

**CHINESENESS IN (A) NEW ZEALAND LIFE:
LYNDA CHANWAI-EARLE**

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To discuss the question of China and Chineseness in the life of Lynda Chanwai-Earle is to consider subjectivity, agency, identity politics, and advocacy. This paper traces the ways in which these strands intertwine in increasingly complex ways via a consideration of her work as poet and performance artist, playwright and journalist.

This trajectory begins with private reflections in poetry on a personal experience of a childhood and adolescence inflected with questions of corporeal identity. Since the appearance of the play *Ka Shue=Letters Home* in 1996, Chanwai-Earle has become widely recognized for her pioneering representation of and advocacy for the Chinese community. Since this first play, Chanwai-Earle's work has reflected a close awareness of and dialogue with prevailing discourses of identity, immigration, and multiculturalism in New Zealand. *Ka Shue* asserts the experience of poll tax descendants, who were of predominantly Cantonese heritage, in the face of antagonistic attitudes to new migration, but later plays engage with the increasingly multiple experiences of being Chinese in New Zealand. This includes a growing engagement with language, particularly Mandarin. Intertwined with a drive for representation and advocacy to the broader New Zealand public is an equally driven desire to engage and indeed to critique attitudes inherent among the various strands of New Zealand Chineseness. Such engagement is lent a further level of complexity through an additional preoccupation with China itself, both its traditions and its difficult contemporary politics. This, in turn, has fuelled experimentation with form and staging, which is reflective of Chanwai-Earle's broader experimental approach to her work, which maintains a critical and provocative voice. Beginning in an autobiographical mode, focused on long-standing Chinese New Zealanders of Cantonese heritage, Lynda Chanwai-Earle's work extends its focus to make visible the variety of new migrant experience. While one of her own plays overtly critiques representation in the mainstream media, her own later work as a journalist has sought to counter such attitudes as well as furthering her advocacy work to include the multiplicity of marginalized voices of multicultural New Zealand.

The representation of New Zealand Chineseness in Chanwai-Earle's work should be understood as part of a much broader repertoire which incorporates advocacy, experimentalism, and critique. From 1995 to 1999, for example, she toured with Māori theatre company Te Rākau Hua O Te Wao Tapu to prisons, marae, and schools and

led poetry and drama projects at Arohata and Christchurch Women's Prisons.¹ This is but one exemplification of the range of her work and speaks to the reductive and essentializing dangers of the "automatic association between ethnic authorship and ethnic cultural production."² Acknowledging Eleanor Ty's interpretation of Susan Stanford Friedman's notion of "scripts of relational positionality,"³ this paper will invoke the "occasional approach" of indigenous studies in its primary focus on her work which specifically engages with Chineseness in New Zealand. Chadwick Allen argues for indigenous minority texts to be conceived of as "occasions" for the performance of indigeneity, as 'episodes' in the ongoing negotiation of contemporary indigenous minority identities."⁴ He continues:

An occasional and episodic approach invites us to read particular literary and activist texts as responses to the multiple motivations for their creation and, potentially, as co-creators of the multiple contexts of their reception—local, national, and global—rather than to focus on their conformity or lack of conformity to a given set of standards for authenticity or aesthetic excellence.⁵

This discussion will focus on the Chinese occasions in the author's work, while acknowledging the greater breadth of her repertoire.⁶ Acknowledging the post-identity turn, such identities are clearly constructed and lack coherence, and yet, as aspects of identitarian thinking, they "continue to persist as affective investments, means of knowledge productions and modes of ethico-political engagement and imagination."⁷ This is all the more the case in the context of New Zealand's fledgling and unresolved multiculturalism, which has evolved, unmediated by specific policy, as a result of immigration reforms in the late-1980s. Chinese New Zealand identities also sit uneasily beside the bi-cultural and racially determined framework upon which the nation was

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- 1 See "Lynda Chan-Wai Earle," Playmarket, <http://www.playmarket.org.nz/playwrights/lynda-chanwai-earle> (accessed 21 July 2014).
 - 2 Eleanor Ty, "Rethinking the Hyphen: Asian North American and European Ethnic Texts as Global Narratives," *Canadian Review of American Studies/Revue Canadienne d'études américaines* 32 (3) (2002): 249.
 - 3 *Ibid.*
 - 4 Chadwick Allen, *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 12.
 - 5 *Ibid.*
 - 6 See also the approach of Zhang Haifeng, which combines occasionality with a recognition of a broader repertoire. "A Comparative Study of Shen Congwen and Witi Ihimaera as Indigenous Writers" (PhD thesis, University of Auckland, 2011), 42.
 - 7 See Christopher Lee, *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 8.

founded, which is unable to include fully other in-comers of colour.⁸ It is to these debates that the pioneering example of Lynda Chanwai-Earle has made a significant contribution by foregrounding the multiple experience of being a Chinese New Zealander. At the same time her work exemplifies the incompleteness of the process of representation, particularly in the strong reactions it provokes in her audience/s.

Agile Positionality

In her public profile,⁹ Lynda Chanwai-Earle is recognized as a fourth-generation Chinese New Zealander. This public identity emerged at a specific moment in her creative career with the premiere of her ground-breaking play *Ka Shue=Letters Home* at Circa Theatre, Wellington, in March 1996. Prior to that event Chineseness was a personal reference point, but one which coloured the autobiographical elements of her poetry. Her acclaimed first poetry collection, *honeypants* (1994), which was published under the name Lynda Earle, was celebrated for its portrayal of the Hastings underworld, but it also opens vistas onto her family background:

But I was meant
to be different, a
British-born Chinese Kiwi
who grew up in New Guinea
an Asiapean if you like¹⁰

Born in London in 1965 she spent her early childhood in Papua New Guinea before completing her education in New Zealand. In several of the poems in *honeypants*, identity is expressed in both strong corporeal terms and clear-cut racial categories, yet at the same time continues to shift, these metamorphoses being achieved through an act of will. “To Hastings with Love” evokes a coming of age on the east coast of New Zealand.

if it wasn't for Carl
I wouldn't have known Fidalis Crescent
or the strength
it takes
to become blacker

8 For a more detailed discussion, see Hilary Chung, “Native Alienz,” in *Asians and the New Multiculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Gautam Ghosh and Jacqueline Leckie (Dunedin: Otago University Press, forthcoming).

9 See, for example, “Chanwai Earle, Lynda,” New Zealand Book Council, <http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Chanwai-Earle,%20Lynda> (accessed 21 July 2014); or “Lynda Chanwai-Earle,” Radio New Zealand National, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/presenters/lynda-chanwai-earle> (accessed 21 July 2014).

10 Lynda H. Earle, “To Hastings with Love,” in *honeypants* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1994), 10.

from white
boonga from pakeha¹¹

The challenge of this transition contrasts with the ease of movement prized by the lyric subject in the extended autobiographical poem “Lotus Hook” via her identification with her comic book hero, the Phantom. Iterations of the following refrain occur five times within the poem:

*I dreamt I was the Phantom
passing like a shadow
through falls of water
I was a stranger
in all lands*¹²

The Phantom’s effortless mobility is contingent upon a lack of belonging. This state of being resonates with the fixed, stereotypical racial and gender categories to which the speaker does not have full access as a consequence of her parents’ mixed-race partnership.

It was
my mother’s fault
give me a hirsute suitor
anytime, she says
She preferred them tall
white and hairy
so she married my father¹³

Her corporeal dimensions massively exceed the conventions of Chinese womanhood as espoused by Great Uncle Shi who “took one look up at me / and wrote me off / for marriage.”¹⁴ The pink feminizations of a little white girl had been equally ill-fitting: “[I] wore my pink / like a camouflage,”¹⁵ and only the child who grew up in Irian Jaya “like a wild animal” seemed to have temporarily approximated the unencumbered mobility of the Phantom:

climbed rocks naked
people’s rooftops naked
I swam naked
I talked naked

11 *Ibid.*, 8.

12 Lynda H. Earle, “Lotus Hook,” in *honeypants*, 31; italics in original.

13 *Ibid.*, 30.

14 *Ibid.*, 29.

15 *Ibid.*, 32.

I was the little brown girl from Borneo
until they made me put clothes on¹⁶

The empowerment of the possibility of a corporeal redefinition of identity belongs to the realm of childhood and adolescence, whilst the conformist adult realities of the Hastings canning factory enact only the invisibility and irrelevance of Chineseness:

Hastings!
where a thousand years'
Chinese heritage
is reduced
to 10 minutes' smoko time
moonlighting
as a Mills and Boon fantasy¹⁷

However, while the poem begins with a rejected stereotype of feminized Chinese masculinity, it ends not in Hastings but with the Phantom, who, of course, lacks corporeality but propels the extended motif of passing invisibly, particularly through water. This is the longed-for Nirvana. In the penultimate stanza occurs the statement: "*Nirvana is a luxury cruiser / caught on a sandbar.*"¹⁸ While, indeed, Nirvana is the name of a luxury cruise ship, a phantom can never be stranded by corporeality. This agile positionality contrasts with persistent connection with the crippling corporeality of the bound feet of her female Chinese ancestors, prized signifier of Chinese femininity known as "golden lotuses": "Lotus hook / I'm stuck on you like glue to a shoe."¹⁹ In combination, the two motifs, agile positionality and marked corporeality, become prophetic of future developments in her career.

Linda Martín Alcoff delineates two aspects of the self that are involved in social identity, "public identity" and "lived subjectivity." Public identity concerns "how we are socially located in public, what is on our identification papers, how we must identify ourselves on Census and application forms and in the everyday interpolations of social interaction."²⁰ It also includes the social expectations with our "networks of community." Lived subjectivity is "who *we* understand ourselves to be, how we experience being ourselves, and the range of reflective and other activities that can

16 *Ibid.*, 33.

17 *Ibid.*, 34.

18 *Ibid.*, italics in original.

19 *Ibid.*, 30. For an extended discussion of "Lotus Hook," see Kathy Ooi, "Reorientations: A Critical Study of Chineseness in New Zealand Literature" (PhD thesis, University of Auckland, 2009), 107–11.

20 Linda M. Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), electronic edition, 92.

be included under the rubric of our ‘agency.’”²¹ There may well be inconsistency and tension between the two, and both aspects will evolve, but there is “constant interplay and even mutually constitutive relations between each aspect.”²²

In *honeypants*, Chanwai-Earle’s Chinese affiliations are expressed informally as part of the poet’s lived subjectivity and occupy a minor position within the collection.²³ Two years later, the appearance of *Ka Shue=Letters Home*, authored and performed under the hyphenated version of her name that she was to use henceforth, brought Chineseness formally into her public identity. This strategic move into identity politics should be understood in the context of the political debates of the day which precisely shaped the way “asianness” in general had become perceived. The arrival of new migrants from Asia after the adoption of new immigration policies in 1986–87 resulted in anti-immigration sentiment at the perceived threat of “asianization” of the country and influenced the outcome of the 1996 general election.²⁴ Such developments brought Chinese New Zealanders’ identity into sharp relief as their multi-generational association with New Zealand was undermined by their being mistaken for or associated with new transnational incomers.²⁵

Identity Politics: Autobiographical and Monodramatic Enactment

As Alcoff argues, identity politics does not deny the “contextual, relational, and fluid nature of identity,” but it does entail making a public choice of alignment with one or more groups in order to advocate for those interests.²⁶ *Ka Shue*’s prefatory material makes this strategic move explicit. The “Playwright’s Note,” which precedes the play text in the published version, declares the author’s affiliation with the New Zealand Chinese identity that the play presents and explores in unequivocal terms: “I am Eurasian by ethnicity, a fourth generation New Zealander. I am also a descendent [*sic*] of the ‘Poll Tax.’ Based on the Chinese side of my family (the Dong clan of Bak-Chuen), *Ka-Shue* uncovers some of the last 150 years of a buried history in New Zealand.”²⁷ Citing

21 *Ibid.*, 93.

22 *Ibid.*

23 The cover biography of *honeypants* reads: “Lynda Hera Earle was born in London and spent a large part of her childhood in Papua New Guinea. She is a jazz poet and performance artist and has studied fine arts and drama at the University of Auckland. *Honeypants* is her first book of poetry.”

24 See, for example, Bryce Edwards, “[NZ First Party History] 14: The Anti-Immigration Surge,” *Liberation*, <http://liberation.typepad.com/liberation/2008/11/nz-first-party-history-14-the-antiimmigration-surge.html> (accessed 25 July 2014).

25 For an extended discussion, see Hilary Chung, “The Autoethnographic Impulse: Two New Zealand Playwrights,” in *Disaporic Chineseness after the Rise of China*, ed. Julia Kuehn, Kam Louie, and David Pomfret (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 81–82.

26 Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 146–47.

27 Lynda Chanwai-Earle, *Ka Shue=Letters Home* (Wellington: Women’s Play Press, 1998), 5.

the “noticeable absence of a Chinese voice in this country,” Chanwai-Earle implies that this play intends to articulate such a voice via her own family history in a way which is accessible to “mainstream audiences.”²⁸ This play retells, and thus unsettles, the archetypal New Zealand story of settlement with Chinese protagonists, authorizing and making visible their inclusion in this history through autobiographical enactment. It unsettles the myth of New Zealand’s racial tolerance by articulating New Zealand’s racist treatment of Chinese immigrants via the experience of three generations of the Leung family. By speaking out, it also unsettles the traditional conformist quietism of the Chinese community. This double-edged critique is achieved by claiming alternative histories through the inter-generational relationalities of mothers, daughters, and granddaughters who author and re-author their own narratives.

Ka Shue=Letters Home is a monodrama in two acts, each comprising a series of short scenes set non-sequentially in a range of time frames between 1939 and 1989 in both China and New Zealand. Each scene comprises a monologue by a single character which collectively create a series of exchanges between mothers and daughters in the form of dictated letters or telephone calls, most of which meander into reminiscence and reflection. In 1989, New Zealand-born Jackie is in a Beijing hotel room witnessing the events unfolding in Tiananmen Square, where her Hong Kong Chinese boyfriend is encamped; these events are recounted via letters to her mother, Abbie, in Wellington. Abbie responds to Jackie in 1989 but also becomes the daughter she was in 1959, arguing with her mother Paw Paw over her intention to marry Pākehā Nigel. Paw Paw begins as a daughter in China in 1937, arguing with her own mother over her intention to join her husband in New Zealand. In war-torn Hong Kong in 1941, on her way to New Zealand, she becomes “mother” to baby Abbie, daughter of her husband’s favoured concubine, Lady Li, who remains in China and commits suicide; in Wellington, Paw Paw is the frustrated mother of a recalcitrant Abbie in 1959, but she becomes the doting grandmother of Jackie in 1968. Abbie addresses her mother for the final time at her graveside in Karori Cemetery in Wellington in 1989. Lady Li appears periodically as a ghost from the traditional Chinese past, transcending space and time, but perpetually defined by myths of self-sacrifice. Unable to communicate with the other characters, she addresses only the audience. Gung Gung, husband of Paw Paw and grandfather of Jackie, appears twice, once in each act, in a hotel room in Wellington in 1949. Fixed in time and space and obsessed with his addiction to mah-jong, he does not communicate meaningfully with anyone.²⁹

Central to this representation of Chinese migrant experience is the notion of home which Paloma Fresno Calleja describes as “a multiple and ambivalent signifier.”³⁰ In New Zealand they are viewed as outsiders even after three generations of settlement.

28 *Ibid.*

29 This summary is taken from the extended analysis in Chung, “The Autoethnographic Impulse,” 82–90.

30 Paloma Fresno Calleja, “Monodramas for a Multiculture: Performing New Zealand Chinese Identities in Lynda Chanwai-Earle’s ‘Ka Shue’/‘Letters Home,’” *Australasian Drama Studies* 55 (2009): 105.

Paw Paw recalls the racial taunting of her son Cyril by recounting the taunts to her audience. “This Parker kid little shit. He say to Cyril, ‘Ching chong China man, eatee doggie in fry pan!’ Punch Cyril! It very hard for Cyril. He not allow fight back. Give us bad name.”³¹ The critique is directed both at Chinese conformity, which she defies by speaking, and at New Zealand bigotry. Her greatest authority for speaking out is her association with the poll tax, which invokes the historically sustained discrimination against the Chinese community:

Guilo 鬼佬 call us “alien.” Say we pay one hundred pound or not come! It take long time save, I sell family gold, just to come!...New Zealand government not charge anyone else fee but Chinese. They let us in New Zealand, say we be good and only stay two year. Until war over. Then we all go home. Back to China...[*angry*]

Why we go back when Japanese everywhere?!³²

Abbie’s recollections of being a pupil at the prestigious Wellington school Marsden Girls speaks the horror of enacting the “model minority” myth.

There I sat, smackbang in the middle of all those white faces. The only coloured one. A five year old...The teachers...they don’t notice me, no-one notices me...just sitting there, trying to be quiet...but my teeth are chattering. [*giggles nervously*] Shh—shh—I have the tremors, sitting trying not to be noticed...Thinking—sh—shh! shh!³³

In its extended meaning, the Chinese title of the play (in romanized Cantonese) means not simply letters but significant family documents, even a family history. This legacy, inherited by Jackie, has been rendered invisible by new patterns of migration. The English title also implicitly refers to the anti-immigration exhortation to “go home.” If New Zealand has been an unwelcoming home, encounters with China by each generation offer little consolation. Paw Paw flees the horrors of wartime China. Abbie experiences Cultural Revolution era China as an uncomprehending tourist (“Slogans, character posters everywhere and I couldn’t understand a word of it”),³⁴ her make-up and permed hair underscoring her dislocation and foreignness. Jackie goes to teach English in China “on a whim,” and, while she is enthused by the heady atmosphere of the Tian’anmen Square demonstrations, she is equally uncomprehending: “Peaceful demonstrations. Nothing to worry about. It started when...what’s-his-name died...

31 *Ibid.*, 25.

32 *Ibid.* See my extended discussion of the treatment of the poll tax in this play in “The Autoethnographic Impulse,” 86–87.

33 Chanwai-Earle, *Ka Shue=Letters Home*, 27–28.

34 *Ibid.*, 13.

Communist Party General something.”³⁵ In her encounter with China, Jackie re-experiences both her mother’s and her grandmother’s story. She has a romantic moment with her boyfriend, Paul, on the banks of the Pearl River in “Kwangchow” (indicative of her family’s ancestral origins) just as Abbie had with her father, but also experiences loss and horror as Paul dies on Tiananmen Square.

What distinguishes *Ka Shue=Letters Home* from the portrayals of Chineseness that had previously coloured the history of New Zealand literature is that it is the first play to be written (and performed) by a person of Chinese descent, reinforcing (for some) the authority of its representation of New Zealand Chinese experience.³⁶ The combination of autobiographical and monodramatic enactment, whereby the solo actor, who is also the author, strategically deploys their racially marked body to realize multiple roles, draws attention to and resists essentialist inscriptions of identity.³⁷ This unsettling of history and prejudice is all the more telling in the light of Chanwai-Earle’s mixed heritage, her own performance foregrounding the body as “the primary site for conceptualizing the tensile doubleness of homogeneity and difference.”³⁸

The play is pioneering in many ways. It foregrounds the issue of the poll tax, about which there was not widespread awareness at the time,³⁹ but its very designation as “the first Chinese New Zealand play” indicates the boundaries against which it pushed. The risk that is taken is to address, critique, and advocate for New Zealand Chinese. Kathy Ooi documents how, while Pākehā reviewers of the play took the author’s authority to do this as a given, certain members of the Chinese community “perceived Chanwai-Earle’s inability to speak Chinese as an ‘irredeemable failure,’ a shortcoming that is sufficiently serious to disqualify her from making a claim on her Chinese heritage

35 *Ibid.*, 9.

36 Lisa Warrington suggests that a further motivation for the development of *Ka Shue=Letters Home* was the cultural appropriation and failure to subvert Asian stereotypes displayed in contemporary New Zealand theatre. See “Brave ‘New World’: Asian Voices in the Theatre of Aotearoa,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 46 (2005): 101.

37 Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 233.

38 Jacqueline Lo, “‘Queer Magic’: Performing Mixed-Race on the Australian Stage,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 16 (2) (2006): 181.

39 In an interview with Paloma Fresno Calleja, Chanwai-Earle describes her own discovery of New Zealand’s poll tax history during the writing of the play. See Paloma Fresno Calleja, “‘Rocking the Boat’: A Conversation with New Zealand Playwright, Lynda Chanwai-Earle,” *Kunapipi* 31 (1) (2009): 139, <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol31/iss1/11139> (accessed 27 July 2014). The official apology made to the descendants of those upon whom the tax was levied by the New Zealand government did not occur until 2002.

despite her Chinese ancestry.⁴⁰ Creative risk-taking lies at the heart of Chanwai-Earle's art: "Artistic Risk is EVERYTHING. Without it, any art would stagnate, get lazy and ultimately atrophy. Gotta keep the muscle between the ears out of its comfort zone, and keep challenging your audiences—positively."⁴¹ Engagement with language is part of this risk-taking strategy. While there is textual confusion between Cantonese and Mandarin in *Ka Shue=Letters Home*,⁴² it is almost imperceptible on the stage. By contrast, the deployment of the two dialects in the play *Foh Sarn=Fire Mountain* plays a significant role.

Exploding the Asian Invasion

Foh Sarn=Fire Mountain was first performed in 2000 at the Herald Theatre in Auckland, and, like *Ka Shue=Letters Home*, it responds to a specific context, including concerns about the proliferation of Asian gangs and resentment against wealthy Asian immigrants.⁴³ It is set in Auckland, and the main protagonists are all students at either Auckland University or AUT. The "Playwright's Note" includes the intention "to offer an insight into the different layers of New Zealand's diverse Asian community" and "the ethics of mainstream television's portrayal of marginalized groups."⁴⁴ The play focuses on a spectrum of Chinese identities which have become part of New Zealand society, clearly seeking to educate the antagonistic discourse that envisions all "Asians" to be the same, and all equally wealthy.⁴⁵ One of the ways the different groups are

40 Kathy Ooi, "Insider Dilemmas: The Politics of Reading and Writing Ethnic Minority Fiction," in *The Dragon and the Taniwha: Māori and Chinese in New Zealand*, ed. Manying Ip (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009), 320. Other responses were more positive, see Calleja, "'Rocking the Boat,'" 138. Lynda Chanwai-Earle speaks a little Cantonese, but no Mandarin.

41 Interview with Renee Liang, "Cultural Storytellers: Lynda Chanwai-Earle," *The Big Idea: Te Aria Nui*, posted 9 July 2010, <http://www.thebigidea.co.nz/news/blogs/talkwrite/2010/jul/71975-cultural-storytellers-lynda-chanwai-earle> (accessed 21 July 2014).

42 See Chung, "The Autoethnographic Impulse," 88–89.

43 It is in part inspired by a television documentary directed by Philip Tse on Triads in New Zealand. See Susan Budd, "Volcano of Cultural Tension," review of *Foh Sarn=Fire Mountain*, by Lynda Chanwai-Earle, *New Zealand Herald*, 23 October 2000, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/news/article.cfm?c_id=6&objectid=156477 (accessed 21 July 2014). See also the interview with Renee Liang: "Saw a documentary on TVNZ about Asian crime in NZ at the time. Got spurred on and wanted to redress many of the issues facing a largely voiceless (at the time) ethnic minority community. 'China'-bashing and racism within NZ media was also an incentive to write *Foh Sarn*. Wanted to expose unsettling issues facing young Asian students, women in particular, my main character gets herself into desperate trouble—these are universal themes that strike at the heart of any community or ethnic group, just a matter of how say it without patronizing the audience or sensationalizing the subject matter" ("Cultural Storytellers").

44 Lynda Chanwai-Earle, *Foh Sarn=Fire Mountain* (Wellington: Women's Play Press, 1998), 7.

45 There is one Korean character, Paul Cho, a kidnap victim, who does not appear on stage.

distinguished is by language. Joseph Tam and his daughter Mei-Ling are from Macau via Hong Kong and latterly Malaysia. They have recently arrived, speak Cantonese, and are not well-off. A qualified engineer whose lack of English prevents him from converting his qualifications, Joseph manages a Chinese grocery store, and business is not good. Alicia Chen is from a wealthy Hong Kong family who has spent considerable time in New Zealand. She speaks Cantonese and fluent English, and her character profile describes her as “almost a banana.”⁴⁶ Aunty Lin and her nephew Chia-Han Lo are from Taiwan, wealthy, and speak Mandarin. Aunty’s English is particularly limited. She has charge of her drop-out nephew who has been sent to New Zealand by his parents in the hope that he can attend university and be straightened out. Throughout, the dialogue combines the respective dialect of the speakers and English, and is assiduously constructed to be comprehensible to a mixed audience. Exchanges between Chia-Han and Mei-Ling, whose tragic love story forms the backbone of the plot,⁴⁷ are the main exception to this pattern; they have to speak in (broken) English because their dialects are mutually incomprehensible. The following exchanges on the night of their first meeting make clear both their differences and those aspects of the migrant experience which they share:

CHIA-HAN: Homesick? (*Mandarin*) Home is where the heart is.

MEI-LING can’t comprehend his Mandarin. She looks puzzled.

CHIA-HAN: (*Mandarin*) Not as many night-clubs. Auckland is a slow city full of stupid ignorant people. (*laughing in English*) I not speak Cantonese. Only little words.

MEI-LING: Same. Not speaking much Mandarin.

CHIA-HAN: (*laughing*) So we talk English.

They both laugh at the irony.

...

CHIA-HAN: No place to go out. Not like home.

MEI-LING: Ah. I know what you mean. Hong Kong, Taiwan...compare to here. (*Laughs*) I miss the food. All my friends back home. I missing them very much.⁴⁸

Through this linguistic complexity is revealed an array of interrelationships. Joseph Tam places heavy restrictions upon Mei-ling, who, encouraged by her friend Alicia, rebels by going to night clubs and having a boyfriend. By contrast, Chia-Han and Alicia act without the weight of parental pressure. Aunty Lin mothers Chia-Han and has very little idea of his gang connections. While she cultivates her image as a “good girl,” Alicia begins as Chia-Han’s girlfriend and is attracted to his world of drugs, gangs, and nightclubs. After Chia-Han’s affections turn to Mei-Ling, in order to

46 Chanwai-Earle, *Foh Sarn=Fire Mountain*, 9. This ubiquitous term denotes an overseas Chinese who is detached from Chinese culture and is typically articulated as “yellow on the outside and white on the inside.”

47 “Definitely inspired by Romeo and Juliet.” *Ibid.*, 7 (“Playwright’s Note”).

48 *Ibid.*, 35.

save her own skin, Alicia betrays Chia-Han's involvement in drug-dealing to the press and the police, falsely implicating Mei-Ling in the process. Mei-Ling is the innocent abroad. She is blind to Chia-Han's gang-related activities, including his involvement in the kidnap of her friend and class-mate Korean Paul Cho. She becomes pregnant to Chia-Han and, unable to face her father, runs away from home. On finally learning the truth about Chia-Han, she hangs herself. We also see glimpses of three broken families. Joseph Tam's wife died on Tiananmen Square when Mei-Ling was very young, and, by the end of the play, he has lost his daughter too; Alicia's parents are remote or absent and seem to have little bearing on her life, except to finance it; Aunt Lin's husband works overseas most of the time, and she lives in her own world of memories and comprehends little of her nephew's life; despairing of Chia-Han's delinquency, his well-intentioned parents send him far away to New Zealand in the vain hope that this will be beyond the reach of gang activity; Paul Cho came alone to New Zealand to study, but returns to his family after being kidnapped for ransom.

This complex reality contrasts markedly with the single-track agenda which is imposed upon the documentary being made by TV journalist Lynette and Māori cameraman Sam throughout the play. Annette feels the pressure from her editors: "Bloody boys upstairs. 'Right' o Annette. Extend the Paul Cho story, lots of juicy stuff, kidnapping, extortion, fantastic! Asian crime syndicates! Of course you must exercise the utmost cultural sensitivity—don't want to be sued."⁴⁹ As the pressure mounts Annette is in danger of losing the story: "Deal is I rework the storyline. (*sardonic*) Real spin-doctor stuff. There's a drug war going on and it's called the 'Asian Invasion.' Two weeks Sam. Just two weeks left."⁵⁰ Working under such conditions affects the two differently. Annette increasingly sees her subjects in terms of the agenda she has been set, fixating in particular on Mei-ling whom she wrongly suspects of being involved in criminal activity. By contrast, Sam, who begins with stereotypes ("cute Asian chicks with loads of money"⁵¹), befriends Mei-Ling and comes to understand not only her innocence but also the greater complexity of the situation: "Alicia. Check out her car? Parents must be loaded. (*shakes his head*) Real attitude. Reckon it's Asians like Alicia who give the others a bad name."⁵² The greater irony is that, in the last scene of the play, Annette wins best documentary at the New Zealand Media Awards, which presses home the critique not only of media representation itself but of society's expectations for such representation.

This tension is deliberately unresolved and indeed resonates on multiple levels throughout the play. It is articulated in an early exchange between Sam and Mei-Ling:

SAM: It's like a wall between us and your people. A wall of secrecy.

MEI-LING: (*offended*) A wall? Us...you? My people? What you mean?

49 *Ibid.*, 25.

50 *Ibid.*, 59.

51 *Ibid.*, 23.

52 *Ibid.*, 37.

SAM: (*persistent*) Asians, you know. Very inscrutable people.

MEI-LING: Inscrutable?

SAM: Sticking to yourselves. You know, secretive.

MEI-LING: Is rubbish. We are not so different. Only because you people so rude! Got no manners. You think is easy to be here? People so rude, thinking we Asian all the same.⁵³

The tension is felt in Sam's increasing frustration about the documentary project. ("What do they want? For us to start a war with the Asian community?!"⁵⁴) It is encapsulated in the volcanic eruptions threatened by the title of the play and articulated by Chia-Han: "This place. Fire mountain. People here not even know. They have... *Foh-sarn* (*struggles for the word*)...volcano, volcano right here, in front of them all and they not even noticing. Crazy."⁵⁵ It is also built into the very structure of the play which effects a severe juxtaposition of ancient Chinese and intensively modern elements. The performance style contains aspects of medieval Chinese drama, including a bare "floating" stage, no scenery, minimal props, and all the actors present throughout the performance.⁵⁶ Traditional Chinese flute music and choreography accompany the appearances of the ghost of Mei-Ling's mother, whom her daughter has been encouraged by her father to associate with the legend of Chang-O, the goddess of the moon, to ease the pain of her death. These surreal elements are juxtaposed against the realist conditions of modern city life, including night clubs, karaoke bars, and up-beat dance music.⁵⁷ The ghost figure is reminiscent of the figure of Lady Li in *Ka Shue=Letters Home*, but its association with values of the ancient past are perplexing. Whereas Lady Li was a concubine entrapped in traditions of self-sacrifice, Mei-Ling's mother, Ming-Fung, was a modern activist who travelled from Hong Kong to Beijing to participate in the Tiananmen Protests and lost her life there. The final moments of the play enact a surreal scene of ghostly reunion between mother and daughter. This has the effect of diluting the impact of the announcement of Annette's winning the best documentary award which constitutes the first half of the final scene. While it underscores the importance of the relationship between parents and children, particularly mother and daughter, in a dramatic landscape populated by students making their way alone, their parents absent, it leaves the audience with a romanticized image of traditional China as the final solace to the play's volcanic tension.

This play displays the now recognizable combination of address, critique, and advocacy in the face of prevailing prejudice, exclusion, and misunderstanding.

53 *Ibid.*, 47.

54 *Ibid.*, 59.

55 *Ibid.*, 51. There is a linguistic error here as the Mandarin for volcano is *huoshan*. The word is recognizably similar to its Cantonese counterpart and thus does not undermine the dramatic import of Mei-Ling's instant understanding of what Chia-Han is saying.

56 *Ibid.*, 7 ("Production Notes").

57 See also Warrington, "Brave 'New World,'"104.

If stereotyped representation of the media is one target of critique, another is the unwillingness of the Asian community to speak out, even in extremis. Paul Cho refuses to identify his kidnappers; despite their antagonism, both Joseph Tam and Auntie Lin stay silent, not wanting any trouble, despite appeals from the police to “the community” to come forward.⁵⁸ Yet, perhaps more unsettling to some is a plot that contains kidnapping, drug-taking, gambling, and unwanted pregnancy. The author is very clear on the accusation of negative stereotyping: “I refuse to sanitize a story just to please a section of the audience because I’m frightened I might offend them. I refuse to do that because that’s not real life.”⁵⁹ In the same interview she elaborates further:

I was challenged by a Chinese student in Witi Ihimaera’s New Zealand literature class at Auckland University (where they were studying my two plays). He asked me, “Don’t you think that you are actually reinforcing the negative stereotype by having all these negative things happen?” My reply: you don’t ask the same thing of a European writer. You never challenge a European writer over the same kind of material. But you will challenge an Asian writer because you want a rosy-coloured view of the world and positive reflection of the Asian communities. In reality bad things happen. There’s a high rate of abortion among young Asian women, just like there’s a whole range of issues around the high prevalence of domestic abuse among Polynesian communities. I understand artistic responsibility but is it racist to create characters of different ethnicities that are flawed and negative? Or are you really being racist when you write sanitized versions of history and reality?⁶⁰

A significant aspect of Lynda Chanwai-Earle’s creative drive as a playwright is to be provocative. Strong reactions mean that the audience is engaging with the issues rather than ignoring them.⁶¹ With its racy and fast-paced plot, contemporary Auckland setting, and its use of both Cantonese and Mandarin, the play was also an attempt to engage the younger generation that she sought to portray on stage.⁶² While, fourteen years later, there is much more sophisticated audience engagement, this is a further aspect of the pioneering work of this irrepressible playwright.

In focusing on characters from Hong Kong and Taiwan, *Foh Sarn=Fire Mountain* reflects dominant Sinophone migration patterns at the time.⁶³ However, engagement

58 Chanwai-Earle, *Foh Sarn=Fire Mountain*, 14.

59 Calleja, ““Rocking the Boat,”” 137.

60 *Ibid.*, 137–38.

61 *Ibid.*, 142.

62 See Budd, “Volcano of Cultural Tension.”

63 In the first “wave” of Asian immigration after the changes to the immigration legislation, the statistically dominant places of origin were Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea. The inclusion in the play of Paul Cho, the Korean kidnap victim who does not appear on stage, is a token acknowledgement of this third group. Sinophone is a neologism used to refer to those from the Chinese-speaking world.

with contemporary China itself continues to be problematized. As Paloma Fresno Calleja has observed, both *Ka Shue=Letters Home* and *Foh Sarn=Fire Mountain* use the events in Tiananmen Square as a point of departure.⁶⁴ Both Chia-Han's and Mei-Ling's families share anxiety about China:

CHIA-HAN: ...My father think about leaving Taipei. Not want problem in case China take-over.

MEI-LING: Same reason why we leave Hong Kong. We get out just before '97 take-over.⁶⁵

Instead the engagement is with myth and legend: the story of Chang-O in *Foh Sarn=Fire Mountain* and the legend of the self-sacrificing loyal imperial servant Jie Zitui in *Ka Shue=Letters Home*. The use of myth is well-worked ground in Asian American literature, particularly issues surrounding its reworking in contemporary contexts which invites "a dialogue with readers, traditional texts and interpretive communities."⁶⁶ In these two plays the myths remain transcendent vessels of traditional Chinese values, but the development of *Monkey*, a children's play that premiered in the 2004 International Festival of the Arts in Wellington, marks a new departure by reworking a Chinese classic into a New Zealand school playground. The heroes are Sam and Pepe, two "new kids on the block, fresh off the boat from mainland China,"⁶⁷ who are bullied at their New Zealand school. The issues of bullying and racism are resolved via a journey into the magical world of the classic Ming-dynasty novel *Journey to the West*, attributed to Wu Cheng'en, about the monk Tripitaka who journeys to India to obtain sacred Buddhist texts in the company of animal and supernatural companions. Via magic, Chinese acrobatics, puppetry, and original music by Gareth Farr, Sam and Pepe transform into Tripitaka and Monkey, and their bullies into Pigsy and Sandy, and by working together they defeat the evil of their own fears and become firm friends. The play toured the country as part of Capital E, National Children's Theatre programme.

Reflecting the increasing presence of migrants from mainland China and some of the problems they encounter/ed in New Zealand's schools, the play's heroes are identifiably mainland Chinese, indeed their language is accorded the respect of being spoken by the two characters on stage.⁶⁸ The question this poses is to what extent the play can transcend the specific cultural context to address bullying and racism more broadly. The contents of the original novel have undergone numerous adaptations in a broad range of media, and stories of "The Monkey King" are not unfamiliar to Western audiences. The acrobatic spectacle achieved, particularly the special training undergone

64 Calleja, "'Rocking the Boat,'" 141.

65 Chanwai-Earle, *Foh Sarn=Fire Mountain*, 32.

66 Rocio G. Davis, "The Self in the Text versus the Self as Text: Asian American Autobiographical Strategies," in *Asian American Literary Studies*, ed. Guiyou Huang (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 44.

67 Lynda Chanwai-Earle, *Monkey*, 2005, unpublished MS, 7 ("Synopsis"); cited with permission.

68 See, for example, *Ibid.*, 14.

by Sonia Yee, who played Monkey, also adds to the appeal of the production. The tension between strategic cultural specificity and appeal to universal themes lingers as a presence in Lynda Chanwai-Earle's dramatic work. The last lines of the "Playwright's Note" to *Ka Shue=Letters Home* express her aspiration to have produced "a universal story about immigration, about the systematic alienation of particular immigrant groups [...], and] a story about immigrant women, struggling to make for themselves a sense of home and identity."⁶⁹ While this aspiration is somewhat eclipsed by the necessarily specific rewriting of the New Zealand story of settlement, it does not negate it. A greater resolution of such tension is achieved in the play *Man in a Suitcase*, which played in both Christchurch and Beijing in 2012.

Strategic Cultural Specificity and Appeal to Universal Themes

Once again Chanwai-Earle breaks new ground with this play. Not only was it commissioned by the Court Theatre in Christchurch, but the project grew into a collaboration with Peking University's Institute of World Theatre and Film, thanks to funding from Creative New Zealand. As such it is the first major international collaborative theatre project between New Zealand and China.⁷⁰ A further significant factor in the original commission is its association with the city of Christchurch. As the author recalls, the Court Theatre "wanted to commission a play that reflected our New Zealand's Pan-Asian community, but particularly the Chinese New Zealand community. The only thing they asked was that it be set in Christchurch so that it would appeal to Christchurch audiences."⁷¹ This setting came to include the major earthquake of February 2011 which occurred during the play's development and has a presence within it.⁷²

True to form, the author takes artistic risks with *Man in a Suitcase*. The plot is controversial, taking as its starting point the murder of Chinese student Wan Biao in Auckland in April 2006, whose partially dismembered body was discovered in a suitcase floating in the Waitamata Harbour.⁷³ The text also contains homosexuality,

69 Chanwai-Earle, *Ka Shue=Letters Home*, 5.

70 Vivienne Plumb, "Lynda Chanwai-Earle," in *Twenty New Zealand Playwrights*, ed. Michelanne Forster and Vivienne Plumb (Wellington: Playmarket, 2013), 146–47. Much of the background in this discussion is taken from this interview.

71 *Ibid.*

72 The Christchurch connections are strong. The Tung family's dining room has a large crack running down one wall and the action is shaken by tremors. Mrs Tung is an ESOL teacher, whose place of work, it is implied, was in the CTV Building. Kauki Paw, Wen Lin, and his tormentors are all her students. The details of the suitcase murder are adjusted to the local geography with the inclusion of a taxi ride to Lyttelton Harbour.

73 Alastair Bull, "Body in Suitcase Murder Trial Begins," *New Zealand Herald*, 3 September 2007, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10461447 (accessed 21 July 2014).

drug use, and very strong language. An additional element to challenge audiences is the amount of dialogue delivered in Mandarin, as well as some in Cantonese, which requires subtitling for most audiences.⁷⁴ Unlike her previous plays, even *Foh Sarn=Fire Mountain*, spoken Chinese is not mediated through English. This alienating effect underscores the play's overarching preoccupation with vulnerability, transience, e/im/migration, and the need to belong, to which all three subplots contribute. The Tungs, a three-generation Chinese New Zealand family of poll tax descendants, have all but lost touch with the hardships of their immigrant history and despise the more recent incomers from mainland China and elsewhere in Asia. Wen Lin, a Chinese only child, an international student in Christchurch, is exploited by everyone as a "cash cow," by his New Zealand homestay family, his Kiwi friend Stuart, and a Chinese drug gang, and proceeds inexorably towards his tragic end. Kauki Paw, a refugee from Burma, relates the unimaginable hardships of her long journey and is overwhelmingly grateful to have found safety in New Zealand. Functioning as the play's narrator and witness to all that unfolds, she is studying to be a journalist and is compelled "to drive the truth home."⁷⁵

The deep implications of the play's central theme are explored through the relationships between parents and children and the construction and unravelling of notions of home. The gulf between Mr and Mrs Tung and their daughter Amy, who dabbles in party drugs and wants to marry a white boy, Stuart (the only non-Chinese character in the play), causes her to leave home after a furious row. The Tungs' quiet conformity and their Christian faith offer little for either understanding or engagement. Wen Lin's doting parents, of modest means, cannot see past their own aspirations for him to either his lies in covering up his gambling habit or the dangers of casting him adrift in a complex world for which he is ill-prepared. The two sets of parents are connected by their mutual bewilderment at the lives and values of their children,⁷⁶ and their dilemma has universal resonance. The failings of these parents contrast with previous generations of parents who have held families together in the face of adversity. Mr Tung's mother, Ah Maa, who has early onset Alzheimer's disease and re-lives in tortured confusion her wartime experiences of the invasion of Hong Kong, attains a fleeting moment of lucidity to prevent Mr Tung from striking Amy (in Cantonese): "We don't strike loved ones son. Too much pain and suffering already. Just walk away son. Take a deep breath. Go on."⁷⁷ Ah Maa's experiences connect to Kauki Paw's account of her own mother's bravery in their flight from Burma: "My wound is festering, flies buzz at blood and tissue. Moh Moh wraps my leg in leaves soaked with her own urine....Moh

74 In Christchurch subtitles were projected onto a screen beside the stage, whilst, at the Haidian Theatre in Beijing, there were running titles on a screen at the base of the stage.

75 Lynda Chanwai-Earle, *Man in a Suitcase*, 2012, unpublished MS, 20; cited with permission.

76 This connection is underscored by the way both couples are played by the same two actors. Incidentally, this creates the added challenge of requiring the actors to speak both Mandarin and Cantonese.

77 *Ibid.*, 53.

Moh carries me for days. She will not give me up. Ever.”⁷⁸ Such juxtapositions make the concerns of middle-class parents seem trivial until Act 2 Scene 2 “Life Line,” where Mr and Mrs Lin plead in vain for their son’s life, unable to provide the ransom demanded by his killers. On multiple levels these relationships are shown to be fundamental to our sense of well-being and belonging, even when all else is lost, their corruption bringing the severest of consequences. As the calligraphic scroll hung over the crack in the Tung’s living room wall reads, “Where my heart is at ease, this is home.”⁷⁹

The play also derives depth from its structure. There is no ambiguity about the fate of Wen Lin, who emerges, bloodied, from his suitcase and articulates his fate in the very first scene of the play. Rather, the suitcase itself becomes the central motif, encapsulating the condition of transience and reflecting on the difficulties of establishing a new life—the suitcase remains present. Life out of a suitcase is the condition of both the international student and the refugee. Wen is trapped in his suitcase for eternity; Ah Maa still has her original camphor-wood chest, which, in her demented state, she still keeps packed, ready to flee; Kauki Paw walks off the stage, jobless, at the end of the play, carrying her own small battered suitcase. These deeper truths are revealed through the mediation of Kauki Paw, aspiring journalist and outsider, whose integrity is in sharp contrast to the duplicitous world of Sam and Annette in *Foh Sarn=Fire Mountain*. Her vocation and her condition are inextricably intertwined:

“One thousand words or less. You must fit your story into this space.” I ask Mrs Tung, “How does one do this? How do we tell our lives to fit this space? No less, no more?” She had no answer. Then I think of suitcases. Lives lived out of such small spaces.”⁸⁰

The collaboration with Peking University’s Institute of World Theatre and Film brought three Chinese actors and a set designer to both the Christchurch and the Beijing seasons. Ironically, the Beijing season of the author’s first adult play to feature Mainland Chinese migrant experience was severely disrupted by the withdrawal of official approval by the Ministry of Culture due to its provocative content.⁸¹ Despite this setback, the reception to both productions was overwhelmingly positive—a rare achievement for a Chanwai-Earle play! Part of its artistic success is the embedded nature of its multiple social critiques, which are less dominant than in her earlier plays. They are, nevertheless, hard-hitting and include: New Zealand Chinese prejudice against all recent migrants; the destructive upbringing of China’s “little emperors”; China’s ungenerous stance towards homosexuality; New Zealand’s failure to offer sufficient support to international students; and continuing racism in New Zealand society.

78 *Ibid.*, 63.

79 *Ibid.*, 7.

80 *Ibid.*, 4.

81 Plumb, “Lynda Chanwai-Earle,” 148.



Figure 1. Ji Zhou as Wen Lin, *Man in a Suitcase*, Beijing, September 2012. Photograph courtesy of Lynda Chanwai-Earle.

This play in particular draws on the author's journalistic experience:

as a journalist working for *Asia Down Under* and also for Radio New Zealand for *Asian Report* as a spoken features producer, I have interviewed many different people, and the characters are composites of all these people with their refugee experiences. I want to acknowledge a wonderful Burmese woman by the name of Kauki-Paw who helped me a lot with the research for the Kauki-Paw character, and she actually allowed me to use her name.⁸²

Between 2001 and 2004 Chanwai-Earle worked as a journalist for the long-running weekly TVNZ magazine series *Asia Down Under*. Its broad output ranged from news items to profiles, arts, sport, business, and travel “for and about the Asian population in New Zealand.”⁸³ Covering the broadest conception of pan-Asian subject matter, the show ghettoized that experience in its Sunday morning slot on TV ONE.⁸⁴

82 *Ibid.*, 149.

83 “Asia Down Under,” NZ On Screen, <http://www.nzonscreen.com/title/asia-downunder-1994/series> (accessed 21 July 2014).

84 As Lynda reminisces, “When I worked at Asia Down Under, one of my colleagues had a lovely way of putting it: ‘Us Asians! First we are marginalized, then we are scrutinized, then we are ghettoized!’” Calleja, “Rocking the Boat,” 139.

However, it offered invaluable access to personalities, experiences, and networks, fuelled her advocacy drive, and at the same time enabled marginalized voices to speak for themselves. From 2011 she became producer of Radio New Zealand National's *Asian Report*, a similar style programme with perhaps a more critical edge. It is described as "a weekly report that highlights Asians in New Zealand, aimed at promoting a greater understanding of Asian New Zealanders."⁸⁵ Once again the "ethnic ghetto" was very widely drawn: "The programme features Asians from Iraq to India to Indonesia, and East Asia too. Local-born and immigrant Asian New Zealanders, Asians on short stays, visiting Asians, and anyone working with Asians in New Zealand."⁸⁶ In 2014, when the show's name was changed to *Voices*, a new, inclusive, multicultural agenda was set: "Formerly Asian Report, Voices is a weekly programme that highlights Asians, Africans, indigenous Americans and more, from Iraq to India to Indonesia and East Asia, spanning Morocco to Madagascar, Belize to Brazil. These are our local-born and immigrant ethnic minority communities, New Zealanders with stories to share."⁸⁷ This work has placed Chanwai-Earle at the forefront of media coverage of the "Asian community," conceived in increasingly broad terms, and latterly of the marginalized voices of multicultural New Zealand.

Conclusion

In the career of Lynda Chanwai-Earle to date, representation of and advocacy for the multiple experiences of being Chinese in New Zealand and coming to terms with China itself have grown increasingly complex as the author brings the multiple strands of advocacy, cultural specificity, universal appeal, and artistic innovation into greater balance. In her journalistic work, her constituency has extended beyond Chineseness and Asianness, such that what began as a strategic alignment with a specific cultural group has metamorphosed into a critical and provocative voice that probes New Zealand's social conscience. Chanwai-Earle is an influential pioneer who continues to break new ground, challenging herself and her audience linguistically, artistically, and critically, as she contributes to the discourse of New Zealand's multiculturalism.

Such culturally inflected occasions have significantly shaped the author's public profile, but they should be understood as part of a repertoire, distinguished by versatility, experimentalism, and advocacy, that has made a significant contribution to the cultural life of New Zealand in a range of genres. The poetry collection *honeypants*, which derives from her work in performance poetry and experimental theatre, was shortlisted for the Penn Book Awards and the New Zealand Book Awards in 1995. The dance theatre work *Alchemy*, which engages Māori mythology, won Best New Work

85 "Asian Report Index," Radio New Zealand National, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/asianreport/library> (accessed 21 July 2014).

86 *Ibid.*

87 "Voices," Radio New Zealand National, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/voices> (accessed 21 July 2014).

in the 1998 Wellington Festival Fringe. The monodrama triptych *Box/Role/Dream* was nominated for Outstanding New Production in the 2000 Chapman Tripp Awards. The role of Bob the emperor penguin, as played in the 2008 play *HEAT* by Brian Hotter, won the Chapman Tripp Award for Actor of the Year. Inspired by the tragic love triangle in Carson McCullers' novella *Ballad of the Sad Café*, the play is set in a research station in Antarctica. It is pioneering both in the role of the penguin, played by a naked actor in body paint who articulates not a single line, and in its being the first off-grid production in New Zealand. Such range and creative versatility are a timely reminder of the reductive narrowness of vision which not only constructs ethnic authorship but requires of it ethnic cultural production. Identity politics plays an important role in the creative life of this author, but it should be understood in its broader context—the creative agility of the Phantom. “I kept dreaming I was the Phantom / and my lover never saw my face.”⁸⁸

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88 Earle, “Lotus Hook,” 34.

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