

Eng, A. (2022). *Our Laundry, Our Town: My Chinese American Life from Flushing to the Downtown Stage and Beyond*. Fordham University Press.

Review by Michelle M. Tokarczyk

As the subtitle of his memoir suggests, Alvin Eng's book chronicles his physical, intellectual, and emotional journey as a Chinese American man. He is the youngest of five sons born to undocumented immigrants whose marriage was arranged. Class is thoroughly entwined with ethnicity in *Our Laundry, Our Town*, and the class markers are unmistakable. The family runs a hand laundry in Flushing (part of Queens, NYC). For years their living quarters are behind this business. Eng realizes that customers who left their clothes at his family's laundry had class privilege. They did not do manual labor for twelve hours a day. He describes the scars on his older siblings' hands caused by rope burns from the twine used to tie packages. (Eventually, tape replaced rope.) His parents and the majority of the post-World War II Chinese immigrants came from the Toisan region of China. In many ways, Toisanese immigrants are similar to Sicilians. Each group is poor, from the south of its nation, and disparaged by more cosmopolitan country members. Immigrants from regions such as these become working-class Americans. Those of us from working-class families cringe when we remember being embarrassed by our parents. When Eng's father comes to his school wearing the baggy worn clothes of a Chinese immigrant laundry man, Eng feels shame for his father and himself.

Many people are unaware of the history of anti-Asian racism in this country, and Eng is careful to supply crucial information. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred Chinese immigration and forbade legal residents from becoming citizens, marrying US citizens, or bringing their wives to the United States. It was not until 1965 that the Immigration and Nationality Act specified the same flat quota for all nations outside the western hemisphere; previously, the only immigrants permitted entry were from northern and western European countries. Eng also notes that during the Cold War many Americans were fearful of China and extended their suspicions to Chinese immigrants. Sadly, this dynamic resurfaced in full force during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From a young age Eng wanted his life to be different from that of his parents, but he did not have a vision of his role in American society and in the Chinese American communities within this society. Today, according to the 2010 census, close to seventy percent of Flushing's population is Asian-American. Yet when Eng was growing up, there were few Asians or other non-white people in this area, which intensified feelings of isolation.

Today Alvin Eng is a performer, playwright, college educator, and political activist. In his memoir he reflects on pop culture providing both a portal into American life and a means of talking back to it. His early love is rock music, but his tastes evolve as he moves from being a listener to a performer. Punk

channeled anger and rebelliousness for many youths in the 1970s. For Eng and his fellow Asian American musicians, this genre rebuts Model Minority stereotypes. He and another punk performer, Ray Wong, fantasize demonstrating to audiences that all Chinese boys are not nice, good at math, and yearning to be doctors, lawyers, or engineers.

After graduating from Queens College Eng works in a dream job as a publicity assistant for a record company. As he matures, he begins to feel a pull toward other forms of work and self-expression. Coming of age during the time of the ‘gorgeous mosaic’ when multiculturalism is flourishing, he continually reframes his American story. Throughout the memoir he refers to the Eng Dynasty, the Empress Mother (his mother), and, less frequently, to the Emperor, his father, showing how he fuses his Chinese heritage with his American life. In time he finds a way to tell stories and satisfy his performative urges. In playwriting he sees elements of what he loved about music—both forms require a dialectic between isolated reflection and community engagement. A theater production is a community effort. It is also a way of giving voice to community and opening up dialogues. Theater can be a kind of activism.

Eng first takes classes at the Writer’s Voice and eventually attends New York University’s Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program. His short pieces are performed in downtown spaces such as La Mama and The Nuyorican Café. During all of this, he is still living with his mother in Flushing. (Eng’s father died when he was fourteen). Because he is the only son still at home, Eng is his mother’s caretaker. He shops, cooks, and attends to her personal hygiene. When she dies, he is forty years old, without a mother and a home. He realizes that most people go through the transitions he is experiencing in their twenties. But his trajectory isn’t slow; it’s just shaped by different ethnic norms.

Eng does not write about young romance, but after his mother’s death he meets Wendy, a woman who shares his love of theater and outlook on life. They live together, and eventually marry. As the book draws to a close, they are conducting a theater workshop in Hong Kong. Here students respond to Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* with dramatizations based on their lives. This play was chosen partially because Wilder, Eng learns, spent part of his childhood in Shanghai and Hong Kong and was influenced by Chinese theater and opera.

The book’s ending represents Alvin Eng building community. He does not choose between East and West, but blends them—as he has throughout the book. Eng is a punk rocker who lives in uncool Flushing with his mother. He does not leave his working-class family to develop his career, and his family does not leave him. His mother cannot speak English, but she and his older brother Herman attend his plays, and his mother particularly offers moral support. Ultimately, Eng’s memoir celebrates the continual evolution of a Chinese American and his American dreams.

Reviewer Bio

Michelle M. Tokarczyk is professor emerita of English at Goucher College. She is a past president of WCSA and one of the founders of the field. Her poetry book *Bronx Migrations* is available from Cherry Castle Publishing.