

At the Intersection of Deaf and Asian American Performativity in Los Angeles: Deaf West Theatre's and East West Players' Adaptations of *Pippin*

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Los Angeles has a rich history of community-based theatre, with various groups and programs that emphasize the diverse and multifaceted nature of the city and its inhabitants, such as Center Theatre Group's Latino Theatre Initiative, which provides a space for Latino artists and audiences, Celebration Theatre, which creatively explores gay and lesbian culture, and Cornerstone Theatre, which has produced joint performances with employees from the Los Angeles Public Library, the Los Angeles Police Department, and the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Linnell 61). Los Angeles Theatre Center's Artistic Director Jose Luis Valenzuela notes that Los Angeles is "the most exciting city in the country, so our theater has to reflect that" (Valle 46), and Colony Theatre's Costume Designer Sherry Linnell remarks how the many types of theatres in Los Angeles "are representative of a lively multi-cultural environment" (60). As further proof, East West Players and Deaf West Theatre, both founded near Hollywood in 1965 and 1991 respectively, have long been staples to the unique and complex character of the Los Angeles theatre scene: East West Players is known for producing shows that place Asian American playwrights and actors front and center, and Deaf West Theatre is known for staging productions featuring both deaf and hearing actors on stage together. These two theatre groups collectively and quite closely "mirror Los Angeles' changing ethnic landscape" (Goodman 93), with heavily-populated Asian American enclaves like Monterey Park and Arcadia scattered throughout Southern California, as well as one of the largest deaf student populations in the United States attending California State University, Northridge. While both East West Players and Deaf West Theatre ostensibly have little in common besides their regional proximity, they have both challenged and continue to challenge the national

theatre scene by attempting to make the theatre experience accessible to groups of people who have been historically marginalized by society, for audience members and actors alike. Furthermore, scholars such as Harlan Lane and Tobin Siebers have argued that the “Deaf world” identifies itself as a minority culture, thus producing a rhetorical and political intersection between Deaf studies and minority studies. By using non-traditional casting for what were once traditionally-casted shows, both the East West and Deaf West theatre companies have revised the source material that they choose to perform, challenging so-called norms and raising questions about socially constructed and performative identities.

While many scholars have studied these two theatres’ productions individually, no research currently exists exploring both companies as functioning together within the larger, national theatre movement towards diversity. However, regardless of which company’s production is being explored, scholarship has found that the shows, by creatively interrogating the very concept of “normal,” establish counter narratives within the works themselves, effectively subverting existing social orders by way of race and physical faculty. This particular influence that both Deaf West and East West have demonstrates not only a strong association between the two groups but also how successfully both groups have brought new life to the theatre. Significantly, both companies also staged stark versions of the same show: the 1972 Tony-award winning musical *Pippin*, which tells the coming-of-age story of a young prince—East West in May 2008 and Deaf West in January 2009. Although the choice in source material may seem coincidental at first, a closer examination reveals that both the Asian American and Deaf communities² have struggled with experiences that marginalize their respective communities; after all, not until the mid-20th century did both communities begin to forge a collective political voice in society, and the coming-of-age story depicted in *Pippin* echoes this similar struggle for identity. Thus, by conducting on-site archival research and interviews with cast and crew, and by exploring the cultural conditions within which these LA-based productions were mounted, I argue that Deaf West Theatre’s and East West Players’ adaptations of *Pippin* are reflective not only of LA’s cultural diversity but also of the challenges that the Deaf and Asian American

communities were—and still are—facing today. In addition, a study of these two versions of *Pippin* will provide an understanding of how musical adaptations intentionally disrupt and subvert current notions of national privilege and identity in the United States.

The Intersection of Deaf and Asian American Discourses

The discourse surrounding, and often times defining, both Deaf and Asian American identities within the United States has produced a distinctive intersection between the two communities. Shaped by the social justice movements of the 1960s in the United States, both Deaf and Asian American studies have “challenged so-called neutral norms concerning the valuation of bodies marked by signs of difference” (Stanley et al. 75); after all, physical (dis)ability and racial difference have historically been markers of inferiority. In the years since, the nation has continually recognized the growing need to address the educational, social, and legal concerns of these historically marginalized communities.

The juncture between Deaf and racial minority identities has been of particular interest to scholars over the last few decades, since the Deaf community resists classifying deafness as a disease and instead categorizes itself as a cultural minority. Specifically, many scholars have begun to note the parallel ways in which both Deaf and Asian American identities are socially constructed categories. Douglas Baynton observes that deafness is simultaneously a cultural construction and physical phenomenon marked by difference, much as racial groups are, and, including deafness within the academic context of disability studies, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder consider “disability, like gender, sexuality, and race, as a constructed category,” situating disability within multicultural studies (1). Most significantly, Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren specifically notes that “deaf theatre has more in common with multicultural theatres, those which seek to redress cultural inequities driven by efforts to suppress linguistic difference” (423), an intersection of performativity that is of particular interest here.

There is also a common theme of existence, or inexistence, for both Deaf and Asian American identities. Stanley et al. note that “the disabled body is often described

as incomplete, damaged, or deficient,” while the Asian American body has similarly been viewed historically as “somehow distinct from a nativist white identity and ‘lacking’ American-ness” (77). Both the Deaf and Asian American communities have thus struggled with the perception that they are “less than” the normative American corporeal body or that they do not meet the standards of normative American identity. That is to say, Deaf identities or bodies, like Asian American identities and bodies, are considered “incomplete” by societal standards and in legal rhetoric.

That Deaf and Asian American identities are often recognized as not measuring up fully to normative identities demonstrates too a strong political intersection between the two minority communities, which have both faced issues of social injustice and inequity. Disability theorist Tobin Siebers observes that “the emerging field of disability studies defines disability not as an individual defect but as the product of social injustice, one that requires not the cure or elimination of the defective person but significant changes in the social and built environment” (3). Similarly, Cynthia Wu comments that “disability” is not used as a term to mean an impairment in function but that it demonstrates, rather, a clear demarcation between the “modes of embodiment and the social and material environment in which that embodiment occurs” (6-7)—that is, whether racial or physical, disability is not based on the ostensible ableness of the person but on the way that person is treated by the rest of society, a judgment made in relation to normative society.

On Silence

Notions of silence continually permeate both the Deaf and Asian American communities. Rhetorician Darsie Bowden acknowledges that the act of silence is often devalued when perceived within the dominant discourse and context of power, wherein the more powerful voice eventually “silences” another in order to gain control; however, presenting an alternate interpretation, Bowden argues that silence also “has a value, because silence presumes listening, hearing, thinking, caring, and embracing” (234), symbolizing qualities traditionally understood as feminine. Challenging the view of silence as a sign of weakness and submission, the adaptations of *Pippin* take Bowden’s

feminine idea of silence one step further: silence indeed has value, but not in the passive way Bowden describes. Silence, in the Deaf West and East West versions of *Pippin*, contains action and is thus not “silence” at all, at least not in the traditional sense. Silence is, rather, an active, even aggressive, act of power. Linguist Evelyn McClave observes that, for Deaf individuals, “silence is not really silence at all”—for someone fluent in ASL, “silence” is not about aural noise. While verbal speech and music may halt on stage, sign language can continue as a physical speech act for the cast, which is exactly what happens during pivotal moments in Deaf West Theatre’s productions of *Big River* and *Pippin*. For those who can understand ASL, the scene and song continue in these moments, whether or not there is anything auditory happening. Silence can thus be a powerful and central act in and of itself.

As further evidence concerning the purposeful and active power of silence, the University of California, San Diego presented an exhibition featuring work by four deaf artists in early 2015, entitled “LOUD silence.” Appearing at first as a contradiction in terms, the exhibition “offers viewers the opportunity to consider definitions of sound, voice, and notions of silence at the intersection of both deaf and hearing cultures” as well as the unique occasion to

explore how the binary of loudness and silence might be transformed in politicized ways through their own specificities, similarities and differences in relationship to communication and language. The stereotypical view of the deaf experience is that they live a life of total silence, where they retain little to no concept of sound. On the contrary, as spelled out in “The Meaning of Sound” by UC San Diego social sciences dean Carol Padden and professor of communication Tom Humphries (in the 1988 book “Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture”), deaf people actually know a lot about sound, and sound informs and inhabits their world just as much as the next person. (Ramsey)

While many may believe that deaf individuals cannot possibly comprehend the notion of sound, “the Deaf have a strong understanding and connection to sound and voice,” and “those who have full hearing can appreciate the value and meaning of silence versus

the absence of sound” (Ramsey). This on-going argument regarding Deaf culture, as well as the notions surrounding sound and silence, is one that informs Deaf West Theatre’s adaptation of *Pippin* and Deaf West Theatre in general. For many, it comes as a shock to learn that deaf individuals can take part in a performance normally reserved for hearing actors; that is, music, in and of itself, is considered an act in which only those with the ability to hear and vocalize can participate. Deaf West’s *Pippin* challenges these stereotypes not only by staging scenes and songs that seamlessly integrate both ASL and English at once but also by channeling deaf and hearing characteristics in the title character.

Asian American notions of silence also contain a sense of purpose and meaning. For Asian American communities, silence is normally understood as a culturally symbolic action, representing respect, particularly as it pertains to expected social behavior. King-Kok Cheung explains in *Articulate Silences* that, in the United States, “silence is generally looked upon as passive,” but “in China and Japan it traditionally signals pensiveness, vigilance, or grace” (127). Valerie Pang likewise notes in her article on Asian American silence and communication that “silence can be a powerful and a profound method of communication . . . some Asian Americans believe that silence does not show reticence, but rather denotes respectful and caring action” (183-84). For East West Players, however, it seems that *Pippin* is an attempt to challenge those more traditional, expected acts of silence, both through the use of anime and hip-hop, two cultural outlets which are normally known for their vitality and vibrancy. In the same way that Deaf West Theatre metaphorically demonstrates Pippin’s search for his voice, so too does East West Players symbolically embody Asian America’s search for voice and identity.

(Re)Reading Deaf West’s and East West’s Pippin

Done traditionally, *Pippin*, a musical set in the early Middle Ages, uses 1970s style pop music to propel the narrative forward. The title character Pippin is a young prince on a quest to find meaning and fulfillment in life—because “When you’re extraordinary / You gotta do extraordinary things” (“Extraordinary”)—and audiences

witness Pippin take on various pursuits, such as becoming a soldier and going to war, partaking in various sexual encounters, and leading a revolution to fight tyranny, going so far as to murder his own father, the King. What Pippin finds out in the end, however, is that one can actually find meaning and fulfillment in the ordinary, perhaps echoing the ending of Voltaire's famous picaresque tale, *Candide*—that “we must cultivate our garden.”

The show's seemingly simple message and “long ago” setting have allowed for dramatically different adaptations over the years, many of which have taken place in Southern California. Besides Deaf West's and East West's versions, LA theatre reviewer Steven Stanley recalls that “[UCLA's] Reprise [Theatre Company] did it sexy and Chicago-esque some years back”; “Simi Valley Cultural Arts Center revival set Pippin in the world of ‘Steampunk Carnivale’” and San Diego's LGBT Diversions Theater placed Pippin in a post-apocalyptic Blade Runneresque world while using a hard rock sound. Many recent productions of *Pippin* have even incorporated an adaptation that crosses gender lines: while Ben Vereen was the original Leading Player on Broadway, the 2013 Broadway and 2014 national tour productions feature female Leading Players. That Deaf West Theatre and East West Players recently chose to adapt *Pippin* fits neatly within the multidimensional nature of theatre in LA.

Although *Pippin*'s libretto remains unchanged for both Deaf West Theatre and East West Players' productions, numerous scenes within *Pippin* can and should be re-read and re-analyzed with their particular cultural contexts in mind, particularly as their respective changes pertain to issues of voice, identity, and power within the Deaf and Asian American communities. Furthermore, while cast members from both Deaf West's and East West Players' versions have commented that the creative decisions made for their respective productions did not necessarily change the meaning of the show, the adaptations diverge significantly from the original in terms of staging and casting, artistic choices that do alter the larger implications normally found within *Pippin*.

Deaf West Theatre's Pippin

Deaf West's version of the musical utilized two actors for the role of Pippin—a deaf actor and a hearing actor, each portraying two sides of a singular character. As with all of their productions, all dialogue and songs utilize ASL and voiced English simultaneously; in the show, “we never really acknowledged that characters were deaf, because they weren't. We were living in a world where everybody knew sign language magically” (Buchwald). That said, cast members besides the two Pippins were either fluent in ASL or learned it as part of the choreography, and a few characters besides Pippin, such as Pippin's father Charles, were also double-cast with deaf and hearing actors.

The most striking element that this rendering generated is an overt focus on Pippin's search for his voice and identity, a quest that leads to his subsequent power and agency and also mirrors the challenges that the Deaf community still faces today. Voice, identity, and power are also topics of debate in the realm of composition studies, and they can be applied to Deaf West's and East West's versions of *Pippin* as well. While composition theorists like Walker Gibson believe there is no such thing as an authentic voice (but rather, that voice is a unique creation for any given rhetorical situation, much like performance) (3-4), Peter Elbow argues that voice is not only “the main source of power” but one's “only source of power” (6-7), and, as I argued earlier, that power can also be found in the “voice of silence.” Elbow's particular argument can be readily applied to the character of Pippin in Deaf West's version, whose identity and power are found in his literal dual-identity, most specifically as it affects the ending of the show. In the first part of the original Broadway production's ending, the Leading Player and his troupe suggest that Pippin perform the ultimate finale, a “completely perfect act,” and sacrifice himself, literally by way of jumping into a fire in order to solidify his existence as an extraordinary individual. Pippin eventually refuses, deciding that his ordinary life with his love Catherine is, in fact, more satisfying than the various pursuits—however exhilarating—he attempted, and he is subsequently stripped of his costumes, as the music stops and the stage is left bare. In Deaf West's production, Pippin resists the wishes of the troupe as usual, but instead of keeping the dual-identity

of Pippin intact and simply stripping the two of their costumes, the Pippins are actually separated from each other—the hearing Pippin is physically carried out of the building by members of the ensemble; his subsequent screams of pain and agony can be heard from the outer lobby area, implying that the hearing Pippin is being tortured. The deaf Pippin is simultaneously left “voiceless,” unable to communicate with or sing to the audience at first, until he finally decides to sign the lyrics to a previous song; Catherine begins to sing for him, as the hearing Pippin did previously, and the two—along with Catherine’s son—eventually exit together. In this powerful and definitive action, Pippin is shown as finding his voice, though not in the normative sense of voice—that is, not a verbalized voice. This Pippin subverts the stereotypical notion that deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals have no voice, as Pippin defines himself as a Deaf character who is not only content with his ordinary life but also able to exist without his “hearing” half. The notion that “anything you can do, I can do better” rings especially true for the Deaf community in this final scene. Dr. I. King Jordan, who became the first deaf president of Gallaudet university because of the Deaf President Now (DPN) movement, recalls a crucial moment during a press conference, in which his abilities as a Deaf individual were called into question: “I remember one reporter asking me if I really believed that being deaf was not an obstacle to success in life. I looked the guy in the eye and told him that ‘deaf people can do anything hearing people can do, except hear’” (“I. King Jordan”). *Pippin*, as done by Deaf West Theatre, is thus an attempt to shatter the long-standing stereotype that deafness is a limitation to success in life and is also accordingly a demonstration of voice, power, and identity.

Nonetheless, the final moment in *Pippin*, as it relates to voice and power, is not without further complication: after Pippin and Catherine have completely exited the stage, Theo—Catherine’s young son—stays behind and begins playing with the props; he soon decides to “take over” the role of Pippin by singing the “Finale” lyrics himself and is immediately joined by the troupe, who seemingly begin to mentor and teach the child to eventually perform the finale. Traditionally, this scene can be interpreted as the next generation’s inability to resist the temptation of being an extraordinary individual. In Deaf West’s version, Theo is alone and signing the lyrics, joined on stage by the troupe

soon after, as is customary; however, the hearing Pippin specifically comes back on stage, waving to the young boy and simultaneously singing the words that Theo is signing (as was done for the deaf Pippin previously), a powerful final scene suggesting that individuals with both decipherable language *and* audible speech are welcome into a non-exclusionary community, a communal world in which individuals are not excluded or silenced and where audism does not exist. (I pause to recall here that the deaf Pippin also is joined by a singing Catherine before the two exit). This ending could alternatively be read as a showing that everyone has a voice, but that it is a matter of how one's voice is found and used—the deaf Pippin finds his identity by using his voice, through ASL, to express himself, thus gaining agency and power. *Deaf West's Pippin* director Jeff Calhoun reminds audiences that “the message of the play is that [Pippin] is trying to find his true voice. We can give him that chance in a way the original couldn't because we can personify the metaphor” (Wada). That said, the battle won by the DPN movement and the increased opportunities that the American with Disabilities Act created for the Deaf community seem to go hand in hand with the fact that *Deaf West's Pippin* is fighting to be heard by those around him and at the same time seeking an inclusive community. Importantly, Bowden suggests that the “discourse of power seems to be one in which a person uses his voice to promote himself and his ideas and win over or dominate other voices. For one voice to speak, another must be silenced or somehow incorporated” (234). Because the character of Pippin in *Deaf West's* adaptation gains control over his own voice in the end, the narrative of the show does actually “silence” the voices around Pippin rather than silencing Pippin himself; however, in this act, Pippin does not dominate other voices, but instead he finds an inclusive space for his “loud silence” to be heard. The character of Pippin thus succeeds in subverting normative ideology.

East West Player's Pippin

In *East West Players'* rendition, all characters were cast with Asian American actors, and the creative team chose to meld together anime aesthetics with hip-hop music and dance. Costumes and sets were given a vibrant and vivid feel and look, and

every song in the show was rewritten in a hip-hop style. One character in particular, Pippin's grandmother, normally played by a woman, was instead portrayed by an older Asian American man in drag, typifying an old geisha. Moreover, sword and spear routines were interspersed during songs, "frequent background projections of Samurai era paintings" were shown, "and the warring soldiers use[d] traditional martial arts moves in their combat" (Stanley).

Like Deaf West's version, voice, identity, and power are underlying topics found within East West Players' adaptation of *Pippin* but are issues wrought with complications as well. Since all of the characters are played by actors of Asian descent, East West Players symbolically and aesthetically depicts an Asian American longing for voice in society. One may pause here and ask, is the use of anime, hip-hop, and a geisha not merely playing into stereotypical Asian American representations? The complexity of the Asian American identity is no doubt complicated by these elements, but I contend that the show, and East West Players itself, is both reifying and re-signifying traditional ideas of Asian American identity. Zachary Pincus-Roth remarks that "[t]he melding of anime and hip-hop into *Pippin* fits the pan-cultural attitude [director Tim] Dang observes among young people at East West"—as Dang recognizes, "A lot of the younger audiences, the younger performers, don't want to be defined by race anymore. They're not necessarily Asian anymore, or African American or Latino. . . . They're this urban, metropolitan, cosmopolitan kind of generation" (Pincus-Roth). Reflecting this complex challenge to traditional modes of identity, East West Players breaks away from prior notions of silence and disrupts the originally "silenced" identity and character of Asian Americans by embracing and subverting stereotypes at once.

The use of anime, typically understood as an "Asian" cultural artifact specifically derived from the Japanese culture, allows for a very visually surreal version of *Pippin*, embracing and challenging Asian American representations and stereotypes simultaneously. Anime, "a style of animation originating in Japan that is characterized by stark colorful graphics depicting vibrant characters in action-filled plots often with fantastic or futuristic themes" ("Anime"), is a lively medium "often used to tell complex, dark stories" ("Japan Finds Films"), and the entire East West Players production is told

through this visual vehicle, with characters often “perched on platforms to evoke anime’s unpredictable camera angles” (Pincus-Roth). Pincus-Roth observes that the choice to posit *Pippin* within the visual genre of anime is actually not surprising considering that “[a]nachronisms and young men on quests are frequent traits of anime,” and Dang even instructed the cast “to mimic the cool, understated style of anime.” Dang explains, “We thought that everything that we do onstage has to be dead serious, as if it’s life or death. . . . There’s a lot less ‘Ta da!’” (Pincus-Roth). Marcus Choi, who took on the role of East West’s Leading Player, also notes how “War of Science,” a song in which Pippin is taught the history and rules of war, specifically utilizes anime as a form of story-telling in an almost cartoonish manner. Thus, in using anime as the medium through which to tell the story, East West Players’ adaptation compels audiences to look beyond the normal limitations of a traditionally produced *Pippin*.

One such limitation that East West Players disrupts is that of gender; while Pippin’s grandmother, Berthe, is traditionally cast as an older female actress, East West Players casts the role with an older male actor in drag. As a way of bringing light to the geisha stereotype—that is, the stereotype that posits Asian women as being submissive and passive—East West Players exploits the stereotype for its own benefit. Pippin’s wise grandmother is a geisha, one “trained to entertain men with singing, conversation, etc.” (“Geisha”), but “she” is also being played by a man, a creative choice which makes, in reality, a mockery of such stereotypes and at the same time creates a counter narrative or a new voice for Asian American men and women.

Finally, in their use of hip-hop music, East West Players may appear to be misappropriating music conventionally understood as African American. In actuality, however, by changing from pop to hip-hop, East West Players is attempting to foreground discourses of power and voice as they pertain to Asian American identity. Cross-cultural studies have long been investigating the influence of African American hip-hop culture on the Asian American community, most specifically as a space of combatting previously prescribed notions of silence. Nitasha Sharma, a scholar who writes on both Asian American and African American cultures, views hip-hop “as a potential place of alliance” in a nation still faced with tremendous conflicting politics

(Roach). Scott Crossley also notes that hip-hop as a genre was originally used to give a “voice” to those who were otherwise powerless and marginalized in society. *East West Players* thus appropriates hip-hop music in this fashion to symbolize Pippin’s coming-of-age attitude and desire to break away from tradition. Such a view of hip-hop has also been reflected in contemporary sitcoms such as *Fresh Off the Boat*, in which the young protagonist remarks that “if you were an outsider, hip-hop was your anthem” (“Pilot”), and in *Black-ish*, in which characters joke that hip-hop is no longer a “black man’s go-to” having been taken over by Asians (“Pilot”). Asian American rappers, in particular, have been charged with culturally-misappropriating hip-hop; however, numerous scholars have also posited hip-hop as a “social space” that “bears the potential to facilitate meaningful cross-racial exchange” (Woo ii), and Christina Lee’s article on *Fresh Off the Boat* notes that “[h]ip-hop is black music, through and through, but it’s also largely the only music that speaks directly to racial minorities, black and otherwise.” Therefore, while it is true that hip-hop began as an African American identity marker, its positive objectives and influence have reached beyond its original cultural confines.

While the re-envisioning of the show’s score entirely in the genre of hip-hop seems to acquiesce to the stereotype that Asians have simply (mis-)appropriated African American music, *East West Players* appropriates hip-hop music in their version as a way of symbolizing Pippin’s coming-of-age attitude—Pippin is not just a young man on the search for an identity but, for *East West Players*, a young man on a search to become more than the identity others have assigned to him. Dang notes that the change from pop to hip-hop music was not an arbitrary decision: “Bob Fosse’s choreography is very sexy; it deals with a lot of isolation of body parts—lots of shoulders, lots of hips, lots of knees and all that. I see that correlation in hip-hop” (Pincus-Roth). Dang’s use of hip-hop, then, is not necessarily tied to the ideology of race but to the visual language of dance. Hip-hop allows for *East West Players*’ Pippin to metaphorically find an identity, different from the one generated by the traditional production with its 1970s pop score. In fact, Asian Americans in the production are seen as taking on a new voice—something that thus frees Pippin from the older generation’s antiquated ways of thinking.

Confronting Social Issues & Ideology In Pippin: The Generation Gap(s)

From a cultural-ideological standpoint, positioning Pippin within an all-Asian American environment or Deaf environment accentuates the complex relationships both cultures may have with authority figures, both familial and social. In the musical, this idea is foregrounded by the role of King Charles, who is not only Pippin's father but also representative of dominant authority. One scene in particular—in which Pippin kills his father and takes the crown—requires further analysis in regard to both Deaf West's and East West Players' adaptations. In his director's guide *From Assassins to West Side Story*, Scott Miller explores the multitude of references to the sun in *Pippin*, suggesting that “the use of sunrise and sunset is symbolic of beginning and ending, life and death” which “ties the whole show together. If everything goes as Leading Players [sic] plans, *Pippin* the musical will encompass Pippin's entire life, from his birth to his death in a fiery suicide in the finale” (197). Most specifically, Miller's brief analysis highlights the scene in which Pippin the son (and “sun”) murders his own father to become king, which is a metaphorical “new beginning” (or sunrise) for Pippin; “Charles, as sunset, is at the end of his reign” (197). This metaphorical ending/beginning is a particularly poignant point for both Asian American and Deaf communities.

Children both within the Deaf community and Asian immigrant populations have struggled to navigate the generation gap, “a broad term that generally describes the conflict in ideologies between older generations and younger ones” (Lai). For Asian Americans in particular, Lai observes,

The most common perception of the generation gap involves immigrant parents and their U.S.-born children, but taking into account the fluidity of Asian American identity, nationality alone does not influence interpersonal relationships within families. Rather, the beliefs and ideologies that individuals absorb from living in the United States and other countries gives a transnational perspective on the generation gap.

If the audience keeps this intergenerational conflict in mind, the death of the old and the crowning of the new played out within East West's *Pippin* becomes much more poignant

and racially metaphorical. In a special issue on first- versus second-generation problems, Pyong Gap Min and Kyeyoung Park note, “Ethnic identity is usually hidden in childhood, but often emerges in young adulthood. . . . Second generation Asian American identities are multiple, fluid, and heterogeneous, as well as gendered, classed, racialized and ethnicized” (x). Min Zhou goes on to explain in his article that “immigrant children and children of immigrant parentage lack meaningful connections to their ‘old’ world” (2). For East West’s Pippin, it is not so much that he finds conflict with the old world, but, like a traditionally-cast Pippin, he finds issue with his father’s old ways of thinking. In the production, the death of King Charles at the hands of Pippin is symbolic not only of a simple regime change and “new beginning” as in a traditionally-cast production, but it is also a metaphorical display of how a second-generation Asian American child can confront the rule of first-generation ideology. Along with the action on stage, the music that the show utilizes overall can be also understood as metaphorically challenging the “old world.”

Unlike the Asian American generational gap, the generation gap issue in regard to Deaf culture is much more complex, which problematizes the same murder and revolution scene in Deaf West’s *Pippin*. Distinct from the racialized generation gap, the gap between generations for Deaf culture is due to the fact that two hearing parents can give birth to a deaf or hard-of-hearing child; “Like the blind and others with individual physical differences, [Deaf people’s] difference is not in most cases passed on to their children” (Baynton 3) and, in fact, 90% of Deaf children “have hearing parents who are unable to effectively model the spoken language for most of them” (Lane, “Construction” 80). Hearing parents thus find it necessary to learn ASL in order to communicate with their children but can also choose to exclude their children from conversations. However, since all characters in *Pippin* are treated as if they are fluent in ASL and in English, King Charles is not a hearing-only parent to Pippin. Rather, he has a dual-identity and, as such, is deaf *and* hearing himself, navigating the same space that Pippin does, thus complicating the generational gap issue. Nonetheless, this is not the first time Deaf West Theatre has attempted to incorporate the idea of the generation gap: in their 2014 production of *Spring Awakening*, “the deaf Wendla comes from

hearing parents, so that the show's beginning—in which Wendla asks her mother where babies come from ('Mama, who bore me')—presents an even steeper barrier to communication. Not only does her mother struggle emotionally with explaining sex; she also has difficulty with the sign language" (Buchwald). Because Deaf West's Pippin and King Charles are both deaf and hearing simultaneously, the standard analysis of the scene does not seem to deal with the issue of destroying any generational gap in terms of deafness or hearing. Mirroring the conflicts in a traditionally produced *Pippin*, Deaf West's Pippin's inability to communicate with his father comes from having different ideals than he does; killing the king is a new beginning, but not any more so than a traditional reading of the scene.

The murder of King Charles is nevertheless further complicated by the very fact that Charles does not stay dead. Instead, as in traditional productions, Pippin finds that he cannot handle the responsibility and power that comes with kingship and, therefore, asks for his knife back; the Leading Player, as he or she is wont to do, allows Pippin's wish to come true—Charles comes back to life and takes back the crown, and the King's "second-reign" begins with him cheerfully yelling "denied!" to all of the nobles and peasants. This reversal of Charles's death seems at first contradictory to both the Deaf and Asian American ideologies expressed up until now. However, in both Deaf West's and East West's adaptations, the return of Charles seems to reflect the reality of their world as is; that is to say, Pippin is brought back to the world in which he lives in, where normative authority is still in power. For Pippin, the return of the King also illustrates that one is never truly free of the past and that characters—Deaf, Asian American, and otherwise—continue to be haunted by their lineages and histories.

Concluding Thoughts

Much as Viet Thanh Nguyen argues in *Race and Resistance: Literature & Politics in Asian America*, East West Players' and Deaf West Theatre's adaptations of *Pippin* both resist and accommodate sociopolitical issues surrounding the Asian American and Deaf cultures; that is, the productions both challenge and reflect sociopolitical attitudes towards and of Asian American and Deaf identities. Instead of presenting the cultures

and their respective identities and bodies as one-dimensional, the shows choose to problematize the topics instead. These particular, complex constructions of normativity and performativity demonstrate that “society’s goal should not be to conform the ‘othered’ body into the normative [society], but to find ways to transform disabling environments” (Stanley et al. 81). In the same way, the goal of musical theatre should not be to place those who are historically othered by society into normative spaces but to challenge and break down those normative spaces, thereby enabling a more broadened theatrical experience for audience members. Theatre as both a venue and an outlet of expression should not limit the involvement/experience for Deaf and/or Asian American bodies but, instead, find ways to include, embrace, and give meaning to those bodies, both on stage and off.

With a traditionally staged production of *Pippin* touring across the United States today, it is important to understand the unique work that theatres in LA have done with the show. These adaptations of *Pippin* produced by East West Players and Deaf West Theatre give voice to both Deaf and Asian American cultures and communities. By way of adapting older material, these two regional theatres accentuate the stories and struggles of Deaf and Asian American individuals and communities in a way that reshapes, subverts, and disrupts national notions of Deaf and Asian American identities.

Notes

1. In her article on the historical overlap of Deaf and disability studies, Carol Padden comments that "deaf people see themselves an odd fit in disability studies" (508) and, in fact, many Deaf individuals resist the "disability" label altogether. However, I draw from the academic discourses of both Deaf and disability studies, for like Padden, I believe that the convergence of these two studies—both which emphasize the social construction of identity--can be helpful, as long as we respect the distinctive histories of each community. Like Harlan Lane, I regard the Deaf individual as "a member of a linguistic and cultural minority with distinctive mores, attitudes, and values" ("Do Deaf People" 368).
2. The uppercase "Deaf" is consciously and conscientiously used, based upon American Sign Language specialist Douglas Baynton's elucidation that there is a "common practice of using the lowercase deaf when referring to the audiological condition, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to the Deaf community and its members" (12).

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