

# Rewriting the Self-Identity in Diana Son's *Stop Kiss*

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## Abstract

Diana Son orchestrated a love story between two women in *Stop Kiss*, rewriting her self-identity while crossing the boundaries of sex, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. On the one hand, the two heroines in the play are the victims of homophobia due to the tragic violence that befalls them. On the other hand, the tender, innocent and genuine kiss between them, which is delayed to the last scene, represents their courage in facing their difference in the public and rebelling against the old views of a hetero-patriarchal world in which a woman identifies her role in relation to the man that she serves. Regardless of the man-specified responsibilities of staying at home, bearing babies and serving their husbands, the heroines gradually transform their identities from being heterosexuals to the ambiguous lesbians. Instead of focusing on the sex/gender binary in heterosexual dualism, the author reassesses the identities of the heroines based on diversity and plurality. Furthermore, Diana Son apparently sees no value in emphasizing her ethnicity as an Asian American writer, as the label of ethnicity narrows the potential world views of both the writer and the audience. Accordingly, the “kiss” in the play comes as a cataclysmic leap of self-awareness, trust and commitment, not solely as a statement of race and sexuality. It not only exposes the violence, bias and inequality of society, but also surpasses the writer's self-identity as a heterosexual Asian American woman and rewrites her identity within the fulfillment of humanity without superiorities of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality.

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## Key words

Diana Son, *Stop Kiss*, rewrite, self-identity

## Introduction

Since the first performance at Joseph Papp Public Theater of New York City in November 1998, Diana Son's most popular play, *Stop Kiss*,

has been staged repeatedly in different theaters. The play was nominated for several awards, including the Outer Critics Circle Award for outstanding off-Broadway production and a Drama League Award for distinguished production, and won the 1999 Obie Award, the 1999 GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation) “Media Award for Outstanding New York Theatre Production on Broadway or Off-Broadway,” and the New York Times “Best of 1999.” With *Stop Kiss*, Son has received exceptionally warm responses from critics and audiences, and many Americans have come to know the “talented young playwright” who is an Asian American woman.

Diana Son was born in 1965 in Philadelphia and grew up in Dover, Delaware. Since becoming an adult, she has increasingly noticed the gap between the world she lives in and her own personal world. Son once admitted, “I am Korean and that’s inescapable” (Byrne, 2000, p. S09). Owing to her visible identities, Son involves her ethnic, sex and gender identity in her earlier plays *BOY* (1996) and *R. A. W. ('Cause I’m a Woman)* (1997) as she discusses the real situations of Asian American women. In contrast to the plays that address the recurrent theme of her evolving identity as an Asian American woman, *Stop Kiss* goes beyond the stereotype of Asian American female plays as well as subverts social constructions of ethnicity, gender and sexuality in mainstream theater of America.

*Stop Kiss*, whose title suggests a romantic love story between a man and a woman, tells the story of two heterosexual single women – Callie, an insecure traffic reporter in New York City, and Sara, an idealistic schoolteacher from Missouri. The carefully constructed play begins with the first meeting of Sara and Callie in New York City, and short scenes alternate between the past and present, leading to the title kiss at the climactic point. The first kiss between the two heroines according to the chorological time happens off-stage and the brutal beating that comes as its consequence leaves Sara speechless in a wheelchair. The invisible “kiss” and violence undoubtedly make the theme of the play confusing and obscure the identities of the characters, though most critics believe that this is a full-length play about homosexual love and homophobic crime due to the mixed message implied in the connection between the off-stage kiss and brutal beating. It seems that the violence is the justification of the love between two women which should be banned and

punished in the patriarchal world.

As a matter of fact, there are two kisses in the play. The first one is only uncovered in a report and investigation of the criminal case, and the second one, which represents the commitment of love and the confirmation of identity, is delayed to the end of the play. In the first kiss, both of the heroines still feel confused and hesitant about their relationship, thus the off-stage kiss is invisible and makes the lesbian identity ambiguous. When asked the meaning of the title in an interview, Son explained “I mean it to go both ways – a command, as in ‘Stop kissing,’ but also, ‘let’s stop playing games and just kiss.’ Or, ‘Let’s stop pretending we’re not attracted to each other and kiss’” (Tanaka, 1999, p. 27). Son believes that kissing, romanticism or homosexuality is only part of the context, but not the focal point. For her, the play is a love story about two people who experience a “whole web of emotions that they’re alternating giving into and fighting against” (Tanaka, 1999, p. 27). In addition, not wishing to entangle her ethnical identity in the issue, Son purposefully orchestrated a realistic love story between two white women to explore identity in a multicultural world and improved her views in the original performance of 1999.

Social identities are precisely related to meanings associated with various social group memberships, such as ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, and socioeconomic status, and expand the meaning of identity beyond the individual by representing “categorizations of the self into more inclusive social units that depersonalize the self concept” (Brewer, 1999, p. 174). Rather than searching for her own social identities, Son pays close attention to how to present an individual identity which is personal and special. Consequently, the play addresses Son’s interest in the “conflict between how other people identify you and the more complex way you know yourself” (Tanaka, 1999, p. 27). Instead of narrowing the discussion on the social identities of Asian American women from the perspectives of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and etc., in *Stop Kiss* Son rewrites her self-identity from a wide view of love and humanity.

### **Beyond the Identity as a Heterosexual Woman**

*Stop Kiss* is a play with only two female protagonists: Callie and Sara.

From their first meeting, Callie and Sara seem both transfixed and terrified by desire. They find excuses to ditch the boyfriends, hang out at lesbian bars, and crawl into bed together as well as experiencing the hair-trigger paranoia about being seen wearing each other's clothing or being accused of vegetarianism, though Callie lightly tells her boyfriend, George, on the phone "It's not a date, I'm meeting my friend Sara for dinner" (Son, 1999a, p. 48). Although the two women are eager to conceal the true feelings between them, the fact that the mutual attraction seems to go beyond normal friendship is precisely delineated. While they are walking in a West Village park at 4 am, Callie finally gets the courage to kiss Sara after many missed cues and opportunities. They used to date and live with men, but now find themselves falling in love with each other. As the two women hesitantly explore the possibilities of love, the audience begins to dread what is coming and imagines the result of it.

Reviewing the Seattle Repertory production for [talkinbroadway.com](http://talkinbroadway.com), Jonathan Franks wrote: "instead of the big 'themes' that usually make up gay drama, it's actually a disservice to label *Stop Kiss* in that genre, and it's about two people discovering that each has fallen in love, and this time it just happens to be with a woman. There are no dramatic 'I am gay' revelatory monologues. There is no preaching nor is there angst over the discovery, which is incredibly refreshing." (Franks, 2000) Despite the play not meeting the requirements generally set for gay drama due to the lack of a typical homosexual stereotype, the absence of a hidden message about homosexuality, or the miss of repression of unashamed love directed to the person of same gender, the feelings that happen between the two heroines do deconstruct the female identity orientation in the patriarchal society.

In their early relations with men, both women act the roles of being dependent, obedient and domestic. Callie obtained an apartment and job in New York City indirectly from her ex-boyfriend, Tom; while Sara had lived with her parents and ex-boyfriend, Peter, about seven years and never lived away from them before she arrived in New York. Before their meeting, the two women's behaviors are usual and normal because they just act in accordance with men's imaginations about women as depicted in the Biblical Book of Genesis, in which God takes a rib from Adam to make a woman in order to provide a helpmate for Adam, thus

beginning the stereotypes of unequal relations between man and woman. Simone de Beauvoir established the concept of the Self and the Other in her revolutionary book *The Second Sex* to reveal the social inequality of women. This pattern establishes that the dominant power is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being...She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, inessential as opposed to the essential. He is subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other... Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the one without at once setting up the Other over against itself (Beauvoir, 1953, pp. xvi-xvii).

Obviously, this dichotomy between man (the Self) and woman (the Other) implies a complex set of negative characteristics that are attributed to the woman. A woman is subordinate, dependent, and herself a negative entity, while man is dominant, autonomous, and exists as positive force in the universe. Accordingly, women as a group are powerless subordinates of men, as an individual is not an autonomous being (Brown, 1979, p. 13). In the patriarchal world, women have always been defined by men and in relation to men.

In effect, recent explorations into the issue of women's writings, feminism, and realism in literary studies associate "realism and an identity politics" (Dolan, 1988, p. 24) of diversified female subjects. In the self-discovery of the female writers, "search for identity...as a dominant motif, exemplified in the construction of a model of gendered subjectivity combined with a self-conscious appeal to a notion of oppositional community" (Dolan, 1988, p. 16). Although *Stop Kiss* cannot be categorized singularly as "feminist", it addresses women's issues of gender discrimination, sisterhood and lesbians. Therefore, the identities of the female protagonists in this realistic play are bound to be questioned.

In Beauvoir's view, women need to look upon themselves as a positive force, transcending the Other and taking the Self as the central position from which to identify the female human being. Accordingly, woman is relative to herself but not dependent upon an identification related in any way to man. This concept of relating the female existence to other females is known as the woman-identified woman (Natalle, 1985, pp. 59-60). Elizabeth J. Natalle, the radical feminist, further claim-

ed: “Only women can give each other a new sense of self. That identity we have to develop with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men” (Natalle, 1985, p. 60). According to her aggressive anti-patriarchal ideology, the female identity needs women’s own affirmation beyond the simple binary identification as man and woman based on the physiological sex, sexual orientation and social status in the patriarchal world. In the bold action of kissing, Callie and Sara voice their own words with the new identities crossing the specified gender, heterosexuality and social responsibilities. In lieu of being Other, the heroines in the play transfer their roles from physiological sex to ambivalent gender, heterosexuals to ambiguous lesbians, the weak to the strong.

Undoubtedly, *Stop Kiss* was not written by a homosexual as Son is a heterosexual married woman with three children, nor is it really a gay drama which is defined by John M. Clum as “drama by and about lesbians and gay men” (Clum, 2002). However, *Stop Kiss* can be interpreted as a piece on homophobia and the civil rights of gays and lesbians in America beyond Son’s self-identity as a heterosexual woman. In the patriarchal world, the female identity is enforced against women’s own choices. In their search for self-identities, women have the civil rights to confirm them beyond the constraints of the physical, social, and political genders. French philosopher Michel Foucault proposes that what is considered “repression” of sexuality actually constitutes sexuality as a core feature of human identities, and produces a proliferation of discourse on the subject. In *Stop Kiss*, what the heroines realize in the delayed kiss is something their repressed sexuality had hitherto denied them: the long pursued harmony and tranquility of their spiritual worlds, the commitment of their love, and the nature and innocence of human emotions. Son once interpreted: “there are other kinds of identity that aren’t so obvious. I think [Callie and Sara] are surprised by each other. And I think that’s so real. Who ever really goes for what they want?” (Byrne, 2000, p. S09) *Stop Kiss* is about two people falling in love, and that they are of the same sex is secondary. It is really about making a commitment to something, making a decision about what to want in life, and about the universal themes of people desperately trying to find meaning, and their need to figure out how they fit in. Whether the two women’s relationship is heterosexual, homosexual or only sisterhood has no importance; the importance lies in their courage to uncover some

true part of their own repressed identity.

Furthermore, *Stop Kiss* is not a simple story about woman-identified woman. Unlike the happy ending of a symbolic kiss in a traditional romantic story, the tenderness of a first “Kiss” between two women descends to the ugliness of violence. In the play, the kiss on the street is viewed by a man who curses “Fucking dyke! Pussy-eating dykes” (Son, 1999a, p. 59) to both women, and Sara who is beaten heavily becomes a disabled victim of the kiss. Obviously, the violence upstaged in the play represents an attitude of man’s intolerance of any open disobedience of woman. The female identity is confirmed as staying at home, bearing babies and serving their husbands. Thus, the identity of homosexual orientation is prohibited due to the man-specified duty required of the female gender in patriarchal society. Women, regarded as belongings of men, must be heterosexual in the ideology of patriarchy. Women’s sexual feelings have been repressed by the heteropatriarchy, and therefore women must adopt those practices which historically have been male prerogatives and adapt them to their own need (Brewer, 1999, p. 138). In effect, social and legal institutions sustain the dominant pattern of family life, which has at its center the heterosexual relationship of man and woman, rendering lesbians unfit for such the pattern of life (Brewer, 1999, p. 8). When women disobey the pattern, they are bound to be punished and expelled from the mainstream of society as Eve is banished from the Garden of Eden. Although the kiss between the two women cannot be confirmed simply as their lesbian love, it precisely threatens man’s self-centering identity. Monique Wittig explains that the notion “lesbian” is a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature, existing outside of heterosexuality and, therefore, a challenge to patriarchy (Wittig, 1993, p. 105). In her argument, “lesbian” can be a term independent of womanhood in a heterosexist and patriarchal world, always defined in relation to man. Consequently, the lesbian interrupts and contests patriarchal authority (Masequesmay & Metzger, 2009, p. 11).

On the other hand, Hearn believed that the reason for men’s violence to women was that men always regarded the violence as a demonstration of masculinity and sex difference. In the research field of feminist psychoanalysis, Jessica Benjamin pointed out that violence is derived from the development of men’s “rigid ego” and the denial of depend-

ences on women (Hearn, 1998, p. 22). Therefore, the violence is the expression of male identity as well as being the explanation for it. The assault in *Stop Kiss* is not only due to the women's sexuality, but also to their refusal to share their sexuality with the onlooker. The man did not become infuriated and mad when the two heroines kissed, but instead the possibility that his lust could be satisfied by the women disappeared. The violence in the play is not only enacted against the homosexual love in women, but also as a result of the man's fear of losing his physiological and psychological dependence – on heterosexual women.

Nevertheless, the final violence and the homosexual orientation do not restrict the interpretation of female identity in *Stop Kiss*. It seems that the simplest expression of love with a kiss between two women cannot be understood and accepted easily even by the two heroines themselves. After the incident on the street, Callie accepts the investigation of Detective Cole in the hospital examination room of Scene 2.

DETECTIVE COLE: Was he coming on to you, trying to pick you up?

CALLIE: He was just saying stuff, guy stuff, stupid kind of

DETECTIVE COLE: What did you do? (She folds her arms protectively across her stomach as if it is tender.)

CALLIE: I-I wanted to leave

DETECTIVE COLE: Your girlfriend?

CALLIE: My friend-Sara...said...something

DETECTIVE COLE: What.

CALLIE: "Leave us alone" or something.

DETECTIVE COLE: And that's what set him off?

CALLIE: N-n-yeah. Well, she said-but then he said something back and she told him...she said something-upset him.

DETECTIVE COLE: What'd she say?

CALLIE: ...She sai-I think

DETECTIVE COLE: What.

CALLIE: She told him to fuck off. Then he hit her (Son, 1999b, Scene 2).



It is apparent that Detective Cole has discovered that the case does partly have relation to homosexual and homophobia though Callie denies that it is related in any way to their kiss or their being romantically interested in each other. In Scene 8, Callie's boyfriend George rushes into Callie's apartment madly after getting the news report.

GEORGE: You wanna know how fucked-up and worried about you everyone is right now?

CALLIE: No.

GEORGE: You wanna know how I heard?

CALLIE: No.

GEORGE: You wanna know exactly what drink I was making at the moment I heard your name on the goddamn TV?

CALLIE: No, I don't.

GEORGE: Dirty martini. TV's on in the background. I hear about this gay bashing, two women attacked and I sort of pay attention, not really. I'm making this drink and thinking about how I gotta run downstairs and get some more peanuts. And then I feel my ears close and my face gets all hot, like I just swallowed a mouthful of hot peppers. So I turn to the TV but now they're talking about some apartment fire. So, I switch the channel and they're just starting the story. Gay bashing. Woman in a coma. Callie Pax (Son, 1999b, Scene 8).

It is not only George who tries to get the answer from Callie, but Peter, Sara's ex-boyfriend, asks for the truth of the event directly as well.

Peter: I'd like – I'd like you to tell me what happened that night.

Callie: I'm sorry.

Peter: What.

Callie: I can't.

Peter: Why can't you?

Callie: Everything you need to know has been in the papers, on the t.v.—

Peter: I've seen the newspapers and the t.v.

Callie: Then you know every—

Peter: No, I don't know everything. I know what time it happened, I know where, and I know that you were there. And now you're here and Sara is in there. That's the part I want to know about. Why is she in there? (Son, 1999a, pp. 95-96)

Actually, what George and Peter want to know is not only the truth of the violence, but the truth of the “kiss,” as well as the sexual orientation of the two heroines. As the men of the two heroines, George and Peter are upset and angry at the probable homosexual love between the two women that symbolizes the loss of “their” heterosexual women and their male center and authority. Callie definitely knows the public reaction on this event, but she pretends to be calm and ignores all the reports relating to homophobia. She is also confused about the letters from the lesbians that connect Sara's beating to the hate crime in which they are victims. Callie does not fear violence, but the reaction of society. The two women hesitate to form their relationship because they worry what others will think of them. It is hard for them to admit their lesbian inclination and commitment of love for they know the prejudice against the gay women in the society.

However, despite repeated examinations by detective, reports from mass media and worries of families and friends, Callie and Sara do not submit to the social pressure and abandon the choice of their true love and identity, but decide to contest the world of man and express the self-identity of woman in their own words. In Scene 22, encouraged by the nurse who is a woman as well, Callie decides to bathe Sara. She undoes Sara's gown and puts her bra on tenderly. These simple actions full of love not only prove Callie and Sara's decision to fulfill their commitment of love, but also inspire the audience to ponder the significance of naive love and truth of humanity. At the end of the play, Callie puts her arms around Sara's waist and pulls her toward her.

SARA: Do you think we should

CALLIE: I don't want to go anywhere, I don't want to change anything. Let's Just

SARA: OK.

CALLIE: Try again.

They get their heads right, connect lips, put their arms around each other. And kiss.

End of Play (Son, 1999a, Scene 23)

It is significant that the true kiss happens on stage in the last scene to represent the innocence in humanity. Compared with the heterosexual chaos, the kiss between the two women is more natural and sincere. In the play, Callie and her current boyfriend, George, have been off and on for years, as casual sex partners who will probably get married when they get tired of dating and sleeping with others. Reminding themselves of their first kiss, Callie and George find that neither of them can remember it, while Sara finds that she is shackled in a long relation with Peter which is defined by patriarchy as family life. In contrast, the relationship between the two women manifests nothing but the true love that conquers the world. Seattle writer-director Steven Dietz once praised the play: "I admire Diana's elegant writing and her deft touch with a subject that could easily be polemical. She captures a lot of humanity and humor quickly and easily" (Berson, 2000, p. G26). Consequently, Son not only implies the transformation of sexual and gender identity of the heroines, but also reconstructs a new female identity beyond the restrictions to women. Son received the GLAAD Media Award for *Stop Kiss*; thus, she has often been assumed to be a lesbian. She emphasized after she got the prize that she was more interested in how people were alike and not different which could expand to ethnicity, gender, and etc. Son would obviously like to see the day when a kiss between two women is viewed as naturally as a kiss between a man and a woman. Her play is a "Kiss" to build a dream on (Siegel, 2000, p. F2). This "Kiss" is a pursuit of humanity without superiorities of racial, ethnical, sexual and gender identities, as well as a victory of true love.

### Beyond the Identity as an Asian American

Diana Son's parents were from Korea but met in Philadelphia. After her brother Grant was born, they had to leave America for a year because of their visas. When her mother was pregnant again, her parents immediately came back to Philadelphia to make sure Son would be American born. Though her parents wanted Son to grow up to be "very American", Son still believed that she could not escape from her visible identity as an Asian American. When living in New York City, Son is relentlessly asked where she is from because something about her—her face, her speech and her manners proves that she is not a local resident. She said: "I've lived in New York for eleven years but I know no matter how long I end up staying here, I'll never be *from* here" (Son, 1996, p. 28).

As a matter of fact, as a leading global city, New York is always regarded as the center of international commerce, finance, media, culture, art, fashion, research, education, and entertainment. It is not only the symbol of freedom, equality, democracy and hybridity of multi-cultures, but also the representation of success in self-identification. Thus, working, living and merging in the city are the dreams of all young Americans. As a beautiful, modern, and diversified metropolitan area, New York is often regarded as a place where the American dream can be realized. However, the darkness of poverty, inequality, discrimination and moral bankruptcy still characterize the city. *Stop Kiss* is a realistic play that depicts the true nature specifically of New York—brightness and darkness.

In *Stop Kiss*, Callie is not a native of New York, and Sara is a school-teacher newly transplanted from Midwest of America. In spite of living in New York, neither of them can be identified as a New Yorker. It is ridiculous and ironic that Callie helps the people with cars as a traffic reporter every day, but both Callie and Sara are outsiders without cars who live on the margin of New York City, the paradise of the American dream.

CALLIE: ...I don't have a car. No one I care about has a car.  
Who am I helping?

SARA (Gently): People with cars.

CALLIE: Who are they? Why do they live in New York City? Why have a car when you hear every 10 minutes on the radio that the traffic is so bad? (Son, 1999a, p. 80)

The contradiction in the international metropolis unfolds the loneliness, coldness of human relations, the crisis of belief and the absurdity of existence in modern society. In living in this meaningless chaos, the two heroines are only nobodies who are lost in the imaginary Garden of Eden. Actually, the loss of self-identity is not only the problem of the two protagonists, but also of all American dreamers. Diana Son finds that such a feeling derives from the racial and ethnical identity of her Asian roots, and her experience as an outsider in New York relates to American history, experience and spiritual crisis on the other hand. Accordingly, when she wrote the play, Son purposefully left aside her typical Asian ethnicity and employed as characters two white individuals who, as outsiders in New York, the mainstream culture, still failed to find a way to belong to the commonplace of Americans. Similar to the characters in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, the heroines in *Stop Kiss* are victims of social reality and the American dream. New York City is actually a symbol of the "urban jungle" where everybody lives for him/herself contrary to the imagined Garden of Eden and the eternal dream of success. In order to survive in the huge city, people must know how to obey the law of the jungle. Lost in the jungle, what Callie and Sara pursue is true love as a light in the darkness.

No doubt, what Son forwards in *Stop Kiss* is the vibration of the communal experience as rootlessness and homelessness in contemporary American society because she is aware that all the ethnic groups, the Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans, as well as artists on cultural margins, are tormented by the same question of identity. In effect, Son's plays cannot be simply classified in the category of Asian American drama though she often expresses the conflict between Asian culture and American culture. Son concentrates her writings more on human rights and politics from the wide viewpoint of humanity. In writing the play, Son fabricated a love story in which all the characters were White Americans and the setting was New York City to avoid involving her Asian American identity in

the narrative. She interpreted her dilemma in writing such a lesbian bashing story for fear that if she had written a play in which a Korean American woman was beaten by a racist, the audience would relate her play to the ethnic identities of her characters and herself. The message would be wrongly directed to an assumption that the character's Korean American identity had effects on the lesbian story and caused the violence. In order to surpass this limitation, she composed a story without relation to Asian American identity. Son has lived in New York more than one decade and knows this city deeply. She once explained the reason she wrote a story of all the characters being white in an interview, "I want to present this image of New York with the same confidence as people who write about a New York in which everyone is white" (Tanaka, 1999, p. 27). Although Son wrote a story about white characters to avoid the audience centering on her ethnic identity, and to merge with the main culture of America with such a non-ethnic play, it is limiting to believe that telling a white story is to tell a story without ethnicity, for whiteness is an ethnicity as well. Concerned with visual representations, Richard Dyer argued in *White* that "race is not only attributable to people who are not white, nor is imagery of non-white people the only racial imagery" (Dyer, 1997, p. 1). He further criticized the assumption that "white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colors are something else, is endemic to white culture" (Dyer, 1997, p. 2). The editors of *White Trash* also wrote, "Whiteness is an oppressive ideological construct that promotes and maintains social inequalities, causing great material and psychological harm to both people of color and whites" (Wray & Newitz, 1997, p. 3). Therefore, if a story is told from a white perspective, it entails a set of white ideologies and assumptions that a white American perspective is a universal one.

For this reason, Son has continuously been reinterpreting and reconstructing the self-identity in the productions of *Stop Kiss* on the basis of its text. In the first production of *Stop Kiss*, Son insisted that African American actor Kevin Carroll be cast as George, Callie's boyfriend, and that the role of Sara be played by Sandra Oh, a Korean Canadian actor at the Public Theater. Son explained: "What's important to me is that actors of color get cast in this play, period" (Tanaka, 1999, p. 27). By making the race of the characters in the play nonspecific, Son allowed

the play to be accessible to artists from different backgrounds in the later productions. She further emphasized: "The characters I write are not race-specific, because I've always wanted the meaning of my plays to be universally accessible and the casting to be open, so that actors of many races could be considered for all the roles" (Greene, 2006, p. 117). However, it is still worth questioning why Son chose a Korean Canadian to act Sara given her earlier concern that writing the character as a Korean American would lead audiences to assume that the assault was racially motivated. In the 1999 production, Callie is a radio traffic reporter ironically lacking in direction and her aimless life is turned upside down when she meets Sara (Sandra Oh), a schoolteacher who seems to know exactly what she wants. Sara (Sandra Oh) presents more courage than Callie in the process of their relationship, and it is she who refuses the man's sexual lust openly. Hence, Sara (Sandra Oh) is the writer's reconstruction of this female character that is willing to signify her other personal identities instead of her visible gender and ethnicity. Although the various voices are different perspectives that truly represent the melting pot that is America, it is obvious that the failure of self-identification is the eternal theme about the American dream. Son has discovered the common complex of the nation, and integrated the issue of self-identity into American multi-cultures, crossing the boundary of her ethnical identity as an Asian American.

Furthermore, Son sees no value in identifying the ethnicity of a writer or to highlight that *Stop Kiss* is an Asian American play. If so, it would only narrow the way the play looks at the world. Even though she regards *Stop Kiss* as a play about bias among other things, and its central event is one in which somebody is called out and punished for being different, Son has to admit the possibility of this theme coming from her experience as an Asian American person. However, she sublimates the emotions of some minority individuals to the spirits of a nation.

As a contemporary Asian American playwright, Diana Son is conscious of a changing trend among writers.

"I've noticed that younger Asian American writers do not write about Asian Themes. In the sixties and seventies, there were all these ethnic-branded theatre groups ...But I think theater artists have to grow away from that. Our generation falls in between: there are those who choose to do that and those of us who find it unnatural" (Greene,

2006, pp. 123-124).

Actually, it was not until the 1970s that Asian American literature was recognized as American literature, though Asian-Americans had been here for seven generations (Chin, 1974, p. ix). Nevertheless, it did not mean the Asian-Americans had got rid of the dilemma and the rejection by both Asia and White America proved “we were neither one nor the other, nor were we half and half or more one than the other” (Chin, 1974, p. viii). Frank Chin argued that the identity of an Asian American was that of a “linguistic orphan” (Chin, 1981, p. xvii). He claimed in an interview:

For us American-born, both the Asian languages and the English language are foreign. We are a people without a native tongue. To whites, we’re all foreigners, still learning English (Chin, 1976, p. 56).

Accordingly, Asian American writers keep questing for an authentic self-identity. In the self-identification, the ethnical identity is always the focus of discussion in Asian American literature. Nowadays, Asian American writers have emphasized their artistic freedom as individuals who do not necessarily identify with or stand for an imagined community, be it Asian American or otherwise. In other words, many Asian American authors, tired of being weighed down with the burden of representation and representativeness, have stopped favoring the communal (being the spokesperson for a certain community) and have instead turned to the individual. Thus, current Asian American literary works should be regarded simply as “world literature” written by individual authors beyond boundaries and constraints, and beyond expectations on the part of the readers. Apparently, Asian American theater has started moving away from the purely naturalized (American white) and national (Asian American) concerns, “while at the same time shifting towards an increasingly transnational (Asian diasporic) perspectives” (Simal & Marino, 2004, p. 13), which indicate the free choices of the individual identity relating to both Asian and American cultures or others.

No doubt, Asian American writers still hope to induce a prefiguration of the different cultural regulating code so that their works can be viewed in a way that is more universalized and comprehensive. Loy Arcenas, both director and set designer for the San Francisco production of *Stop Kiss* in 2001 commented: “There is really no Asian American identity...The Asian experience is different for each group...



Many of the newer generation of Asian American writers do not address race per se; it's involved but it's not the main theme" ("Stop Kiss," 2001). Son emphasized as well: "I don't want to be thought of as writing Asian American plays" (Greene, 2006, p. 118). Despite her occasional encounters with racism, Son regards herself as an "insider" of the mainstream culture. And like other U.S.-born Asian Americans, she acts "Asian" at some times and "American" at other times, with no interaction between the roles (Dhingra, 2007, p. 4). Hence, Son questions the label "Asian American playwright" and finds it limiting. She is more interested in telling stories about people who come to New York City from small towns to "reinvent themselves as very different from the image that people had of them in their small towns" (Eng, 1999, p. 418). Though to some extent, the play stems from her personal experience, "her Korean American face is not a requirement in telling them" (Liu, 2002, p. 324). Son believes that the self-identification could be acquired by oneself beyond the boundary of race and ethnicity, but not as a designation from others.

### Conclusion

As an Asian American female writer, Diana Son cannot escape from her multi-identities including race, ethnicity, sex, gender and sexuality in her writing. However, similar to other young Asian American playwrights, she rewrites her self-identity in *Stop Kiss* to free herself from the complex condition of cross-cultural background, and to be acknowledged by American main culture. Simultaneously, Son tries to deconstruct the stereotype of self-identity and explores a new one in the discussion of humanity, removing the binary opposition between men and women, homosexuality and heterosexuality, Asian cultures and American cultures. Obviously, the current panorama of Asian American literature cannot be read as working within the constraints of this (or any other) binary hierarchy, but rather indulging in a dynamic dialectics: both the coexistence of communal and individual modes and the "hatching" of new, hybrid forms (Simal & Marino, 2004, p. 15).

Donna Haraway argued that while early second-wave feminists criticized the nature/culture dualism, they hesitated to extend their criticism fully to the derivative sex/gender distinction (Haraway, 1991, p. 134);

thus the research of human identity relied on heterosexual dualism, or, in other words, male and female got their gender identities on the basis of their biological and physiological differences: sex. Recently, the deconstruction of sex/gender binary has been the core of identity studies. The post-structural ideas of Michel Foucault have influenced many areas, including feminism, queer theory, and antiracist and postcolonial studies, promoting the reassessment of female identity, gender, patriarchy, femininity and women's experience, emphasizing diversity and plurality. Poststructuralists have focused on the inextricable links between power and knowledge and on how individuals are constituted as subjects and given unified identities (Petersen, 2003, p. 55). Therefore, in the research of identity based on ideologies, whiteness, sexuality, sex and gender "are no longer seen as intrinsic and fixed aspects of the person, but rather understood as discursive constructions or inventions" (Petersen, 2003, p. 55). As physiological women, Callie and Sara's gender identities have been affirmed before their self-choices in the context of patriarchal society. When they behave in a way that contradicts these pre-affirmed identities, the violence that happens to them not only represents the opposition of man, but also "the oppositional views of gender between psychological reductionism and sociological reductionism" (Epstein, 1987, pp. 28-29). The kiss between the two heroines and their final choice, non-confirming to their physiological identity, are challenges against the stereotype of female identity due to their being emotionally and economically, physically and psychologically independent. This is especially evident in the gay and lesbian literature, where there is a familiar tension between a view that identity is something that is always present (but has been repressed) and that which has never been socially permitted (but remains to be created or achieved), and this tension has often led to the reduction of the political to the personal, and the limitation of political activity to self-discovery and personal transformation (Fuss, 1989, pp. 99-101). Although the theme of homosexual love is not explicitly confirmed in the text, Son brings stable identities based on stereotypes of sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and economical status in the stereotype under suspicion, thus subverting the hetero-patriarchal orientation world.

As a matter of fact, Son tries to reconstruct her self-identity as an Asian American woman in *Stop Kiss* from the other pole of her identities

and the common consensus of humanity. As self-identity represents itself differently according to free and personal choice, it is difficult to classify any individual's identity into any sole community, and meaningless to label a person according to visible characteristics. Therefore, Diana Son rejects giving a fixed and unchangeable answer to the kiss which could have happened as easily between a man and a woman. The "kiss" in the play comes as a cataclysmic leap of self-awareness, trust and commitment, not solely as a marker of race and sexuality. *Stop Kiss* crosses the specifics of a gay romance and embraces the broader theme of love and humanity. Rather than using incidents of gay bashing to raise the issue of homophobia and prejudice based on sexual orientation into public light, this play presents themes that transcend the homosexual kiss and the gay hate violence while at the same time speaking to anyone who wonders whether he/she should stop and grab hold of life and love. Obviously, the critique of identity in the play does not mean "one should disavow identity, but rather that one needs to be constantly aware of the fictitious character of identity and of the dangers of imposing an identity" (Petersen, 2003, p. 62). Within the social issues of violence, prejudice, ethnical discrimination, homosexuality, and female rights, Son rewrites self-identity beyond the boundaries of sex, gender, sexuality and ethnicity with a "Kiss" of humanity.

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