
The Global White Snake as Digital Activist Project

◎ Liang Luo

University of Kentucky

Abstract: There is a long oral tradition and written record for the legend of the White Snake. As a woman, her “original sin” is being a snake. She is a snake who has cultivated herself for hundreds, if not thousands, of years to attain the form of a beautiful woman. Living as a resident “alien” (*yilei*) in the “Human Realm” (*renjian*), the White Snake has always been treated with suspicion, fear, exclusion, and violent suppression/exorcism. The White Snake is an immigrant to the human world, whose serpentine identity made her a “resident alien,” the legal category given to immigrants in the United States before they receive their “Green Card” and become a “permanent resident.” The implication of being a snake woman in the human world took on new meanings when the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the existing xenophobia, fear, and suspicion toward minority populations in the contemporary United States and throughout the world. Inspired by the Chinese White Snake legend, the three Anglophone opera, film, and stage projects from Cerise Lim Jacobs, Indrani Pal-Chaudhuri, and Mary Zimmerman, energetically engage with issues relevant to minority activism in the United States and more broadly, through digital media and digital platforms.

Keywords: global, anglophone, White Snake, minority representation, digital activism, United States

CLC: I207.3 **Document Code:** A **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2021)01-0109-16

When I started researching a Chinese legend from hundreds of years ago and attempted to map out its modern and contemporary travels in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and English-speaking worlds, I could not have imagined myself writing about minority activism and responses to COVID-19 in the contemporary United States.¹ There is a long oral tradition and written record of the Chinese legend of the White Snake—a snake who cultivated herself for hundreds, if not thousands, of years to attain the form of a beautiful woman. As a woman, her “original sin” is being a snake. Living as a resident “alien” (*yilei* 异类) in the “Human Realm” (*renjian* 人间), the White Snake has always been treated with suspicion, fear, exclusion, and violent suppression or exorcism. The White Snake is an immigrant to the human world, whose serpentine identity makes her a “resident alien,” the legal category given to immigrants in the United States before receiving their “Green Card” to become a “permanent resident.” The implications of being a snake woman in the human world took on new meanings when the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the existing xenophobia, fear, and suspicion toward minority populations, initially African Americans and later Asian and Latino Americans in the United States, and throughout the world.

What was it about the Chinese legend that inspired Anglophone producers to use it as an impetus for social change and minority activism in the digital world? Although some earlier Chinese versions portray the White Snake as polluting the bodies of the men with whom she is sexually entangled or as eating the heart of her male sexual slaves, the image of the White Snake was increasingly humanized and beautified later in the tradition. In one of the more developed and well-known versions from the 17th century, the White Snake (Baishe 白蛇) goes to the beautiful West Lake, located in what was called “Heaven on Earth,” the city of Hangzhou, and meets a handsome young man with the name of Xu Xuan (许宣; better known as Xu Xian 许仙). They marry the next day and enjoy their sexual life as a couple. However, as widely interpreted by scholars, being from an alien species and enjoying human love and happiness, the White Snake was fated to be exorcised by the Buddhist abbot Fahai (法海). The abbot represents the need to maintain the status quo and enforce the boundaries between the “human” and the “nonhuman,” “us” and “them,” even as the image of the snake woman gradually metamorphoses from that of a demoness to a goddess.

Even this sketchy outline demonstrates the range of interpretative possibilities the White Snake legend has to offer and their power of minority representation, especially regarding the image of the snake woman (or snake *women*, as with White Snake’s companion/sister/maid, Green Snake). Like the *Odyssey*, the White Snake legend is not only an enchanting tale full of adventure, monsters, and romance; it is also profoundly about human nature and human relationships. In its modern iterations, it argues strongly for tolerance of the strange, the uncanny, and for compassion for human frailty. It drives home the point that love and empathy are without boundary and are transformative.

A number of Anglophone digital projects inspired by the White Snake legend engage powerfully with issues relevant to minority rights and environmental justice in the United States and across the globe. I will discuss here the digital operas from White Snake Projects, an activist opera company based in Boston; the digital activism of fashion photographer Indrani Pal-Chaudhuri in her short film *Legend of Lady White Snake*; and the global reach of Mary Zimmerman’s stage play *The White Snake* and its digital afterlives. Through Anglophone (and Sinophone) digital media and digital platforms, these activist projects enrich our understanding of what can be seen as a global White Snake digital archive, one that is multivalent, constantly regenerating, contemplative, and empowering.

White Snake Projects: An Asian American Activist Opera Company

I first encountered Cerise Lim Jacobs and what came to be the White Snake Projects through *Madame White Snake*, which premiered in Boston in 2010 and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in music in 2011. Conceived by Jacobs, a Singaporean Chinese American, the opera was composed by the Chinese American composer Zhou Long at Jacobs’s invitation, based on an English libretto written by Jacobs herself. The opera complicates the gender and racial dynamics of the White Snake legend by granting Green Snake (White Snake’s sister/maid, a supporting character in the legend) the ultimate power of discourse as narrator of White Snake’s story. In a further transformation of the original tale, the production enlists a leading male soprano to sing and perform the role of Green Snake. There are rich implications of this diasporic interpretation of the Chinese legend in a Western operatic production in English. For the audience in Boston and other locales outside the Chinese-speaking worlds, the Chinese legend itself serves as a kind of exotic environment in Zhou Long’s opera, while the Western

operatic form and its characterizations reinforce such exoticism for the audience at the Beijing Music Festival and Hong Kong Arts Festival when the opera was “reimported” back to China, as they may very well already be familiar with the legend in Chinese.

I had the opportunity to interview Cerise Lim Jacobs in July 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic and after attending a number of online events organized and digitally streamed by White Snake Projects.² I had long been fascinated by Jacobs’s accounts of her childhood, growing up in a traditional Chinese family in colonial Singapore, where she watched Cantonese opera versions of the White Snake legend (“The Snake Charmer’s Birthday Gift” web). In a published interview in Chinese, Jacobs also mentions the Shaw Brothers’s 1962 Mandarin-language opera film and its leading actress Lin Dai as major influences. Although she loved the film as a child, when writing the libretto for *Madame White Snake*, she was determined to remold the “fragile” and “hopeless” characterizations of the snake women into strong, antiauthoritarian female characters (Fang 54-55).

In my interview with her, Jacobs specifically mentioned the festive and ritualistic atmosphere of watching Wayang-style outdoor White Snake performances as a child. She recalled that the style of the performances was similar to Wayang puppet theatre, and the language of the performances might be Cantonese or Teochew (Chaozhou) but never Mandarin, highlighting the minority identity of her upbringing, even within the Chinese cultural universe. She again fondly remembered endlessly watching *Madam White Snake*, the Shaw Brothers’s film starring Lin Dai, on the black and white TV at her grandparents’ house in her early teens. As an adult, the film transitioned from “her favorite” to “the worst” as she watched it again while researching for the *Madame White Snake* opera in 2010. The 1962 film’s conservatism and prescription of traditional feminine virtues clashed harshly with her conviction on the empowering possibilities of the White Snake image and its potential for minority expressions at our contemporary moment in the United States context.

The Anglophone *Madame White Snake* opera opens with a half-woman, half-snake figure in the debris of a great flood and ends with another great flood, initiated by another snake woman, with its destruction of human lives. Western audiences would likely find these apocalyptic scenes readily identifiable, drawing parallels from such cultural resources as the Bible. As the conflict between Madame White Snake and Abbot Fahai over the mortal Xu Xian intensifies, the opera invokes other universal dilemmas, asking the audience to choose between siding with righteousness and truth (Abbot Fahai) or love and freedom (White Snake). The war between the good values leads to evil, as the flood devours the onlookers, many of them innocent children, who are often casualties of war in real life.

Before tragedy strikes, however, the opera fosters an ambience of love, resonating with a key motif in American missionary Samuel I. Woodbridge’s 1896 English rendition of the White Snake legend.³ It likewise resonates with other 20th-century multilocational and multilingual retellings of the legend in an inter-Asian context, expressed most intensively in Japanese and Korean film adaptations from the 1950s to the 1970s (Luo chap. 4-5). Most importantly, the libretto of the opera compares the snake women’s immortality with the mortal man’s “thirty long years of human experience,” observing that the snake women are “only just exploring what it is to be human.” In fact, Madame White Snake insists forcefully on her own righteousness: “I am a woman, and I love this man. How can this be wrong?” (Zhou and Jacobs 86-73). Learning to love, to be loved, and to die is precisely her destiny, her desire, and what gives meaning to her existence, as is clear when she exclaims, “Love transforms the lowliest of us all. I am lifted by its potent power. I surrender to its thrall” (99-101).

It is helpful to consider the multicultural and multilingual background of the creators of the *Madame White Snake* opera in a broad inter-Asian context historically, as well as through their shared minority perspectives in their American context at our present moment. Jacobs forcefully articulates the attraction of the White Snake legend, whole-heartedly identifying with the White Snake as “a complete outsider” who, uprooted from her cultural background, had to struggle as “a woman, a ‘yellow-skinned’ minority, an immigrant from outside” in a new environment for survival and success (Fang 56). Following the critical success of the *Madame White Snake* opera, Jacobs went on to establish an IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access) opera foundation and the White Snake Projects opera company, with the express purpose of helping minority composers and librettists break into mainstream American venues (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

Such an activist project was aided increasingly by digital technology. The *Madame White Snake* opera production traveled from Boston to Beijing in 2010, then to Taiwan and back to Boston, revamping its minimalistic staging from 2010 and metamorphosing into a highly elaborate digital project in 2016, as part of the *Ouroboros Trilogy* in Boston before moving on to Hong Kong in 2019. The 2016 Boston performance already featured digital backgrounds, including flower trees and starry night, representing the White Snake as animated and three-dimensional with intensified digital qualities.



Fig. 1 Susannah Biller as White Snake, Peter Tantsits as Xu Xian, and Michael Maniaci as Xiao Qing (left to right) in the 2016 performance of *Madame White Snake*, Emerson Cutler Majestic Theatre, Boston. Photo credit: James Matthew Daniel.



Fig. 2. The three-dimensional White Snake in the 2016 performance of *Madame White Snake*, Emerson Cutler Majestic Theatre, Boston. Photo credit: James Matthew Daniel.

The Evolving Global White Snake Digital Archive

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a unique challenge to performance companies. White Snake Projects confronted these challenges head-on and used Jacobs’s vision of minority activism as the direction in which online events have been initiated and organized. A series of events organized by the Boston-based company forms a well-conceived online exhibition to become part of an evolving “global White Snake digital archive,” encompassing a wide range of avant-gardist projects inspired by the Chinese legend. These projects include a sequence of community-based programs responding to issues relevant to immigration, colonization, and the pandemic conditions, forming the Sing Out Strong (SOS) series, as well as a fully-fledged digital opera “Alice in the Pandemic,” centering on the essential workers in the current pandemic.

The Sing Out Strong Series

During the past year of my self-imposed semi-quarantine in Lexington, Kentucky, I had the opportunity to participate in online performance and educational events organized by White Snake Projects. In late May 2020, I was part of an active online audience for “Sing Out Strong: Decolonized Voices,” one of the events in White Snake Projects’ “Sing Out Strong” series, which live-streamed short operatic performances based on poems written by immigrant high school students in the Boston area. Hearing librettos adapted from poems written by immigrant children writing in their second or third language, English, was a truly empowering experience for all involved: the immigrant

composers, the minority singers, the sound engineers, the whole cast and crew, and the audience members.

The Sing Out Strong series was launched in 2019 as a multi-year community-based project to commission composers and writers to create songs based on themes relevant to White Snake Projects' main-stage operas. The songs are performed in a series of concerts in different Boston area communities. A selection of songs is then staged as a "curtain-raiser" to the company's main-stage opera. The first in the SOS series was "SOS: Immigrant Voices," and included composers and writers from Peru, Latvia, India, Mainland China, Taiwan, Mexico, Haiti, Brazil, Vietnam, and the Dominican Republic. They came from diverse socio-economic, age, gender, and racial backgrounds. Some have day jobs as teachers, professors, counselors; some are musicians; others are high school students, retirees, cooks, waiters, homemakers, and parents. But, as articulated by White Snake Projects, "all are activists who believe that music and storytelling have the power to change lives."⁴ Because it is local and site-specific, this fascinating series had not entered my vision before the pandemic. It was only when White Snake Projects started to live stream their events and digital productions during the pandemic that I was introduced to the second installment of the series, "SOS: Decolonized Voices," in May 2020.

In early August 2020, White Snake Projects featured Dreamers, or DACA recipients,⁵ in a related online event, "Immigration, Dreaming of a Real Future." The project grew out of White Snake Projects' response to President Trump's proposal to phase out DACA to become the fully-fledged opera *I Am a Dreamer Who No Longer Dreams*, premiering in Boston in September 2019 before the pandemic. Created by Jacobs, composed by Mexican-born composer Jorge Sosa, and based on Jacobs's libretto, the opera features two immigrant women, Rosa, from Mexico, and Singa, an ethnic Chinese woman from Indonesia. Both came to the United States at age ten but then led divergent lives: Rosa is an undocumented immigrant and Singa has a Green Card, something that makes a world of difference for their lives. Singa meets Rosa as her public defense lawyer when Rosa was jailed for organizing a "March for Dreams" and is appalled at the way Rosa and other immigrants like her had to live in such fear every day. She realized her socio-economic class enabled her family to purchase education, lawyers, and a Green Card. With different struggles and shared dreams, they both become part of the American journey.⁶

On Saturday, 19 December 2020, I participated in yet another important event from White Snake Projects' SOS series: "Sing Out Strong: Essential Voices." To understand this third iteration of the SOS series, we need to go back one month in time, to the world premiere of White Snake Projects' first digital live opera, "Alice in the Pandemic." Both "Sing Out Strong: Essential Voices" and "Alice in the Pandemic" feature librettos based on interviews of essential workers who are doing their jobs as nurses, doctors, grocers, postal workers, among many others. By amplifying their voices and recognizing their struggles, this series of performances broadcast through digital platforms showcases the audacity of and the possibilities created by this Asian American activist opera company.

Alice in the Pandemic

In “Alice in the Pandemic,” a digital opera that premiered worldwide via Crowdcast in late October 2020, Cerise Lim Jacobs takes a White Snake-inspired, woman-centered approach to interrogate minority identities and explore pressing social issues confronting the United States and the world in the age of COVID-19, such as systematic racism, mental health crisis, and the opioid epidemic. The opera was again composed by Jorge Sosa and based on Jacobs’s libretto, which was largely based on interviews with essential workers, according to the live discussion after the online performance. The opera features Alice, a nurse working at the frontlines of the pandemic, expressively played by lyricospinto soprano Carami Hilaire, who must navigate the insane world of the COVID-19 pandemic and locate her mother currently hospitalized at “The Fair,” according to a cryptic message she received by phone from a paramedic.

As an ER nurse, Alice already struggles physically and mentally in the world of the COVID-19 pandemic. As she attempts to physically locate her dying mother and to psychologically reconcile with her, like the Alice in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, she takes a deep dive down the rabbit hole into the elasticity of time. Alice has always blamed her mother for chasing away her father, only now she discovered that her father was an addict and her mother caught her playing with his pills and had to leave him. Alice follows Mr. White Rabbit, sung beautifully by countertenor Daniel Moody, to deliver a dozen rabbit babies in the rabbit hole on her way in search of her mother and “The Fair.” She suffers a panic attack and is burdened with guilt. She agonizes over the fact that her mother, a grocery store worker, does not have personal protective equipment. Mezzo-soprano Eve Gigliotti charmingly delivers the roles of Mother, Grandma, and the three incarnations of Alice’s mother (Ice Creature, Witch, and Queen of Hearts) that live in her imagination. The Ice Creature and Witch soon disappear, and the Queen tells her the truth about her father’s addiction and why her mother left him⁷ (see Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).



Fig. 3. Alice meets Mr. Rabbit in the Subway on her way to search for her mother in the 2020 digital opera *Alice in the Pandemic* from White Snake Projects. Art by Anna Campbell.



Fig. 4. Alice was led to “The Fair” in search of her mother in the 2020 digital opera *Alice in the Pandemic* from White Snake Projects. Art by Anna Campbell.

Using CGI animation, real-time facial motion capture, and a plug-in that enables synchronous singing from remote singers, the video game-like animation features 3D avatars of the three main characters (Alice, Rabbit, Mother) who lip sync in real time to live performances from the singers, each singing remotely from the safety of their own locations. In Jacobs’s words, “*Alice in the Pandemic*” is “a cathartic response to the separation, dislocation, and isolation we all feel today and an acknowledgement of the sacrifice our medical heroes make every day as they put their mission to save lives before themselves” (“The Inspiration” web).

A short video trailer of “*Alice in the Pandemic*” on White Snake Projects’ official website provides a glimpse into the digital art designs and the revolutionary qualities of this endeavor to revitalize opera as a means for artistic expression and social change under the pandemic. It opens with dramatic music accompanying the title art, “*Alice in the Pandemic, A Digital Opera in One Act,*” followed by a quick zoom in to a colorfully lit merry-go-around at the center of a fairground at night, with Jacobs narrating: “I am trying to make a new kind of art pushing the boundaries of technical innovation to the limits” (“*Alice in the Pandemic*” web). As she explains, White Snake Projects, like most other performance companies, was devastated at the beginning of the pandemic. However, Jacobs also realized that this was an opportunity to move opera in a different direction, becoming the starting point for a whole season of digital operas that began with the world premiere of “*Alice in the Pandemic*” in October 2020. The video trailer continues with a short interview of composer Jorge Sosa, who describes a scene where Alice, struggling to find the hospital where her mother was hospitalized, cannot make sense of any of the street addresses. “What’s wrong with the world?” Alice asks, and for Sosa, this realization speaks to the pandemic condition we are in; for that, he really wanted to leave “a musical testament of this moment in time” (web). Recently, “*Alice in the Pandemic*” has been made accessible for on-demand rental on the digital platform Vimeo. This version was available from 12

to 28 February 2021, during the Lunar New Year (or Spring Festival) celebrations. The digital rental price was set at \$20.21 to signify the coming of a new year with joy, good health, and prosperity. For essential workers, it was free.

The lasting impact of White Snake Projects' pioneering efforts at producing and delivering live digital performances is yet to be seen. Judging by what was envisioned in the detailed program book of "Alice in the Pandemic," at least one digital opera will be streamed live even when in-person performances will be possible again, in future seasons. "The internet is a great leveler," the program book declares, "It expands accessibility, inclusion, representation, and equity, values that embody White Snake's mission. People who don't want to come to opera because they can't get there, feel uncomfortable entering an elitist 'white bastion,' can't afford a babysitter or a ticket—whatever the reason—now have some of the barriers removed. We cannot walk back from this. We are excited to welcome opera devotees and first timers alike, to experience a new kind of live opera" ("Alice in the Pandemic' Program Book" web). This pioneering endeavor will be archived and documented as, according to White Snake Projects, "Alice in the Pandemic" has been acquired by the Library of Congress for its Performing Arts COVID-19 Response Collection ("Back by Popular Demand" web).

The December 2020 performance event of "Sing Out Strong: Essential Voices" was thus a continuation and more direct documentation of the sentiments expressed in "Alice in the Pandemic," in that the librettos the short opera pieces were based on are all from interviews of essential workers in the pandemic. During my participant observation of the SOS digital opera series and main-stage productions from the White Snake Projects, their pedagogical function of outreach to the community and articulating minority voices and identities became increasingly clear. These projects are designed with community engagement in mind, and such engagement energizes the activists and pushes them to create new artworks for the community. On the official website of White Snake Projects, "Activism" is a prominent section, under which one can find subsections such as "Activist Think Tank," "Ticket Access Program," and "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion," hoping to "bear witness through making opera; to transmute pain into catharsis," and to providing free access to all their programs to those who cannot afford it, anywhere in the world ("A Call to Action" web).

Poetics of the Archive: The Digital Art of Social Change

Like Cerise Lim Jacobs, other immigrant and minority artists have long found inspiration in the Chinese White Snake legend featuring strong, female, and "alien" characters, enriching the global White Snake digital archive through experiments that are both poetic and activist. The Indian-British-Canadian fashion model turned photographer Indrani Pal-Chaudhuri contributed to the White Snake repertoire in the United States, and beyond, with her digital short, a 2013 fashion film titled *Legend of Lady White Snake*, fully accessible on Vimeo.⁸ Since 2013, Indrani has used the transgressive snake woman in her activist projects, which range from empowering Indian girls through school education to fighting for LGBTQ+ rights and environmental justice.

Indrani was first brought to my attention by an undergraduate student at the University of Kentucky when I taught my White Snake seminar in Spring 2017. The student proposed to analyze a short fashion film, *Legend of Lady White Snake*, for her final creative project, and she started with an in-class screening of the film. It was a shocking experience for the whole class. In our seminar, we had

read prototypes of the White Snake legend written in Chinese in the 11th, 14th, and 17th centuries (in English translation) and in late 19th-century Anglophone missionary and diplomatic accounts. We were also introduced to the versions centered on the “lust, caution” theme as well as romanticizing and humanizing adaptations of the legend throughout the 20th century.⁹ However, we had never seen anything like Indrani’s film.

There are obvious inaccuracies throughout the eight-minute digital work, which was created in 2013. For one, there is no source to support Indrani’s claim that the legend of the White Snake is “3,000 years old.” Moreover, the idea that “love” is central to the story is perhaps best considered a reconceptualization from the last few centuries, a result of the snake spirit’s humanization, as it is certainly not found in the early versions. However, like any other form of transculturation, this short fashion film not only takes on the name of the Chinese White Snake legend and pushes some of its central themes to an extreme, but also challenges the White Snake repertoire and its aesthetic conventions in revealing ways. Things “traditionally Chinese” may have been lost in this digital reproduction, but other, less culturally specific, and contextually situated meanings are also found and recreated, albeit in fragments.

A graduate of Princeton University with a major in cultural anthropology, Indrani Pal-Chaudhuri, known mononymously as Indrani, has worked with David Bowie, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga, among others, in the world of popular music. In her debut film, Indrani refashions the White Snake legend through poetry, photography, and most importantly, fashion. She and her celebrity-filled production team, including socialite and fashion icon Daphne Guinness, designer and producer GK Reid, and Indrani’s own photographic partner, Markus Klinko, were initially commissioned to shoot a portrait for the *London Sunday Times*. Indrani marshalled a wide range of poetic fragments from, or inspired by, authors from William Shakespeare to Neil Gaiman. The result is a sensual experience, digitally produced, transmitted, and consumed, and offered as a tribute to the late designer Alexander McQueen (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Daphne Guinness as Lady White Snake with shining snake scales highlighted in the 2013 digital film *Legend of Lady White Snake* by Indrani Pal-Chaudhuri. Screenshot by author. Courtesy of Indrani.

Viewers of this digital performance are invited to contemplate the central themes of women's empowerment, LGBTQ+ rights, and environmental sustainability, embodied in Daphne Guinness's expressive portrayal of the White Snake through poetry fragments inspired by Chinese and Indian thought, by GK Reid and McQueen's flamboyantly Orientalist designs, and by Klinko and Indrani's iconic photographs. Indrani's use of White female fashion icon Guinness could raise eyebrows for anyone who wants to hold on to what they perceive as "essential" or "authentic" meanings of the White Snake legend. At the same time, such radical revisions also open new spaces and instill new energies in the Chinese legend, enabling it to register the voices and visions of iconoclastic artists and activists in confronting pressing social issues.

The iconographies central to this digital performance range from ghosts and demon-lovers, visions and dreams, pleasure domes and romantic chasms. All are well represented in my explorations of the White Snake repertoire in *The Global White Snake*. In Indrani's film, these elements are designed to evoke appreciation from viewers speaking different languages and coming from disparate backgrounds. As "a meditation on obsession, gender and metamorphosis, inspired by an ancient Chinese legend," Indrani's "experimental labor of love" sets out to enrich the White Snake repertoire in ways specific to its digital form.¹⁰ At the same time, it also lays bare several potential problems in my previous conceptions of transmigration and metamorphosis. What could be lost and found in digitally performing a Chinese legend for the high fashion world and beyond? How might the fashion film contribute a renewed understanding of the White Snake legend?

A closer look at Indrani's eight-minute digital fashion film invites audience members to contemplate the enduring themes of love, death, and rebirth, as well as metamorphosis and transmigration, as inspired by Chinese and Indian philosophies, and by the use of poetic fragments from Coleridge, Shakespeare, Poe, Tagore, Gaiman, and others. The female narration stitches together these fragments, diluting the perceived narrative cohesion of the White Snake legend, but at the same time creating fresh possibilities for comparative readings of the legend as an agent for radical expressions of transgressive and transformative energies. Here, the nonnarrative form of the music video-style fashion film is relevant—creating an impressionist mix of disjunct narrative elements as a kind of "desiring space." In that sense, it is creating the space of desire that goes along with displacing and refiguring the narrative.

The female narration was purportedly partly written on the spur of the moment on set by French philosopher Bernard-Henry Lévy for his lover, Daphne Guinness, who performs the title character Lady White Snake.¹¹ If poetry is reduced to digital fragments, digital photographs take over as the main agents of storytelling. Iconic fashion photographs sprinkled throughout the film. The film also expands from China- and India-inspired subject matter to the incorporation of a Chinese composer and musicians in the creation of a digital soundtrack, performed by the Viva Girls, a twelve-girl Chinese instrumental group that specializes in traditional Chinese music.¹²

As epitomized by the poems "Kubla Khan" and "The Hidden Chamber," the themes reflected in this short digital video are rather more universal than China-inspired, which brings home Indrani's meditation on endless time and unending love. At the same time, the film also serves a series of important functions: as a music video-style commercial for its sponsor MAC Cosmetics and as a presentation of a new fashion line, the "Genghis Khan" collection designed by GK Reid, alongside other avant-garde designers. The commercial quality of the film, however, must be understood in the

context of Indrani's commemoration of the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen, whose visionary and iconoclastic designs and suicide at age forty shocked the fashion world in 2010.¹³

An openly gay designer who not only revolutionized the world of high fashion but also suffered from mixed anxiety and depressive disorder, McQueen created signature "manta" dresses featuring "digitally-enhanced, mirror-image-style prints, resembling giant manta rays, sea-serpents and other strange or imagined denizens of the deep" ("Deep Sea Devotion" web). In his last and most enigmatic runway show during Paris Fashion Week in 2009, McQueen "told the story of women morphing into creatures of the deep as the seas slowly reclaimed planet earth." The show featured models with sculpted dresses, "digitally-enhanced prints of fantastical fish, snakes, praying mantis, moths, beetles and giant squid," with some gleaming in golden, fish-scale "armor," like warrior-mermaids ("Paris Fashion Week" web). In its abundant use and flamboyant celebration of the snake women figures and related sea creatures, McQueen's avant-garde final performance for the world provides visual evidence of his queer feminist and environmentalist message to fellow artists and human beings.

In their 2018 documentary *McQueen*, Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettedgui sample McQueen's iconic runway shows, home videos featuring McQueen and friends, and intimate interviews with family members and friends to offer a multidimensional portrayal of this enigmatic figure. McQueen's explorations of the tensions between humans, animals, and machines, his inquiries into death, beauty, and rebirth, and his reputation, in Tom Ford's words, as poetry and commerce united, return to the central issues surrounding the legend of the White Snake and its contemporary metamorphoses.¹⁴ Most importantly, McQueen's at once deeply personal and highly experimental approach to the digital and the emotional, the feminist and the environmentalist in his final runway show also foreshadows Indrani's inspired tribute. *The Legend of Lady White Snake* turns out to be a fitting commemorative act for the late fashion designer whose life and career have been punctuated by relentless inquiries into the transient nature of human existence.

Through the intertwining of poetry, photography, and fashion, we see themes of gender and species, media and politics coming together in director Indrani's insistence on using digital media to foster queer feminist subjectivity and celebrate the life and work of a queer designer, whose at once inspired and tortured existence leaves lingering echoes and extensive legacies in our contemporary moment.¹⁵ The changing genders of the White Snake's lover in Indrani's film, from male to female, the embodiment of queer subject-making through the gender doubling in the images of the human lover, and the power of the transgressive human/nonhuman hybrid are extravagantly stitched together through digital technology and the superimposition of digital images, accentuating the plasticity, the shape shifting, and the transformative qualities of the metamorphosis tales at the center of the legend of the White Snake.

As a minority female director, in dedicating her debut film to McQueen, Indrani consolidated the connection between the Chinese legend, its powerfully hybrid snake woman, and the snake woman's ability to continually inspire and incite digital activist projects in our shared fight for minority rights and social justice. As a guest lecturer at Princeton University in Fall 2020, Indrani offered a course on how digital filmmaking can inspire millions into social action, and she continues to promote the White Snake film in her activist teaching, digital filmmaking, and outreach efforts through digital activism.

The Cosmopolitan Frame: On-site and Online

If Cerise Lim Jacobs's and Indrani's cases demonstrate the White Snake legend's power to inspire social activism for immigrant artists, can such a power resonate with a broader community of artists and the wider public, in the United States, back in China, and beyond? A year after Indrani's film was made, I encountered *The White Snake*, Tony-award winning playwright and director Mary Zimmerman's one-act English play, on stage in Wuzhen, China, site of the Second Wuzhen Theatre Festival in November 2014. The migration of Zimmerman's play from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival to Wuzhen is another instance of the multidirectional travels of the White Snake legend across languages and cultures. What I had experienced inside Wuzhen Grand Theatre that November night seven years ago is hard to put into words. I was fascinated by the enthusiastic audience response to Zimmerman's English-language adaptation in comparison to their response to the opening play of the festival, celebrated Chinese avant-gardist director Tian Qinxin's Chinese-language *Green Snake*. Compared to Tian's postmodern rendition of the legend from the perspective of the Buddhist abbot Fahai and featuring the sister/maid figure Green Snake as female protagonist, Zimmerman's version seemed to me, and apparently to many other members of the audience, as more effective, more accessible, hence more moving.

Zimmerman lists Chinese female writer Zhao Qingge's 1956 novel *The Legend of White Snake*, translated by Paul White and published in 1998, as the primary source of her play.¹⁶ It becomes clear that the Zimmerman play is drawing directly upon the politicized interpretations of Zhao's prose text. The atheist rhetoric in the PRC of the 1950s and the use of the White Snake legend to propagate the nascent regime's new marriage law provided an impetus for reinterpretation—of the Buddhist abbot as the representative of an evil “feudal” regime and of the relationship between the White Snake and her human lover as a case of free love against arranged marriage. In this context, Abbot Fahai is referred to as “a fundamentalist monk who disapproves strongly of anyone marrying a different species.” The legend becomes “a very adventurous, very romantic story,” while at the same time integrating fantasy with reality (“The Story of The White Snake” web).

The Zimmerman play inherits the Chinese 1950s' focus on the “girl power” of the two female protagonists, in a now familiar trope, treating them as feminist heroines of antiauthoritarian struggles. Their struggle against the Buddhist abbot, the embodiment of all evil oppressors, is conditioned by an activist “structure of feeling” pervasive throughout socialist China, now making a comeback in our postsocialist nostalgia for such positive female characterizations. It is less likely that Zimmerman was knowingly mobilizing that nostalgia in her creative process; rather, her engagement with the White Snake source text, while drawing on a wide range of cultural discourses, intersected with the concerns and interests of contemporary Chinese audiences at the Wuzhen Grand Theater. In Zimmerman's own words, deep down, her White Snake play shows that “you can be loved for who you truly are,” regardless of your identity or difference (see Fig. 6; “Writer/Director” web).

My experience in Wuzhen, a beautiful water town close to Hangzhou and its famous West Lake—the city and site the White Snake legend is closely connected with—must be contextualized in relation to the digital platforms that facilitated the global reach of the play, which traveled widely within the United States before venturing to China in 2014. Zimmerman's work played at six venues before reaching Wuzhen: Oregon Shakespeare Festival (premiere), Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Goodman



Fig. 6. Silk curtain featuring ink paintings of bamboo and the two characters for “White Snake” in Chinese calligraphy. Stage decoration for Mary Zimmerman’s *The White Snake*, as performed in English with Chinese subtitles at Wuzhen Grand Theatre, Wuzhen, China, November 7, 2014. Photo by author.

Theatre in Chicago, the Old Globe in San Diego, McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, and Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. Ironically, the play’s going global coincided with its going on-site: being presented at a location (Wuzhen) resembling the “original” site of the Chinese legend. From China, *The White Snake* further traveled back to the Center Stage in Baltimore, and to audiences of the more than thirty high school and college productions around the world, including in Korea and the Philippines (see Fig. 7).¹⁷



Fig. 7. Matt DeCaro as Fa Hai, Amy Kim Waschke as White Snake, and Tanya Thai McBride as Green Snake in Mary Zimmerman’s *The White Snake*. Goodman Theatre, Chicago, 2014. Photo Credit: Liz Lauren.

Zimmerman's *The White Snake* was widely reported on and discussed through a variety of digital platforms, from digital news media to interviews of Zimmerman and her creative team, widely available on YouTube and other platforms. This was how a pre-pandemic stage play acquired its afterlives during the current pandemic. Similarly, when Indrani's digital film *Legend of Lady White Snake* was first transmitted worldwide as the debut film of a celebrity photographer, winning prizes at film festivals in Los Angeles, London, Paris, Kolkata, San Diego, and Princeton, among others, it deserves our critical attention and careful reflexive analysis.

Crucially, in the COVID-19 pandemic, the reach of the Boston-based White Snake Projects also changed from local communities in and around Boston to global communities via digital platforms. The librettos of the opera pieces, short or long, are predominantly based on poetry from immigrant children, interviews with essential workers, and most recently, in White Snake Project's Spring 2021 full-length digital opera production, *Death by Life*, from texts written by incarcerated writers and their families. The virtual opera was conceived as a response to the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, and as a monument of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. It explores the intersection of systematic racism and mass incarceration, with a score by five Black composers representing a broad range of ages and styles. Continuing with White Snake Projects' effort to push the boundaries of technical innovation, the opera sets are immersive 3D environments created in Unreal Engine by Curvin Huber, White Snake Projects' Director of Innovation ("Death by Life" web). Experimental art and social documentation come together in the most recent digital opera endeavors from White Snake Projects, transforming the global White Snake digital archive as both poetic and documentary, both cutting edge and accessible.

These contemporary Anglophone White Snake works offer a radical new reading of the Chinese White Snake legend as activist and revolutionary. They highlight a spirit of persistent antiauthoritarianism and tolerance for the strange and the unusual, showing how Lady White Snake travels through a multitude of translations and adaptations across cultures, time, geography, and media. Her story bends and twists in meaning, always on the move and in mediation. This ability to travel and transform is what keeps any legend, any tradition, and any culture alive, as they shed skin after skin to reach new stages of life and afterlife, forming a global archive for social change in the digital age.

Notes

1. Liang Luo, *The Global White Snake*, U of Michigan P, 2021.
2. Zoom interview with Cerise Lim Jacobs, 11 July 2020.
3. Samuel I. Woodbridge, *The Mystery of the White Snake: A Legend of the Thunder Peak Tower* (Shanghai: Printed at the office of the *North-China Herald*, 1896).
4. For more on the Sing Out Strong series, see its home page on White Snake Projects' official website: www.whitesnakeprojects.org/sing-out-strong.
5. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a U.S. immigration policy that allows children brought to the country without legal means to receive a renewable two-year period of deferred action from deportation and become eligible for a work permit. In September 2017, the Trump Administration announced a plan to phase out DACA, triggering multiple lawsuits challenging this action.
6. For a full synopsis, see "I Am a Dreamer Who No Longer Dreams Synopsis," www.whitesnakeprojects.org/i-am-a-dreamer-who-no-longer-dreams-synopsis.
7. For a full synopsis, see "Alice in the Pandemic Synopsis," www.whitesnakeprojects.org/alice-in-the-pandemic-synopsis.
8. *Legend of Lady White Snake*, vimeo.com/259596618.
9. For a modern rendition of this trope, see Ang Lee's 2007 film *Lust, Caution (Se, jie)*, based on a short story of the same name by Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing). The image of Thunder Peak Pagoda and its cultural and symbolic implications

- are very relevant to Chang's life and writing. Chang finished a semiautobiographical novel, *The Fall of the Pagoda*, originally published in English in the U.S. in 1963 but appearing posthumously in Hong Kong only in 2010. The American publication of *The Fall of the Pagoda* coincided with Chang's decade-long revision process for "Lust, Caution," from the late 1950s to the late 1970s. See Eileen Chang, *The Fall of the Pagoda*, Hong Kong UP, 2010. For an illuminating essay exploring the central importance of the White Snake figure and the serpentine motif in Chang's creative resistance to any and all pagodas as symbols of oppression, see David Der-wei Wang, "Eileen Chang and *The Fall of the Pagoda*," *Chinese Literature Today*, Summer 2010, pp. 94-100.
10. See Indrani's official website, www.indrani.com/films, accessed 18 Jan. 2019. For updates, see www.indrani.com/director.
 11. "Daphne Guinness and 'The Legend of Lady White Snake,'" www.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/look-out-kevin-bacon-5619421/, and "Biography" of Bernard-Henri Lévy, www.bernard-henri-levy.com/en/category/biography.
 12. See Chunmin Su, "The Development of Traditional Chinese Folk Music: Reflections on the Phenomenon of 'Twelve Girls' Music Ensembles," *Journal of University of Science and Technology of Suzhou (Social Science Edition)*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2006, pp. 136-138.
 13. For a moving documentary on McQueen, see Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettedgui, directors, *McQueen* (2018); see bleeckerstreetmedia.com/mcqueen.
 14. See Bonhôte and Ettedgui, *McQueen*, esp. 95-96 min.
 15. "Savage Beauty," the McQueen retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, was a blockbuster and the most popular exhibition in the Museum's history. A petition for the retrospective to tour the world resulted in another record-breaking run at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Lady Gaga claims that McQueen inspired her to write "Born this Way," and a stage play on McQueen ran in 2015 in the St. James Theatre in London, with the aforementioned 2018 documentary among many recent tributes to the late designer; see brooklynrail.org/2011/07/artseen/alexander-mcqueen-savage-beauty.
 16. See the copyright page in Mary Zimmerman, *The White Snake*, Northwestern UP, 2013.
 17. Written feedback from Mary Zimmerman, 3 June 2020.

Works Cited

- "A Call to Action." *White Snake Projects.org*, www.whitesnakeprojects.org/a-call-to-action.
- "Alice in the Pandemic, a Digital Opera." *White Snake Projects.org*, www.whitesnakeprojects.org/projects/alice-in-the-pandemic-a-digital-opera.
- "Alice in the Pandemic' Program Book." *White Snake Projects.org*, www.whitesnakeprojects.org/programbook.
- "Back by Popular Demand: Alice in the Pandemic!" *White Snake Projects.org*, www.whitesnakeprojects.org/back-by-popular-demand-alice-in-the-pandemic.
- "Death by Life." *White Snake Projects.org*, www.whitesnakeprojects.org/projects/death-by-life
- "Deep Sea Devotion: Alexander McQueen's 'Manta' Designs." *Telegraph.co.uk*, 15 Mar. 2010, fashion.telegraph.co.uk/news-features/TMG7449042/Deep-Sea-Devotion-Alexander-McQueens-Manta-Designs.html.
- Fang, Bo. "An interview with Cerise Lim Jacobs on *Madame White Snake*." *Opera*, no. 4, 2019, pp. 54-55.
- Luo, Liang. *The Global White Snake*. U of Michigan P, 2021.
- "Paris Fashion Week: Alexander McQueen" *The Telegraph*, 6 Oct. 2009, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/6267046/Paris-Fashion-Week-Alexander-McQueen.html.
- "The Inspiration." *White Snake Projects.org*, www.whitesnakeprojects.org/projects/alice-in-the-pandemic-a-digital-opera/.
- "The Snake Charmer's Birthday Gift: Cerise Jacobs at TEDxBeacon Street." *White Snake Projects.org*, www.whitesnakeprojects.org/about/cerise-jacobs
- "The Story of The White Snake." Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 5 Oct. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEwhtOwkKfk
- "Writer/Director Mary Zimmerman Discusses 'The White Snake.'" *Chicago Sun Times*, 16 May 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6ivlrWSUSU.
- Zhou, Long, musician, and Cerise Lim Jacobs, libretto writer. *Madame White Snake: An Opera in Four Acts*. Oxford UP, 2011.