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Deconstructing Compulsory Realpolitik in Cultural Studies: An Interview with Alexa Alice Joubin

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American Journal of Chinese Studies

A Multidisciplinary Journal Published by the
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR CHINESE STUDIES

VOLUME 28

OCTOBER 2021

ISSUE 2

Deconstructing Compulsory Realpolitik in Cultural Studies: An Interview with Alexa Alice Joubin*

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ABSTRACT

How might we de-colonize hegemonic knowledge production about East Asia and its relationship with the West? This interview with Alexa Alice Joubin draws on new perspectives on cultural exchange in her book, *Shakespeare and East Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2021), which promotes treatment of Asian performing arts as original epistemologies rather than footnotes to the white, Western canon and theory. We also present her latest thinking on multidisciplinary. Her work, including *Race* (Routledge, 2019), has sought to deconstruct what she calls “compulsory realpolitik”—the conviction that the best way to understand non-Western cultures is by interpreting their engagement with pragmatic politics. In tandem with Anglo-Eurocentrism, she argues, compulsory realpolitik leads to the habitual privileging of the nation-state as a unit to organize knowledge.

Keywords: realpolitik, globalization, multidisciplinary, gender roles, racism, theatre and cinema of Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore, digital humanities

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INTRODUCTION

For more than two centuries, Asian artists have been performing and interpreting Shakespeare's plays. In the process, we have come to appreciate the genre fluidity of what Alexa Alice Joubin calls "Asian Shakespeares." In her fascinating new book, *Shakespeare and Asia*, Joubin seeks to understand the role of performing arts and knowledge production in East Asia's relationship with the West. In so doing, she sheds light not only on the study of literature and art, but also on international relations, political science, history, and philosophy. Throughout the text, Joubin takes a decidedly post-nationalist perspective on Shakespeare and Shakespearean performances. Her groundbreaking work is essential reading for anyone interested in such important topics as cultural appropriation, deterritorialization, power relations, gender, and of course, Shakespeare.¹

Tracing the performance of Shakespeare since 1950, Joubin looks at artists working in various Asian locales as well as throughout the West. Chapter One focuses primarily on film director Akira Kurosawa's and theatre director Yukio Ninagawa's interpretations of Shakespeare for Japanese audiences, though their artistic influence quickly spread well beyond Japan. Chapter Two analyzes Shakespeare in the Sinophone world, examining the politics of reform and Shakespeare's alleged remedial merit. South Korea is Joubin's primary focus in Chapter Three, as she argues that "performing Shakespeare in Asian styles and manufacturing Asian identities through Shakespearean theater are reciprocal processes."² Finally, in Chapter Four, Joubin explores intercultural identity in the Asian diaspora as a function of multilingual Shakespearean productions. Throughout the text, Joubin challenges her readers' assumptions about Asia's histories and cultures while simultaneously undermining the supposed textual stability of Shakespeare.

In August 2021, Dr. David Kenley and Dr. William Sewell met with Dr. Joubin to discuss her recent book. At the time of their meeting, Americans were experiencing the fourth surge in COVID-19 cases, Taiwan had started administering its own homegrown vaccine, and Japan was recovering from its just-completed "pandemic Olympics." Anti-Asian racism was frighteningly prevalent in the United States and Sinophobic attitudes were on the rise throughout much of East Asia. At the same time, venues were struggling to reopen to bring both live theater as well as cinematic productions back to the public. Joubin's work on race and gender across cultures is all the more relevant in the current political climate, and our conversation touched on how promoting understanding Asian cultures can help fight anti-Asian racism.

Kenley: Having worked in a number of fields, what do you see as the value of multidisciplinary? Could you tell us a little bit about your personal and intellectual background?

Joubin: For all my life, I have been looking for a place to call home. Born in Taiwan, educated in the United States, and married to a Frenchman, I am now based in Washington, D.C., where I am conscious of my positionality as a diasporic subject—on both sides of the Atlantic and the Pacific—in my teach-

1 Alexa Alice Joubin, *Shakespeare and East Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2021). The writing of this book was supported by an American Council of Learned Societies fellowship. Sample chapters are now available at <https://ajoubin.org/>.

2 Joubin, *Shakespeare and East Asia*, 18.

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ing and research. I never quite feel at home in any single department, because my work does not quite fit in any discipline structured by periodization. I teach performance studies in an English department and an international affairs program, and examine cinematic representations of theatre making in a theatre department. My focus on ephemera is a misfit in East Asian studies departments where most scholars work with printed texts and the codex books. Within the humanities, theatre is a marginalized site for cultural meaning.

As an immigrant who engages in multidisciplinary work, I have received a number of labels. Depending on the context, I have been seen as a Shakespearean who works across time periods and cultures, as an Asian studies scholar at the crossroads of performance and film studies, as someone who is expected to represent minority communities in some form, and as a digital humanities educator who brings critical race and gender studies to bear on each other.

While interdisciplinary research often involves the transfer or fusion of methods between disciplines, multidisciplinary projects are situated at the crossroads of disciplines either because the subject matter is itself multidisciplinary in nature or it can best be understood through multiple perspectives. Multidisciplinary scholarship catches things that may otherwise fall through the cracks between established fields. In fact, since our students come from different backgrounds, our students are themselves “multidisciplinary,” which calls for multidisciplinary pedagogical methods.

Kenley: How has the global pandemic of COVID-19 affected your thinking?

Joubin: Multidisciplinary work is even more important for the post-pandemic world. We live in a time of hate, and hate is a product of social silos that parallel academic disciplinary silos based on periodization of subject matter. Multidisciplinary work, therefore, can be one solution to hate, because it builds bridges.

It is challenging to do multidisciplinary work, because it involves navigating territories where one may be seen as an outsider. It is even more challenging to do so in the time of hate in which we live, because students and readers often bring our racial and gender identities to bear on the work we do, creating superficially positive and sometimes negative associations. A scholar of Asian descent, for instance, may be expected to write about Asia or Asian America in a particular way. Conversely, those who work in marginalized fields are compelled to explain their work’s relevance to more dominant fields. This is a form of racist ghettoization caused by institutionalized racism that disciplines one’s identity and research output.

Now, still looking in from the outside, I embrace my marginalized positions, which enables me to have a bird’s eye view of issues in a time of hate.

Kenley: How did you come to be so interested in Asian Shakespeares? Why did you decide to title your book *Shakespeare and East Asia* rather than Shakespeare in Asia?

Joubin: Since the nineteenth century, stage and film directors have mounted hundreds of adaptations of Shakespeare drawn on East Asian motifs, and by the late twentieth century, Shakespeare had become one of the most frequently performed playwrights in East Asia. Gender roles in the plays take on

new meanings in translation, and unfamiliar accents expand the characters' racial identities.

Globalization is difficult to study empirically when evidence is organized along the axis of individual countries rather than across borders. Regional data may be widely available but is difficult to classify. Asian Shakespeares give us a category that we can use to develop a site-specific critical vocabulary to discuss cultural globalization.

Further, cross-cultural adaptations encourage self-reflexivity on social and personal levels. This self-reflexivity promotes the awareness of the theatricalization of difference. The performances are productive in the sense that they are generative: they engender evolving ideas of a Western canon and Asian modes of expression.

I titled my book *Shakespeare and East Asia*, rather than *Shakespeare in East Asia*, to signal my emphasis on the interplay between the two condensed cultural signifiers. As a cultural institution, Shakespeare registers a broad spectrum of values and practices that rivals the complexity of the freighted notion of Asia. My book shifts away from the linear, one-way-street model of tracing the transplantation of some British "giant" into a colonial cultural context. This false dichotomy between the native and the foreign can be broken down when we consider global Shakespeare performances in the context of cross-media and cross-cultural citations, the cultural vibration linking productions in different cultures.

The word "and," a coordinating conjunction, in my book's title emerges from my desire to trace shared and unique patterns in post-1950s appropriations of Asian and Western motifs across theatrical and cinematic genres. These visions of otherness are located in East Asia, the US, the UK, and other cultures. The Czech-based artist Nori Sawa combined Japanese Bunraku and Czech puppets in his widely toured solo marionette theatre adaptations of the tragedies. Kenneth Branagh's Japanesque film *As You Like It* (2006) attempts some form of cultural ventriloquism through its use of film and imaginary locations: Wakehurst Place dressed up with a Zen garden, shrine gate, and trappings of a nineteenth-century Japan torn between samurai and European merchants. More recently, South Korean director Chan-wook Park's American debut film *Stoker* (2013) features a female Hamlet figure, and critics repeatedly use the adjective "Shakespearean" to describe the genre fluidity of South Korean director Bong Joon-ho's quadruple Academy Award-winning *Parasite* (2019) which features a unique tonal blend of tragic, comic, lyrical, and horrid elements.

Kenley: In your book, you critique compulsory realpolitik. Since realpolitik is a term more frequently associated with political science, can you explain what you mean when you use it?

Joubin: My research reveals deep connections among adaptations from different cultures. Appreciating these connections help us transcend what I call compulsory realpolitik—the conviction that the best way to understand non-Western works is by interpreting their engagement with pragmatic politics. This approach may imply that non-Western works are of interest solely because of their testimonial value. It also tends to characterize a non-Western artwork based on stereotypes of its nation of origin. For example, South Korean adaptations are seen as political allegories of the postwar tensions on

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the Korean Peninsula, and Chinese adaptations of *Richard III*, when touring to London, were seen as allegories of the Cultural Revolution.

Compulsory realpolitik could imply that works from the Global South or Asia are valuable only for their political messages rather than their aesthetic merits. This assumption leads to research questions driven by polity, for example “Why are there so many global Shakespearean adaptations in cultures with no love for Great Britain?” Anglophone Shakespeares are assumed to have broad theoretical applicability and aesthetic merits, whereas “foreign” Shakespeares—even when they focus on artistic innovation on a personal rather than an epic level—are compelled to prove their political worth. Critics are on the lookout for potentially subversive political messages in these works, which are compulsorily characterized as allegories of geopolitical issues.

As a result, works by non-white authors are imagined to fix their intellectual content by way of their racial identity. As Chen Kuan-hsing has cogently argued, it is problematic when Western, white canons are assumed to be more effective in their explanatory power, while African, Asian, and Latin American materials are recruited to serve as the exceptional particular.³

Kenley: You use the concept of the Sinophone to describe the cultural spheres of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. What is the role of the Sinophone today in understanding East Asia?

Joubin: In contrast to the term “Chinese-speaking,” which presupposes the central position of China as homeland in a settler colonial mentality, Sinophone is a more inclusive notion that points to a network of cultures. This book collects Sinophone works that have emerged from the multilingual, polyphonic, site-specific performance cultures. These cultures are in dialogue with one another beyond nationalist contexts and sometimes circumvent “China” altogether. Shu-mei Shih uses the Sinophone to refer to communities that are connected to or are resisting various forms of dominant Sinocentric ideologies.⁴

The Sinitic languages include Cantonese (often the language of choice for Hong Kong performances and films), Hokkien (one of the primary dialects spoken in Singapore), and Hakka and Southern Min (which feature in many performances in Taiwan). Examples include Cantonese culture in Hong Kong under British rule (which is distinct from Cantonese culture in Guangzhou) and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region after 1997; Hakka and Taiwanese cultures in Taiwan; and Tibetan culture in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

The Sinophone framework helps us move beyond the limiting scope of national profiling to consider intraregional networks of Shakespearean performances. Sinophone is an equally useful concept for understanding theatre productions in China that are wrestling with the idea of a monolithic Chinese culture.

In some cases, national boundaries were significant factors in the dissemination of Shakespeare and evolution of local cultures. In other cases, the nation-state was not as useful as an organizing principle through which to

³ Kuan-hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁴ Shu-mei Shih, “The Concept of the Sinophone,” *PMLA* 126.3 (2011): 709–718.

understand Sinophone Shakespeares. While at times Sinophone cultures had antithetical relations with one another, there was also significant cooperation that went beyond the nation-state. This book employs a regional methodology within a transnational framework to identify shared and conflicting patterns of cultural dissemination. This method disrupts nationalist and globalist paradigms.

Kenley: You write that Asian theatre and cinema have entered a postnational space. What is postnational Shakespeare and what does it look like?

Joubin: While some directors do tap into realpolitik to conceive and market their works, they do so as they engage in generic innovation and formalistic experiments, both of which aspects tend to be overlooked by critics.

Cultural production today has entered a postnational space. Theatre and film artists are challenging fixed notions of tradition and a narrow definition of cultural authenticity. In the postnational space, identities are blurred by the presence of international performers and tourist audiences, transnational corporate sponsors, and the logics of international festivals. The postnational space shares characteristics of liminal spaces that are discursively formed.

Postnational Shakespeare—performances that cannot be labeled as having one single cultural origin—reminds us that cultural ownership is a fiction. Native speakers do not and cannot “own” the language or culture. Familiarity with traditional cultural practices does not align with ethnicity. In fact, certain Asian theatrical practices such as *jingju* and Noh are unfamiliar genres on their home turfs today, and Shakespeare’s language has more immediate impact in modern translations, even as it grows more distant from native English speakers.

Despite the arrival of a postnational phase of cultural production, artists’ racial identities can sometimes incriminate them in ethnic selling out or cultural imperialism. In other contexts, however, their cultural origins and locations exonerate them from cultural appropriation. Directors—regardless of their cultural affiliations—working with Asian motifs often have to contend with their regionally marked cultural identity. Their works are compelled to respond to competing demands to inhabit simultaneously the local and the global, to be innovative but conservative enough to be palatable, to represent Asia on the world market, and to be the conveyor of an Anglophone West to Asian audiences and vice versa.

Sewell: One of the problems for teachers in the United States is that their students lack linguistic, social, and historical knowledge of the Elizabethan era. You explain that “a frequently stated myth is that Shakespearean drama is all about its poetic language, and adaptations in another language. . . violate the ‘original’.” Why is it important to expose this myth?

Joubin: As J. L. Austin theorized in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), words do not have meaning in and by themselves, and this is especially true for drama. Words—in any language—acquire meaning when spoken in context and embodied by actors. Additionally, the myth that Shakespeare is all about, and only about, his “words” is actually a symptom of cultural bias.

There is a tendency to regard the global and the local as politically expedient, diametrically opposed categories of difference in an often-unarticu-

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lated agenda to preserve a literary elite. The global is imagined to be whatever the United States and Great Britain is not. With a combined population of 400 million, these two countries have collectively maintained the dominant role in Anglophone cultural production. This phenomenon has contributed to the tendency, in English-language scholarship, to assume that the global refers only to the cultural realms beyond the U.S. and U.K.

Critics often assign lower aesthetic merit to Asian works, implying that they are only of interest for their political, testimonial value. The myth about Shakespeare is, therefore, a form of cultural elitism. In this context, the local and the global start to sound like code words for highbrow and lowbrow.

Sewell: Globalization means so many different things to people in different locations.

Joubin: I agree. Some cultures worry less about Anglophone globalization than others, and Shakespeare does not always represent an imperial imposition in Asia. Shakespeare was usefully foreign for supporters of Taiwanese independence and Hong Kong's resistance of Chinese authoritarian rule because, for them, the threat of perceived Sinicization (politico-cultural affiliation with the People's Republic of China) is much more worrisome than Anglophone globalization. Similarly, Japanization is a real threat for Koreans who lived through Japanese colonization and is therefore a more urgent topic for exploration. These anxieties add distinct local flavors to what globalization means in East Asia.

Kenley: You argue that Asian Shakespeares have influenced Western artists such as Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, and George Lucas. What does this tell us about Shakespeare, Asia, and the West?

Joubin: The narrative structure of Akira Kurosawa's films, such as *Ran* and *Throne of Blood*, has provided inspiration for Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, and George Lucas. Kurosawa tends to begin his films *in medias res* and offers vignettes of epic history. In *Throne of Blood*, we are introduced to the Macbeth figure as he gallops with Banquo through the thickets of the iconic Spider's Web Forest. Characterized by webs of tangled branches, strong verticals of tree trunks, and heavy rain, the scene draws us in with its perfectly lateral, fast-tracking shots.

Similarly, George Lucas begins *Star Wars* with Princess Leia battling the troops of Darth Vader, plunging audiences into action already unfolding before the start of the film. Lucas and Kurosawa share the same narrative strategy of reaching for the general through specific details.

Learning about these connections is the first step toward treating Asian performing arts as original epistemologies rather than derivative adaptations or ethnographic case studies for Western theories.

Kenley: How have Asian Shakespeares reinforced or challenged traditional Asian gender roles? Can you share some illustrative examples?

Joubin: Gender roles have taken on new meanings onstage and onscreen. An example is *Twelfth Night*. Viola, disguised as page boy, Cesario, is pursued by the lovelorn Olivia. When Viola declares that "I am the man . . . she were better love a dream," she speaks with double irony as a doubly cross-dressed

boy actor on the all-male early modern English stage (such as Nathan Field, 1587–1619).

In the all-female Japanese musical theatre known as Takarazuka, Viola would embody a new form of gender fluidity. In Kimura Shinji's 1999 production, Viola was played by an *otokoyaku*, an actress specializing in presenting "sensitive masculinity" of idealized male characters.

Word choices in East Asian films and productions reveal, or *conceal*, how much power a character might have over others. In Akira Kurosawa's film *Throne of Blood*, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth address each other with formal and informal gendered pronouns that betray their unease and desire for control.

What stands out in the film is how and when some characters choose informal language. When conversing with each other, Washizu (Macbeth) and Miki (Banquo) refer to each other with first names, deepen their voice, and use informal language and the informal, masculine "I" (*ore*).

Washizu attempts to create a similarly intimate bond with Lady Asaji (Lady Macbeth) in private, but she rejects his attempt and maintains verbal and physical distance. It is notable that when Washizu addresses Asaji, he does not use any honorific; he does not address her as *tsuma* (wife) or *okusan* (lady of the house). Meanwhile, Asaji uses the most formal, singular first-person pronoun *watakushi*, rather than the informal, feminine *atashi*, which would be what a private conversation between a husband and a wife normally entails. Asaji's combination of the formal *watakushi* and usually more casual *anata*—the latter here spoken in a register that conveys condescension and rejects intimacy—creates another layer of the uncanny beyond the atonal music.

In the Takarazuka musical I mentioned earlier, Viola's Cesario was not the only cross-dressing character. Gendered pronouns are especially fraught in this all-female production with many layers of disguise.

The Japanese language often elides the subject. In addition to making the right choice of employing the familiar or the polite register, based on the relation between the speaker and the addressee, male and female speakers of Japanese are restricted by the gender-specific first-person pronouns available to them.

Gendered code-switching creates semantic ambiguity and double irony. In general, syntactical limitations create linguistic and cultural opportunities in articulating anew Duke Orsino's comments about love from a masculinist perspective and Viola's apology for a woman's love when in disguise.

Sewell: Did similar transformations occur to racial identities? You have written on misogyny and anti-Asian racism and published a book, *Race*, on global histories of race, co-authored with Martin Orkin.⁵ Could you share your thoughts about pandemic-induced racism?

Joubin: COVID-19 has exacerbated anti-Asian racism—the demonization of a group of people based on their perceived social value—in the United States in cultural and political life. Publicizing Asian cultural life humanizes Asian people. It is the first step to fight racism and to #StopAsianHate. Racialized thinking is institutionalized as power relations. The ideas of yellow peril (an association of Chinese people with diseases) and yellow fever (a fetishization

5 Martin Orkin and Alexa Alice Joubin, *Race* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

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of Asian women) have manifested themselves in theatre and film. The spectatorial aspect of racism has fetishized Asian bodies. Steven Soderbergh's film *Contagion* (2011), which went viral in 2020, puts human faces—Chinese faces to be exact—on an invisible, viral threat. It insinuates that Chinese cuisine may give rise to disease.

Racism has led to biases against non-standard accents. Asian accents are often depicted as interchangeable and inscrutable. Accents, particularly those that distort the predominant language in a community, are intimately connected to racial thinking, and identities become collapsible. In Mina Shum's film *Double Happiness* (1994), a story of an aspiring Chinese-Canadian actress, Jade Li (Sandra Oh) auditions for a role. She is asked to deliver her lines with an accent, and she answers in a playfully Parisian accent before being forced to revert to "a very good Chinese accent" to please the white judges. The scene is charged by the gap between her assimilated white voice and her racially marked body.

Racism also intersects with misogyny. In 1930, English novelist Evelyn Waugh entertained the prospect of Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong playing Ophelia, Hamlet's passive love interest. He imagines Miss Wong having the attributes to play Ophelia who suffers a mysterious death, but cannot see her as the assertive Lady Macbeth. There has always been some perceived affinity between the submissive Ophelia and East Asian women.

However, in East Asian performances, Ophelia is a paradox. Even when she appears to depend on others for her thoughts like her Western counterpart, the Ophelias in Asian adaptations adopt some rhetorical strategies to make themselves heard, balancing between eloquence and silence, shattering the stereotypes about docile Asian women. For instance, inspired by feminist voices, several South Korean adaptations of *Hamlet* recast Ophelia as a shaman who serves as a medium to console the dead and guide the living. Because female shamans exist outside the Confucian social structure, they have greater agency. In some instances, a shamanistic Ophelia figure frames the entire play.

In other instances, Ophelia has more moral agency. In Feng Xiaogang's martial arts film *The Banquet* (2006) Qing Nü, unlike Shakespeare's Ophelia, is able to express her thoughts without going mad or resorting to singing as her only form of communication. Qing Nü is not drowned in the end, although she is still associated closely with water. Unlike Shakespeare's Ophelia, Qing Nü does not have to go mad or speak allusively to express herself.

Reflecting the idea that there is no one prescribed way to express strength and empowerment, these performances counter the racialized myths about Asian women that have led to the fetishization of them as subservient and dainty objects. While her songs still occupy the center of attention, Ophelia does not tend to stand in for lost girlhood or female madness in East Asia.

Sewell: Is there one Shakespeare play that has been most impactful or beloved in Asia? For example, I could see a South Korean adaptation of *Richard III* that depicts Kim Il-sung as the eponymic character. Are there productions which "flip the script" and appropriate Shakespeare that are more complicated rather than critical of a particular nation's government?

Joubin: *King Lear* has held a special place in Asia. The tragedy has been adapted as a story of social reparation. Passages from it have been used to

play a healing role in narratives about aging and dying with dignity. In Rituparno Ghosh's 2007 film *The Last Lear*, which is inspired by Utpal Dutt's play *Aajker Shahjahan*, an eccentric, aging Shakespearean stage actor in Kolkata, Harish "Harry" Mishra (Amitabh Bachchan), reenacts scenes of plays he used to perform. In the final scene, the actress Shabnam (Preity Zinta), who comes to visit Harry, wakes him from a coma by reading lines from act 4, scene 7, of *King Lear*. Shabnam slips into the role of Cordelia, while Harry dies reciting the lines he knows by heart: "You are a spirit, I know. . . . Where have I been? . . . I know not what to say. . . . I am a very foolish, fond old man." It is a scene of reconciliation and self-recognition because in his career, Harry was ill-suited for the transition from stage to screen.

The theme of domestic tragedy in *Lear* has inspired appropriations that examine the wounds of diasporic communities and tensions between different generations. Hong Kong–British director David Tse Ka-Shing staged a Mandarin–English version of *King Lear* in 2006 with his London-based Yellow Earth Theatre, in collaboration with Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, in Shanghai and Stratford-upon-Avon (part of the RSC Complete Works Festival). Focusing on the questions of heritage and filial piety, this adaptation set in Shanghai in 2020 framed the different worldviews of Lear and Cordelia in terms of linguistic difference. Lear, a business tycoon, solicits declarations of love from his three daughters. Regan and Goneril, who live in Shanghai, are fluent in Chinese, but Cordelia, who lives in London, is unable to communicate in Chinese with her father. Her silence is both a result of her inability to speak Mandarin and a gesture of resistance to the patriarchy. Cordelia, a member of the Chinese diaspora in London, participates in this important family and business meeting via video link. Ironically, but perhaps fittingly, the only Chinese word at her disposal is *meiyou* ("nothing").

Similarly, Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen uses language as an identity marker in his multilingual adaptation of *Lear* in collaboration with Japanese playwright Kishida Rio (1997 and 1999). The Lear figure speaks Japanese and walks in the solemn style of Noh theatre, while the Older Daughter, a composite figure of Goneril and Regan played by a *jingju* impersonator, speaks Mandarin. Their philosophical conversation, which is carried out in two languages and two distinct performance styles, is followed by a ritualistic division-of-the-kingdom scene. The younger sister (Cordelia) speaks Thai, although she remains silent most of the time. Ong's *Lear* is set up as a corrective to the prevalent preconception about Asian languages and cultures as interchangeable.

Sewell: How Elizabethan actors pronounced particular words often carried important connotations. Are there connotations specific to Asian adaptations that American audiences might miss or that you found intriguing?

Joubin: There are certainly allusions specific to a cultural or time period that seem opaque to our contemporary audiences located elsewhere. Anthony Chan's 1988 vaudevillian film *One Husband Too Many* dramatizes its characters' near quixotic insistence on performing *Romeo and Juliet* in Hong Kong to ameliorate their conditions. This film's use of *Romeo and Juliet* is part of the larger phenomenon of Shakespeare's plays entering into contemporary culture via quotation rather than in full performances.

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The film opens *in medias res* when a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* is taking place at night. On a makeshift stage in a fishing village center in the New Territories, Hong Kong, an actor wearing black-rimmed glasses prances onstage in costumes reminiscent of Danilo Donati's doublet-and-tights designs for Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) to the tune of that film's "A Time for Us" by Nino Rota, with new Cantonese lyrics. The audiences, unacquainted with Shakespeare, are rowdy and impatient about the pacing of the show. The actor playing Romeo, meanwhile, is unintentionally disruptive. In the final scene in the Capulet tomb, Romeo says to the nonresponsive Juliet: "Death . . . hath had no power yet upon thy beauty," as he accidentally slaps her face as he strikes a pose. After Romeo drinks the poison, Juliet wakes up and improvises: "Oh my cold Romeo, would you like me to take off my ugly aristocratic clothes to warm up your bosom?" Upon hearing this, the mostly male crowd, which has grown impatient and stood up, sits down in an instant, telling each other to quiet down in anticipation of a striptease. Their catcalls then distract the actress.

Encouraged by the mayor who sends his assistants to maintain order, the actors return to the stage to attempt for a second time to complete the play. The mayor's topless bodyguards line up downstage and tell the audience members to quiet down. Despite the presence of the henchmen, the unappreciative crowd start their own sideshow of tribal violence. The disruptive audience storms the stage and comes face to face with the henchmen. Using a low angle, the camera moves between two rows of men lined up like two American football teams ready to charge.

The standoff is depicted in a comedic manner, with the men twitching their pectorals to make them bounce up and down. This is meant as an aggrandizing gesture before the fight begins. The distressed actor playing Romeo wonders out loud whether the standoff is a scene from a then-popular Hong Kong commercial for breast enlargement pills. Perhaps the audience members have now appreciated too well the tragedy about teen exuberance and violence: they have ingested the spirit of feud. Even if American audiences miss the allusion to the local commercial, they could still appreciate the humor by relating to the pec flexing in other ways.

Sewell: *One Husband Too Many* seems very accessible to American students. Are there any additional productions you might mention which educators might consider for their classrooms?

Joubin: I highly recommend the Singaporean film *Chicken Rice War*, directed by Chee Kong Cheah. While *Romeo and Juliet* is propelled by the generations-old dispute between the aristocratic Montague and Capulet, *Chicken Rice War* reduces the feud to the rivalry between the Wong and Chan families, who own competing chicken rice stalls next to each other in an open-air food court in Singapore. No blood is spilled other than that of poultry. Languages and accents are important markers of racial identities in this multilingual film.

Built around the conceit of a college production of *Romeo and Juliet*, the film uses multilingualism as both a dramatic device and a political metaphor. The elder generation converse in Cantonese whilst the younger generation speak mostly Singlish, or Singaporean English.

Fenson and Audrey, in a mix of English and Cantonese, perform the "balcony" scene, in which Romeo and Juliet meet after the masked ball. Mean-

while, their offstage parents become more and more impatient with their public display of affection, not understanding the boundary between play making and playgoing.

Singapore's propaganda emphasizes commercial cosmopolitanism and transnational histories of immigration in the service of economic growth. *Chicken Rice War* critiques the idea that "sounding white"—speaking standard English—conveys more authority.

Kenley: What are some of the challenges of multidisciplinary research?

Joubin: Multidisciplinary researchers face a number of challenges. Restoring a long view of history can help us understand how we think about the present. We can use history to de-naturalize contemporary articulations of gender and sexuality, for example. Directors have used our historical, "safe" distance to "Shakespeare" as a screen for engaging contemporary issues. "Foreign" stories enable some cultures to give the characters an elastic inflection in the art of becoming their new selves.

Kenley: We are well aware of the silos that result from disciplinary difference. Historical periodization can also create silos.

Joubin: Rigid periodization is a symptom of power-knowledge structures. When the production and dissemination of knowledge favors and supports Anglo-Eurocentrism, as Eric Brindley observes, it creates disciplinary silos that obscure long, global histories. They render non-Western knowledge less relevant.⁶

To solve this problem, we can examine similar, or cognate, cultural phenomena, such as cross-gender casting, across extended periods of time and locations. This enables us to draw conclusions from global patterns. Details we learn in the *longue durée* in comparative theatre historiography are as valuable as the "singularity" of any given event.

Performance creates varied pathways to dramatic and cultural meanings across history, but polity-driven historiography has constructed linear, synchronic narratives that have been flattened by national profiling, by the tendency to characterize a non-Western artwork based on stereotypes of its nation of origin.

The story of Asia is not and should not always be political, though the Western media often gravitate toward stories of political dissidents. Stories of political oppression must be told, but dichotomized views do not get us very far.

Kenley: Writing multidisciplinary books involves reaching out to a broad readership. Who determines which topic warrants further explanation?

Joubin: The disciplinary silos impose the uneven burden of multidisciplinary on scholars working in marginalized fields. They have to explain the relevance of their work to those in the dominant fields.

Due to the current structure of academia and hierarchies of cultural prestige, Asian studies specialists, for example, have always been obliged to know their Sophocles, Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, and Anglo-European critical

6 Erica F. Brindley, "Encountering the Euro-American Hegemonic Past," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* (Spring) 7.1 (2021): 112-117.

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theories, though scholars of Western theatre tend to regard knowledge of Asian directors as the responsibility of those who specialize in the subfields. The Euro-American norms have pre-determined what is worthy of scholarly interest.

Further, national profiling is a symptom of the assumption that performances in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada are normative and aesthetically universal, whereas Asian works bear only location-specific meanings.

According to this view, the aesthetic meanings of Asian cultural production are either indecipherable or uninteresting. As Rey Chow observes, there is still a tendency to ghettoize non-Western cultures. This institutionalized bias has put the burden of multidisciplinary on minorities. For example, in order to communicate the importance of their work, Asian studies scholars often adopt a comparative approach and write about how Asia fits into the hegemonic, Euro-American history.

The fetishization of political merits and the nation-state could unduly emphasize non-Western genres' alleged deviation from Anglophone practices and, in turn, instrumentalize "the global" for the purpose of diversifying the scholarship and curricula in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada.

The trans-cultural and trans-historical dimensions of multidisciplinary work can expand the purview of postcolonial studies and de-colonize the study of non-Western cultures and of the white canon.

Having realized that disciplinary boundaries are erected and patrolled by gatekeepers who need them to validate their own authority, I have learned to work with, rather than work out of, the gap between disciplines. Tools from various disciplines help us catch things that may otherwise fall through the cracks between established fields.

To counter dominant assumptions driven by the power-knowledge structure, I propose we see cultural exchange as a network of non-linear influences. This model can capture both the divergence and convergence of cultures. Asian "divergence" from Anglo-European norms is often accompanied by convergences, or a *mélange* of people, motifs, and dramaturgy.

Sewell: I found your *MIT Global Shakespeares* website really fascinating.⁷ Could you tell us a bit more about the design of the site and new features? How were you able to procure such wonderful films?

Joubin: This project was borne out of my passion to further cross-cultural understanding and multidisciplinary research and pedagogy. Globalization remains an abstract concept for most people, but offering vetted videos with permalinks can change that. The project began with my personal collection of videos which I shared with more and more colleagues. As interest grew, it soon became impractical to keep mailing the DVDs all over the country and world. Peter S. Donaldson and I co-founded *Global Shakespeares* as an open-access digital performance video archive providing free online access to performances from many parts of the world as well as peer-reviewed essays and vetted metadata provided by scholars and educators in the field.

⁷ Joubin, Alexa Alice and Peter S. Donaldson. *MIT Global Shakespeares*, an open-access digital performance archive, 2019, <https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/>.

The idea that Shakespeare is a global author has taken many forms since the building of the Globe playhouse. Our work honors the fact and demonstrates the diversity of the world-wide reception and production of Shakespeare's plays in unexpected ways. Our project is a participatory and multi-centric one. We designed global, regional, and national portals to productions within a federated structure. We now have nine regional editors and four affiliated projects within a decentralized editorial design. The project is both a curated and crowd-sourced archive.

In 2018, we launched a new user interface that supports the creation of clips and streamlining of aggregated searches. It can suggest videos of potential interest based on the user's history. By creating clips that are meaningful to them, students curate their public 'self'—their tastes, passions, and signature arguments. They exchange notes on their affective relationship to a play or film.

We also launched a series of self-contained learning modules at <https://shakespeareproject.mit.edu/>; they focus on *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *King Lear*.⁸ These sites are accessible and free of charge. Designed for classroom use, the modules share a focus on global adaptations. The "Global *Lear* in Performance" module, for example, features thirteen full films and numerous video clips that have been pre-arranged in clusters of pivotal scenes—scenes that are turning points in the narrative. Teachers and students can take advantage of the feature of clustered, curated clips from a large number of performances. While it is only feasible to teach in-depth by assigning one or two films of *Lear* in a given class, students can expand their horizon by close-reading competing performative interpretations of a few pivotal scenes.

There is a module focusing on one single production: the solo Beijing opera performance entitled *Lear Is Here* by Taiwanese actor Wu Hsing-kuo.⁹ It offers detailed lesson plans, exercises, and explication specifically around one adaptation. The full performance video has been divided up into video chapters to facilitate learning. All of the modules have permalinks and offer vetted, curated contents on platforms that invite direct user engagement.

Kenley: You co-founded and co-direct George Washington University's Digital Humanities Institute¹⁰ and work as a research affiliate at MIT. Could you talk about crowdsourcing and other methodologies associated with Digital Humanities? How does your MIT project impact multidisciplinary?

Joubin: Effective collaboration is the core of multidisciplinary work. By turning a large number of performance versions into common objects of study, my digital video project makes links among adaptations that were previously regarded as distinct. Digital videos support instant access to any sequence in a performance, as well as the means to re-order and annotate sequences, and to bring them into meaningful conjunction with other videos, texts, and image collections. As such, digital video lends itself to collaboration via affordable and sharable tools.

Building a community with shared purposes, the projects create multiple non-hierarchical entry points for ideas to flow through disparate cultural

8 MIT Global Shakespeare Project, <https://shakespeareproject.mit.edu/explore/>.

9 MIT Global Shakespeare Learning Modules, <https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/modules/>.

10 Digital Humanities Institute, <https://gwdhi.org/>.

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spaces and through genres of stage and screen. They encourage students' ethical responsibility to each other as they grow from a recipient of knowledge transfer to co-creators of knowledge. At the core of my projects is the coexistence of multiple, sometimes conflicting, versions of the same "story" in multiple pathways to knowledge. Researchers and students are able to pause an encounter with a play to gather more visual and textual information collaboratively. They resume the encounter when they are ready, placing the contrasting versions side by side or meshing them in a narrative that they now own.

Kenley: In addition to your scholarship, you are also an outspoken advocate of social justice and diversity. In your outreach work as a public humanist, you have given a congressional briefing on the humanities and globalization on Capitol Hill and a TEDx Fulbright talk. How does your scholarship inform your advocacy work?

Joubin: My research on the question of ethics informs my advocacy work. One of the core values of the humanities lies in understanding the human condition in different contexts, and I found that complex cultural texts provide fertile ground to build empathy and critical thinking.¹¹ One strategy for building inclusive societies is radical listening, a set of proactive communication strategies to listen for the roots of stories that allow for equal footing of the storyteller and listener. We can learn to listen for motives behind stories rather than the "plot" of the narrative. Literature is a cluster of complex texts that sustains both past practices and contemporary interpretive conventions.

By thinking critically about the past in the present—such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement—we can engage with history with an eye toward changing the present. This form of presentism decenters the power structures that have historically excluded first-generation students, students of color, and differently abled students. We live in a time of hate, and we must answer fully the challenges of all forms of violence, including racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and other types of bigotry.

¹¹ Alexa Alice Joubin, "Familiar Ambiguity: The Value of the Humanities in a Globalized World," *Signal House* 10 (March 2021), <https://www.signalhouseedition.org/issue-10-essay>.

American Journal of Chinese Studies

(ISSN 0742-5929)

Vol. 28

October 2021

No. 2

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Message from the Editor

This is the final issue that will be produced under my editorship. I am, however, very pleased to announce that Dr. Wei-Chin Lee, Professor of Political Science at Wake Forest University, is assuming the editorship of the *American Journal of Chinese Studies*. Dr. Lee received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Oregon and was then immediately hired by Wake Forest University, where he has taught for over thirty years. For over a decade he has also served on the executive board of the American Association of Chinese Studies, the official sponsor of the *American Journal of Chinese Studies*. His teaching and research interests are the foreign and domestic politics of China and Taiwan, US policy toward East Asia, international security, and international institutions. He has authored or edited nine books, the most recent of which was *Taiwan's Political Re-alignment and Diplomatic Challenges* (2019), and has published over sixty journal articles, book chapters, and essays. Under Dr. Lee's leadership, I am confident that the *American Journal of Chinese Studies* will continue to provide a prominent venue for the publication of a wide range of articles relating to China, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora in all fields and disciplines.

One of my initiatives for the *Journal* these past four years has been to experiment with different content forms beyond traditional articles and book reviews, including solicited policy commentaries and scholarly discussions on pedagogical theory and practice. This issue introduces a new "Interview" feature, which I hope will provide an opportunity for mediated discussions with prominent scholars and public figures. I am particularly pleased that we are able to initiate this feature with an interview with Alexa Alice Joubin, a widely published author on topics including, among others, race, gender, film and theatre, and East Asian and Sinophone literature. Her most recent book, *Shakespeare and East Asia*, has just been published by Oxford University Press. She is also a recipient of the Modern Language Association's Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for Comparative Literary Studies.