coloured Aliens*, from falling for essentialised notions of race. The outcome, I suggest, was that cross-racial casting in this production unsettled Australian theatre's ability to maintain the white gaze by highlighting its existence.

To make visually apparent the problems related to skin colour and race, the designer Eugyeene Teh foregrounded the colour yellow in the set, costuming, and props. The entire playing space is a yellow ring, which one reviewer (Collins 2017) rightly interprets as a fighting arena, among other visual metaphors, and this battle is over identity. The lighting designer no doubt chose tints that emphasised the yellowness of items onstage, to highlight the supposed pervasiveness of yellow, as colonial Australian fears of Asian invasion were summarised in the phrase 'yellow peril'.[54] The same yellow ring bordering the set also suggests a fortress, or great wall, that Mai has built to protect herself from the white gaze but that equally traps her within its confines. At other times, yellow is playful,

[53] Asian American Theatre scholar, Josephine Lee argues that, 'When the racialized Other must deal with self-representation in the theater, the performative language he or she has recourse to is haunted by stereotypes, and this performative language is not only verbal but has to do with the language of the body as well. Because skin color is often associated with stereotype, the question of self-representation becomes remarkably difficult' (1997, p. 90).

[54] John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats's *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear* (2014), is a comprehensive edited book that shows how the Yellow Peril has functioned as a perceived villain and threat to Western civilisation. The volume argues that 'yellow perilism' has informed the creative imagining of a succession of enemies after World War II, from Oriental Communism and Chinese Nationalism to Islamic Fundamentalism, whereby the identity of the West came to be defined by means of disidentification with the villainous East. However, I want to make the distinction that this thesis is not an analysis of 'anti-Asian' tropes per se. Instead, my focus is on the use of tropes as metaphors for a translingual sensibility, which happens to be in the context of Asian identity in the West.

as seen in the Maneki Neko, the beckoning cat, and the Pikachu soft toy, that Kevin brings to Mai as a peace offering in the final scene.

All this yellowness in the design is a setup for the two climactic scenes in the play. After Mai receives a condescending review (which spends more time talking about Vietnamese food than her play), she takes time out for self-care. She packs her bags and goes on a ten-day silent retreat because it is painful to be who she is in a society where the white gaze dominates. It is there, in seclusion, that she is able to experience her identity on her own terms, and her mind unfurls to allow a sense of lightness that had not yet been seen until now.

As described earlier, with Mai way Kevin writes a play using her name, resulting in the play-within-a-play sequence. What happens next is not in the written script but a creation of the artistic team. instead of simply transitioning from the spaceship of Kevin's play within a play to the meditation retreat where Mai attempts to reconnect with her 'authentic' self (act 1, scene 13), designer Teh gives us the image of Mai / Space-Mai as an alluring alien: her face is painted green; she wears a bluish-green outfit with bluish-green stripes that appear reptilian; her eyes are hidden behind dark, alien-inflected glasses that could be interpreted as mirrors. Mai / Space-Mai is dehumanised and the gaze is forced back onto the audience, as though we are in fact observing our own voyeurism of this nonhuman Orientalist image. She is no longer white, she is no longer yellow, she is no longer even a human—she is an alien. In this design choice, Teh encourages the production to fully embrace the play's title by invoking Vladimir Tretchikoff's iconic Chinese girl painting[55]. Having key roles – playwright/producer, director and designer be Asian Australians – meant that the concerns and themes in the play were able to be explored in a richer way due to the lived experiences of the artists. The overall design—costume, lighting, and sound—worked together in this moment to represent the white gaze as it operates on Mai's identity.[56] Although Mai's lines of dialogue remain the same, the transition between and overlaying of the previous scene of Kevin's identity theft and Mai's meditation scene has the effect of thickening the reading of both scenes. While Mai is alone, connecting with her body through her breath (as an act of resistance), the rest of

[55] This painting's colloquial name is 'The Green Lady'.
[56] The lighting design was created by Matthew Barber and the sound design by Tom Backhaus.

the play, including the play that Kevin has written both *for* her and *as* her, has succeeded in completely alienating her. Kevin attempts to help Mai, but because of the unacknowledged white gaze of the theatre industry, he inadvertently turns his partner into an *other*, a 'coloured alien.'

This transformation captured that moment I had felt when watching the Vietnam War movies of the 1980s. The climactic scenes of *Coloured Aliens* (alluring, seductive) were able to articulate what it felt to be *alienated*, to be transformed into a 'coloured alien.' The performance had depicted the operation of the white gaze, and by doing so, it acknowledged and recuperated a part of my humanity. The transformation in *Coloured Aliens* argues that despite good intentions, the white gaze in Australian theatre precludes genuine support of Asian Australian artists on their own terms.

vi) Critics' Responses to the Play

Overall, the reviews for *Coloured Aliens* were overwhelmingly positive. On independent radio, playwright and theatre director, Fleur Kilpatrick on Smart Arts 3RRR called it 'an absolute delight' (2017), while theatre critic Peter Green told his loyal listeners on 3MBS that the production was a 'Must see!' (2017)

The website Theatre People gave it 4.5 stars (out of 5) and proclaimed that it was 'delightfully weird' (Leeworthy 2017) and compared the race swap 'Caryl Churchill or maybe [Melbourne playwright] Declan Greene', using 'a post dramatic tradition of destabilising identity and the body, helping audiences to see the 'other' with fresh eyes'. Similarly, Australian Arts Review recommended it to its readership: 'If you like your comedy with a little depth and bite, get to it', and found the director's decision to cast cross-racially, 'compelling' (Collins 2017).

Theatre critic, Chris Boyd wrote in the national newspaper, *The Australian*, who similarly found the casting choice to be inspired:

> Chi Vu's latest play Coloured Aliens, now closed, was much more comedy festival-friendly fare…What makes this play rib-ticklingly funny is the cross-racial casting. Under Beng Oh's direction, Annie Lumsden's performance is so far beyond fearless, it's

> practically kamikaze. Likewise, Kevin O'Sullivan, from Tipperary, is played John Marc Desengano. He's about as Irish as banh mi (Boyd 2017).

There were, however, conflicting opinions about whether the play was didactic, with the Australian Arts Review noting that, 'Didacticism's rarely an attractive quality in a script, and Chi steers well clear from obvious hammer holding for bashing theme over an audience's head. It's good writing, backed by good performances' (Collins 2017). In one instance, the critic initially stated in the review that the 'work sometimes feels like a lecture (albeit a personal and engaging one),' yet later on in the same article, conceded, 'I perhaps looked a little too hard for political take-home messages and didn't value the emotional complexity as much as I could have' (Leeworthy 2017). This reviewer's admission of uncertainty demonstrates a high level of engagement with theatre craft.

Beyond the question of whether the play is didactic, I want to draw attention to two more reviews which I will study in depth, as they highlight the points I am trying to make in this paper and lay the groundwork for my final question: What does the reception of *Coloured Aliens* suggest about the white gaze in Australian theatre?

The first review I want to examine closely is from theatre blog *We Know Melbourne*, an online lifestyle blog, which conceded that the production has merits, as an 'intelligent piece, executed with passion by two brilliant actors…this subject matter definitely hit nerves'. However, the same piece also made the following claim:

> Though the intelligent insights, cleverly disguised as witty banter between two lovers were aimed to re-educate western audience members, we felt a little uncomfortable and guilty, for no reason which made the experience a little wearing. . . . Colored Aliens [sic] is meant to be a lighthearted look at casual and reverse racism in Australian society, but as an entertainment piece, perhaps went just a little too far (*We Know Melbourne* 2017).

This anonymous reviewer suggests that historically, there has been *no reason* for white Australia to feel uncomfortable about its racism—whether casual or overt, innocent, deliberate, or systemic—and so there is no reason to make anyone in the audience feel

guilty. The presumption that a play about 'casual' racism is meant to be lighthearted and entertaining reveals how Asian (and non-white) subjectivity is still considered lower down the hierarchy of racial politics in Australia because a key criterion for a play's success is its ability to placate and keep the white majority comfortable. Indigenous educator Genevieve Grieves argues, 'Denial is a very strong part of Australian culture. It is a resistance to embracing the difficult truths of invasion and genocide because of feelings of guilt and shame' (2020, p. 19). This would seem to explain why there is a disconnect between the reviewer's acknowledgment of the overall quality of the play and his or her evaluation that the experience was 'uncomfortable.' It is perhaps a badge of honour to make those used to feeling comfortable to feel a bit uncomfortable, because 'centering people of color and their creative critiques can shift who feels uncomfortable and who feels empowered to speak out against racial injustice' (Galella 2019, p. 198). Drawing on Helena Grehan's observations once again, perhaps audiences in Australia are used to seeing non-white comedy that exists to give audiences permission to laugh *at* the racial other, not *with*. When a play like *Coloured Aliens* questions white privilege, this reviewer at *We Know Melbourne* resorts to a tradition of white denial.

White denial makes it hard for mainstream Australia to admit the racial hierarchy that maintains the power relationship between white critics deny racism's insidiousness. Cultural researcher Roanna Gonsalves asserts, 'within mainstage Australian theatre, the value of [non-white people] lies in their being different, i.e. their inclusion is contingent upon their exclusion' (2011, p. 77). Using Ghassan Hage's formulation, she argues that Australian theatre presumes a white audience that is entitled to be 'enriched' by non-white theatre artists, who are tolerated in their role as 'enricher' (1998, p. 77). Similarly, Alia Gabres asserts that 'if our institutions were intersectional, they would move past tokenistic consultation processes and invest in broader, more courageous, reciprocal relationships with community is most affected by historical marginalisation' (Gabres 2020, p. 28). Instead, what we have is a theatre sector that uses non-white people to enhance the centrality of whiteness.

Now to the second review. In response to the review from *We Know Melbourne*, transnational theatre critic and lecturer Jana Perkovic wrote a longer article in the *Lifted Brow* discussing both the play and how it was reviewed by *We Know Melbourne*. Her

scathing analysis is also pertinent to how Australian theatre in general perpetuates the white gaze. Perkovic argues that when we strive for antiracism in Australian theatre, we tend to focus on inclusion, due to a misbelief that racism is exclusionary. Her observations are cogent enough to be quoted at length. In reality, Perkovic stresses, racism:

> is no more exclusionary of non-white people than rape culture is exclusionary of women." She continues by pointing out that the "purpose of racism is rarely to form separatist communities, but rather to form hierarchies in which some groups are excluded from power but included as an underpaid workforce, as comic relief [or] … the 'ethnically diverse' playwright who will write the play that we want them to write (2017 p. 12).

If Australian theatre's efforts to diversify simply focus on superficial 'inclusion' without interrogating the centrality of whiteness, then we are likely to be in a similar position in twenty years' time.

Conclusion

In this chapter, my concern has been with the continued limited role that Asian Australians are allowed to play in Australian theatre. I argued that it should not be the job of the Asian playwright in Australia to continue the tradition of centring whiteness by merely being the one who is beating the racists to the punchline.

In writing *Coloured Aliens*, I tried to assert that:

- it is exhausting having to perform an 'Asian' in Australia, whether in real life or in the context of marketing oneself in a white and monolingual theatre industry
- as an Asian-Australian, an equally valid 'migrant memoir' can also be about the racism inherent in theatre opportunities that isolate non-white people while keeping the structures of power in place. In the ending scene of *Coloured Aliens* (act 1, scene 17), due to Kevin's act of identity theft, Mai is forced into a

situation where she feels so enraged[57] that she plays out the violent stereotypes of an Asian characters which she had rejected at the start of the play (for example, the dragon lady), while neither Kevin and Dennis bear the negative consequences of the asymmetric power relationships in terms of representations of the other.

- when a translingual writer steps back from such opportunities, then the narrative about Asian Australians will continue to be written *about* him /her, often by white, monolingual writers[58] who assume that different linguistic communities merely live in 'the same world with different labels attached' (Sapir 1929, p. 209). After Mai returns from the meditation retreat, she is horrified to learn that her partner Kevin has taken the liberty of 'translating' her story into a version that centres his role as the white saviour. The play within a play sequence reveals my intuition as a translingual Asian playwright to write a narrative where the main Asian figure is unable to escape from their expected performance before Western audiences. In this way, it comes to a similar conclusion to what befalls Song Liling in the ending scenes of *M Butterfly*.

Coloured Aliens challenges social and artistic convention by using the genre trope of the space alien as a rejection of an essential or so-called 'authentic' Vietnamese Australian identity which typical migrant memoirs typically promise to elucidate to readers. My play does this by refusing to adhere with naturalism throughout; instead, I question who an 'Asian Australian writer' is and how this might be simplified in its mainstream construction. While writing from lived experience as a Vietnamese Australian makes sense as a strategy to counter stereotyped depictions of Asian Australians by a white and monolingual mainstream, it should not be the *only* genre that is available to non-white translingual writers. This is because the identity of the writer frames the public's expectation of the playwright in a way that fetishes her as another case study of *otherness*, rather than focus on the creative skill of her work. Thus, the departure to science fiction shows how the trope of the extra-terrestrial alien playfully stands in for the

[57] Mary Besemeres writes that for literary immigrants like Eva Hoffman, the dissent may be 'both voluntary and involuntary', due to a 'welling up of what Hoffman calls 'immigrant rage' that her 'version of things is automatically under suspicion and at a discount' (2015, p. 21).
[58] Now we have AI that has been trained on data, with the biases of those who possess many of the traits of the 'mythical norm'.

marginalisation of non-white immigrants to Australia[59]. In *Coloured Aliens*, the alien trope helps embody the experience of translinguals as translated figures in Australia and allows me to highlight the conditions that perpetuate their alienation from the rest of Australian theatre.

Conclusion

Having described the process I undertook to write *Coloured Aliens* and its reception after the premiere season, in this conclusion to the thesis I will summarise my findings as well as describe what I intend do next with the knowledge gained during my doctoral studies. Will I limit my endeavours to writing plays about living in translation?

During my research project, I came to understand how translinguals are uniquely configured in terms of their relationship to language itself, which leads to distinct emotional processes arising from the transition from one dominant language to another - such as alienation from one's surroundings, alienation from other people and most poignantly for writers, alienation from one's inner addressee (or inner reader). During this process of linguistic re-orientation, it is as though translinguals become estranged from their own inner voice; the latter part of chapter one explored how I began to address this estrangement in my own creative writing practice.

I have emphasised that translingual subjectivity, like the process of translation itself, is a complex and nuanced undertaking. Living in translation, or 'entering the condition of metaphor' means that certain motifs are more pertinent to translingual writers than to their monolingual peers; these recurring themes include duality, transformation, identity performance, allegiance, belonging and betrayal. In addition, because both languages are activated in translinguals even in monolingual settings, their experience of entering the condition of metaphor is not a linear, one-time process. I argued that the study of literary

[59] However, I'd want to avoid going to the opposite extreme, whereby writers for diverse backgrounds are limited to writing only genre fiction. One does not have to look too far back to see that science fiction was once a ghetto genre that serious writers and their publishers avoided. If done uncritically, placing Asian/Indigenous/African writers in these genres can be just another way of reinforcing power hierarchies.

translingualism can benefit from a more nuanced understanding of translation: it's not simply 'carrying across' words from one language to another, but rather a continual process of negotiating meaning that has transformation at its heart.

In my investigation, I narrowed my critical analysis to two Asian playwrights living in Anglophone countries: David Henry Hwang, the renowned Chinese American playwright, and myself as a Vietnamese Australian writer. I did this out of an awareness that Asians cannot 'pass' linguistically as native speakers of English, which means that an additional layer of being '*translated*' by the monolingual majority comes into play. The ways in which Asians are stereotyped by Anglophone societies affects how their creative works may be interpreted. In fact, Tina Chen argues, Asian Americans cannot circumvent these prejudiced interpretations of their identity as 'sneaky' and 'duplicitous'. Chen asserts that Asians living in the USA are best embodied by the metaphor of the spy or the alien, which I use in my analysis of Asians living in Australia as well. Interestingly, Chen proposes that Asians living under such conditions adopt the strategy of impersonation to combat the presumption of deceitfulness. In chapters two and three respectively, I analysed *M Butterfly* by David Hwang and *Coloured Aliens* which I wrote as part of this creative writing PhD. First, I examined the cultural and linguistic conditions in which Hwang and I wrote these plays. Then I undertook a close reading of Hwang's play, as well as my own, with a particular focus on their intertextual references and use of genre tropes (the figure of the spy in *M Butterfly*, the alien in *Coloured Aliens*). My translingual reading of both plays helped me articulate the deeper message that each play carries in relation to its main Asian character - the expected identity performance of Song Liling, and the impulse towards identity theft that is perpetrated against Mai Nguyen because she resists the expected performance of a Vietnamese-Australian writer.

How the knowledge I gained in this research can benefit myself and others

Beyond this doctoral thesis, I see the knowledge I have gained about unique features of bilingualism being beneficial in identifying and selecting projects that have the potential to value a translingual sensibility of the artists involved. This discernment will help me avoid entering into projects that are at odds with my lived experience as a translingual writer, particularly those that expect literary migrants like me to conform to a monolingual

mindset and/or to simplistically 'translate' the complex identities and processes of living in translation to a simplistic narrative for the benefit of a monolingual majority. Having examined the cultural and linguistic factors that translingual writers navigate when crafting their plays, I now have a critical 'toolkit' with which to assess whether potential projects (including the creative partners and intended audience) will value a translingual sensibility in the artistic work, regardless of whether this is foregrounded or not. Put simply, I now have the knowledge that translingual subjectivity exists and requires its own framework of support. Even though translingual experience is varied and nuanced, there are some questions I can ask myself in a more consciously way before choosing to be involved in future projects. These are:

- Are the people in key roles themselves *translingual*, or at least are aware of the features of living in translation?
- Will they likely judge me according to the impossible linguistic standards of 'two monolinguals in one body'?
- Do they see translingual writers like me through the lens of a deficit model, whereby my first language, Vietnamese, is seen as being detrimental to my dominant language, English?
- Would the intended audience be open to a *translingual sensibility* in the final artistic work?

While I will grant myself the artistic freedom to pursue any creative project that interests me,[60] these are some criteria I can now consciously apply to evaluate potential artistic and/or academic collaborations.

This PhD has also given me an overview of how to build resilient networks that support fellow translingual theatre artists as well as bilingual communities.

There are two main themes as to what I might pursue next that arises from my deeper understanding of translingualism in narrative-based writing, particularly as embodied by genre tropes such as the spy or alien. The two themes are:

[60] One example of choosing to make work that is supposedly not based on my translingualism: my play *'The Dead Twin*' (2015) would appear to have little to do with translingualism, or even Vietnamese Australian identity. However, I would argue both of these themes exist in the work through my use of the genre trope of the 'twin' as a metaphor for my linguistically mobile identity.

- Supporting stories created by translingual artists, whether this involves me as the writer or as the dramaturg to another translingual playwright's work.
- Supporting stories involving linguistically diverse communities, including about their experiences of translingualism in monolingual Australia — my role in these socially-engaged projects would be as a facilitator, interviewer, or script editor.

Beyond my own playwriting, the knowledge gained from this PhD will inform my broader practice in terms of translingual dramaturgy, workshop facilitation and community activation.

Supporting stories by translingual writers

Because I had to grow myself up as a playwright in Melbourne in the 1990s, there were some gaps in my technical knowledge in terms of playwriting. The creative component of this PhD allowed me to write a full-length play while seeking support outside of the University. As part of the Lotus Program, I was able to have the dramaturgical support of an internationally-respected playwright, Patricia Cornelius, to write my play *Coloured Aliens*. As a result, I was able to hone my playwriting craft even further.

In the exegetical component of my thesis, my examination of the genre tropes used in the two plays of this study is highly relevant not only to my writing practice going forward but is likely to be helpful to other translingual writers who may be grappling with critical issues related to 'living in translation', which I identified in chapters one and three of this exegesis. Part of the dilemma of a translingual writer is which audience to write for, given that you could be writing for one, or the other linguistic group, for both, or for purely oneself. For each audience requires a different persona—a new writer's identity in order to carry out the task satisfactorily. The translingual author, whether consciously or not, is asking herself - who is the person writing this piece and for whom? For in the twenty-plus years of writing and mentoring younger bilingual writers, I have found again and again the persistent need to negotiate one's writing self, according to the specific writing project; and sometimes, when this 'authorial identity' does not yet exist, the need of inventing one so that it can be negotiated with.

My thesis goes towards the recognition of translingual consciousness within creative writing and identifying some of the techniques that resonate well for these writers. Specifically, my exegesis has examined the use of genre tropes as metaphors for translingual subjectivity, which can help writers to consciously create texts that have a translingual sensibility. This knowledge has led me to be one of a select handful of people in Australia who is both bilingual and proficient in crafting narratives and plays. In addition, I can see growing in demand for this combination of skills. One example is that in August 2023, I was flown to Sydney to help dramaturg a multilingual performance project led by director Sally Sussman and a team of artists from both Australia and Taiwan. I was invited to contribute creative text to this international project because of my knowledge of script dramaturgy in the context of a translingual performance work. Building on years of collaboration between the key artists, I was able to assist with the preparation of a work-in-progress 'showing' to industry peers. These invited peers included festival directors, presenters, and fellow professional artists. In addition, I facilitated the evaluation discussion afterwards to obtain feedback from the audience so that both teams of artists can continue to refine the performance work.

After my PhD, I can see myself continuing this role as a translingual dramaturg and mentor to emerging and mid-career artists in the context of making translingual performance works and being able to undertake this in a more critically informed way. Thus, I aim to continue to write my own play scripts and working as a linguistically-diverse dramaturg (also known as a 'script editor' outside of theatre circles).

Supporting stories that involve translingual communities

Since there was some tension around the reception of *Coloured Aliens*, I came to understand that more work needed to be done in the broader community about bilingualism itself. As Australia has a monolingual mindset, there is little understanding of the features of translingualism nor is there general knowledge of what translinguals need to thrive. Still too many institutions and government agencies in Australia see language through a deficit model; or they vastly underestimate the need for language ecologies that constitutes supportive language environments for minority languages, which I discussed in chapter three of this exegesis.

For my part, I can support the broader understanding of living in translation through community-engaged projects that build on the critical thinking and reading I have done during my doctoral studies. During my doctoral studies, I have co-initiated projects such as the 'Growing Up Bilingual in Australia' (GUBA) podcast with language advocacy group Vietspeak, and the 'Immigration Stories' drama workshops which I run with Singaporean-Australian theatre artist, Yuhui Ng-Rodriguez through the Geelong Arts Centre. I will briefly describe each community project, as examples of the type of work I would like to continue to support.

i) Growing Up Bilingual in Australia (GUBA) podcasts through language advocacy group, Vietspeak

Vietnamese-Australian community activist and artist Hoang Tran invited me to propose a project that would assist bilingual families in the western suburbs of Melbourne. I conceived of a child-and-family centric podcast which allows listeners to become familiar with, and be supportive of, bilingualism as a mode of being that has positive outcomes for a child's educational prospects as well as contributing intergenerational family cohesion. I proposed this idea because I wanted a program that was upbeat, optimistic, curious, and fun in the way it discusses bilingualism as an accessible everyday mode of being. The program aims to maintain heritage language that is also informative. I wanted to avoid the deficit model of bilingualism that is prevalent in Australia given the monolingual mindset. Hoang Tran and I set up a podcast called Growing Up Bilingual in Australia (Vu & Nguyen 2021) and have completed several interviews bilingual children and their parents. To date, having completed six podcasts, I feel confident that we have set the right 'tone' so that other interviewers can become involved; this means the podcast can expand the range of languages that are highlighted - as ideally the person interviewing the family should be able to speak both of the languages which that family speaks.

ii) 'Immigration Stories' workshops through Geelong Arts Centre

I hope to continue drama workshops similar to the ones I facilitated with fellow translingual artist Yuhui Ng-Rodriguez in the northern suburbs in primary schools throughout Geelong through the Geelong Arts Centre (GAC) about Immigration Stories.

The northern suburbs of Geelong are one of the most socioeconomically-depressed areas in Victoria. It is also the most culturally-diverse communities within the Greater Geelong area; however, because Geelong is a regional city, these culturally and linguistically diverse communities face a lack of appropriate support services when compared to local councils with equivalent populations in Melbourne.

iii) The Longer Timeframe

Immigration Stories workshops and GUBA podcasts will help nurture a language ecology that supports a more growing number of confident translingual writers, especially in the Western suburbs of Melbourne and the Northern suburbs of Geelong. This will take at least ten years' time to bear fruit. Then, there will be younger translingual writers and creators who will be hungry for dramaturgical feedback that has a translingual sensibility. And by that time, I, or someone like me, will be ready to support such artists in their creative endeavours, so that they won't have to go through what I underwent in Melbourne in the 1990s. These are two examples of the need for community-engaged projects that creatively meet the unique needs of communities living in translation in Australia. Perhaps this work will be helped by the subtle shift in the arts sector's attitude towards socially-engaged projects since the mid-1990s. Community arts are more likely to be seen as work that is relevant and engaged to a wider community, rather than as a second-rate pursuit which is less than the 'artistic merit' held by institutions.

The theoretical underpinning that I gained from this PhD combined with the work that I do in the broader community, I argue can have a bigger impact than simply putting on a show in a traditional theatre. In order for Australia to become comfortable and even *fluent* in supporting translingualism, these community-based projects are also needed. I aim to combine my knowledge of crafting stories and plays with the scholarly understanding of bilingualism and the needs of translinguals in order to help shift Australian theatre and the broader community towards a multilingual mindset. I hope that people who read this thesis are inspired to go on a creative writing journey that embraces translingualism, as I did.

As bilingual artists, whether connected to the Lotus program or working parallel with it, we have managed to achieve a lot in a short space of time. And this is just the beginning.

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