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Critical Strategies for Reading Asian American Drama

This book begins a critical examination of selected plays written by Americans of Asian descent. The works considered cover a diverse range of subjects and dramatic styles; my discussion teases out the shared strategies by which plays and playwrights make performance, dramatic form, and audience response inseparable from the meaning of race and ethnicity. As we shall see, such an examination necessarily engages with many pressing concerns, ones whose effects are felt outside as well as inside the theater. These concerns make it crucial for us to refocus our approaches *to* dramatic and literary interpretation in response to larger political questions about Asian American experience, identity, and action. Through the reading of these plays, we may gain insight not only into individual plays, but also more generally into the complex modes of action that these works employ and exemplify.

Before discussing such critical strategies, I will briefly summarize some significant history that will help to contextualize the genesis and production of these plays. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the first major wave of Asian immigration to the United States. Attracted by the economic opportunities provided by the California gold rush and westward development and spurred by civil unrest and famine in China,

Chinese immigrants came by the thousands. Their new lives in America were complicated by the acts of violence and institutionalized discrimination they soon encountered. White workers, threatened by economic competition from Chinese workers, lobbied for passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of **1882,** which restricted the immigration and naturalization of Chinese laborers and their wives.

Passage of the act did not stop early twentieth-century immigration from Asia. The need for inexpensive and industrious labor continued on plantations and railroads, and in the factories, mines, canneries, and farms of the West Coast states and Hawaii. Japanese and Filipino workers brought in as contract laborers soon faced similar restrictions. The impuke to stop Asians not only from entering the country but also from settling permanently gave rise to a host of laws restricting immigration, land ownership, and citizenship. The **1929** National Origins Act limited immigration from Asia to small numbers of exempted wives of **U.S.** citizens, students, ministers, and professors. Total immigration from Asia, which had reached nearly 60,000 during the period **1916–20,** fell to **3,700** in **1936–40** and **2,300** in **1941–45** [Barringer **28).**

Significant changes in immigration policy and law after the Second World War, although undoing some of the earlier restrictive policies, continued to reflect a pervasive fear of th: "yellow peril." In **1943** the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed, and foreign-born Chinese were declared eligible for citizenship; however, the annual immigration quota for China was limited to 105. In 1952 Congress passed, over President Harry Truman's veto, the McCarran-Walter Act, which gave all immigrants the right to apply for citizenship. Yet this act still established preferences for skilled immigrants and family members and maintained extremely limited annual quotas for Asian immigrants: 185 for Japan, **105** for China, and 100 each for countries of the "Asia-Pacific Triangle."

Nevertheless, the immediate result of the McCarran-Walter Act was a gradual rise in the number of Asian immigrants to approximately 20,000

per year for the years before 1965. In 1965 the Hart-Cellar Act abolished the quota system, establishing a limit to immigration of 290,000 total per year. Although it still limited the numbers of immigrants from Eastern Hemisphere countries to 20,000 per country (with certain family members of U.S. citizens exempted], the act allowed a great increase in Asian immigration, from 16,000 in 1965 to more than 100,000 by 1972 to more than a quarter million in 1989. Filipinos, Chinese (from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong), Asian Indians, Koreans, and Vietnamese have been the largest groups benefited, although since 1975 significant numbers of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees have also settled in the United States (Barringer 30–32).

In 1960, persons of Asian cescent represented a mere one half of 1 percent of the U.S. population. By the year 2000 it is projectec that Asian Americans, many of them native born, will account for about 4 percent of the total U.S. population (Takaki 5–61. This figure suggests a strong demographic basis for the felt presence of Asian Americans as active participants in a number of public arenas.' But the growing influence of Asian Americans has its foundations in political and cultural as well as demographic changes. Asian American activism, allied with other civil rights movements in the 1960s and after, has wrought important changes in the social fabric of American life. One significant aspect of these changes can be seen in recent cultural production; among their other endeavors, Asian Americans have been increasingly recognized for their contributions to the visual arts, literature, music, dance, and theater.

The new visibility of Asian American theater artists is part of a larger movement that has emerged in the past few decades: the escalating attention given to the political, cultural, and intellectual issues of race and ethnicity. Although plays by Asian Americans were written and performed earlier (notably in Hawaii), much of the current body of theatrical work has been produced or made available to readers only since the early 1970s. These works are now gaining more public attention. Recently,

several anthologies of Asian American drama—*Between* Worlds, The *Politics* of *Life*, and *Unbroken* Thread—and new collections by David Henry Hwang, Philip Kan Gotanda, and Edward Sakamoto have been published.[2] Works by Asian American playwrights such as Jessica Hagedorn, Ping Chong. Diana Son, Brenda Wong Aoki, and Han Ong have also been included in recent anthologies of plays.[3]

To place these playwrights and their works into a grouping designated by national origin, ethnicity, or race is to imply that they participate in a common project: the reconsideration of identity as it is linked both to social repressntation and to artistic presentation. The playwrights whose works I discuss at more length in this book are well aware that they and their characters are seen as representatives of a group; at the same time, their plays problematize the categories of race and ethnicity. Both this self-consciousness about representation and the interest in redefining theatrical presentation define, I will suggest, a set of unique questions, preoccupations, and dramatic styles that mark these plays as "Asian American."

Insisting that drama by Asian Americans deserves a distinctive critical approach, or its own book, is somewhat risky, given the current climate inside and outside the academy and the theater. Increasingly, scholars, teachers, and directors are expanding their curriculum or changing their theater season to have a more multicultural emphasis. The inclusion of works by artists of color for "special" institutional recognition has drawn fire from those who charge that such a move promotes racial separatism. In a 1991 issue of *American Theater* on multicultural issues, significant space was devoted to Robert Brustein's condemnation of the "racial exclusionism" manifested in plays that are "committed to strict racial and ethnic orthodoxy, and the empowerment of disadvantaged people through the agency of culture" (Brustein 46). The so-called "ethnicity" school in literary studies argues a similar danger and urges that a marginalized literature neither should be singled out for exceptional attention

nor merits a group-specific methodology, for fear of promoting insiderism and fragmentation.'

These arguments underscore the importance of using care in how we approach the performance and representation of race and ethnicity in the theater. Race and ethnicity raise complex questions by challenging the traditional criteria by which plays have been analyzed and valued. We can no longer assume that the canonical classics can be evaluated according to supposedly universal or objective aesthetic standards, with works by artists of color added to the repertory solely to ensure political representation. These assumptions relegate art by marginalized peoples to the status of add-ons to an existing canon. Further, it traps more progressive academics into the politically misguided and functionally impcssible task of making academic canons fully "representative." Finally, it places artists of color into the awkward position of speaking for others.'

In reality, preserving a more "universal" set of srandards that would allow us to avoid politics by focusing on presumably neutral aesthetics is no longer viable in the face of cerrent debates over race, gender, and class differences. The old theories of genre, form, and response that erase racial difference and that separate art neatly into either political **or** aesthetic dimensions are inadequate to the demands of new works: to their immediate topical concerns, the complexity of their artistic presentation, the difficult questions of art and pclitical representatior. that they raise. **If** I argue for a more group-specific methodology, it is because a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to understanding art is needed, one that addresses not only individual works of art and artists, but also the assumptions used in interpreting and evaluating them.

Now more than ever, we need ways of looking a; drama and theater that allow for a discussion of racial and ethnic as well as other differences. Perhaps the idea of the universal standard still persists in part because critics have not developed adequate ways to discuss how theater is a valuable or necessary practice. Thus, my aim is to suggest, within the

terms of this specialized study, how we might formulate a new poetics that would enable us to discuss more creatively the performance of race and ethnicity on stage. How are different ideas of what is Asian American inseparable from the interpretation of perfcrmance events? How do these plays work to construct race and ethnicity as theatrical values?

In this spirit, this book is organized around partirular questions and issues rather than by playwright, genre, or chronology; it attempts to integrate interpretative readings with a set of theoretical topics and questions. I offer not only specific contexts for the interpretation of particular plays, but also a larger framework of questions within which to consider the staging of race and ethnicity

Elaine Kim has pointed out that many critical approaches often treat Asian American drama and literature simply as illustrations of some offstage sociohistorical reality (xv). Such approaches, as she insists, are somewhat problematic. First, they neglect the complex ways in which dramatic representation both reconstructs and is defined by its historical context: the complex interpretation of theater ***as theater.*** Second, they sustain essentialized racial categories, maintaining the assumption that ethnicity and race are natural essences tha: can be transparently reflected on the stage, rather than socially fabricated categories that are made through human performance. We must question :he assumption that plays simply imitate a preexisting Asian American experience or identity, and instead describe how race is constructed and contested by theatrical presentation. The theoretical discussions formulated here try to resist readings of plays as mirrors of real lives, social behaviors, or historical events. Instead, they assume a complex negotiation of meaning by both performer and spectator, concentrating on the ways in which the events of the drama, character and action, and in turn playwright and reception are significantly racialized and sthnicized.

I purposefully avoid any attempts to create an alternative canon, to rank the individual masterpiece, or to assess the excellence of any writer.

Instead, I am concerned with the collective nature of the practice and meaning of drama. Less important than what an individual work might contribute to its author's reputation is what that work reveals about the shared assumptions and understanding of race and ethnicity: how and what these terms mean, and how they are presented on the stage. Further, by examining each play in the company of other plays by Asian Americans, we take the pressure off any individual work to be the quintessential Asian American play in some multicultural syllabus. Instead of trying to package a play as the representation of a singular Asian American voice, we are free to try varied approaches that foster comparisons and contrasts between these and other theatrical works.

Just as the idea of performance is crucial to studying race and ethnicity, so also is the reverse true. A study of theater and plays has much to offer current discussions of identity politics. The "liveness" or "presence" of theater suggests an immediate, visceral response tc the physicality of race; the embodiedness of theatsr is experienced or felt, as well as seen and heard. The physical response of the spectator to the body of the actor complicates any abstraction of social categories. The theater does not let us forget that questions of racial difference concern our most basic gut reactions, experiences, and sensations. Literature and cinema or electronic media, as Ella Shohat has suggested, may be somewhat abstracted, divorced from the actual body.[6] Theater is less capable of a divorce from the body. Michael Omi and Howard Winant have recently challenged scholars to investigate how a racial ideology profoundly influences the conventions of behavior and engagement in the United States:

> Rules shaped by our perception of race in a comprehensively racial society determine the "presentation of self," distinctions of status, and appropriate modes of ccnduct. . . . Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of

> their own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Race becomes "common sense"—a way of comprehending, explaining and acting in the world. *(62)*

Different manifestations of such a complex "racial etiquette" are disturbingly and profoundly investigated in the live action of the theater.

Toward a "Real Asian American Theater"

W.E.B. Du Bois's *1926* agenda for the Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre might well describe the ideal goals of a number of so-called "minority" theaters today:

> The plays of a real Negro theatre must be: 1. ***About** us.* That is they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. *By **us.*** That is they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. *For **us.*** That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. **4.** *Near **us.*** The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people. (Du Bois 134)

Yet any attempt to describe "a real Asian American theater" along these lines is particularly complicated. Although certain people have undoubtedly been influential in initiating, enabling, or encouraging it, theatrical activity by Asian Americans is not confined to any one specific theater, a generation of playwrights, or a group of performing artists. Nor is there necessarily one kind of audience or community involved in its reception, interpretation, and meaning.

Thus it is dangerous to assume that "Asian America" can be fully expressed through a particular body of work, however diverse that body might at *first* appear. Any contemporary critical study of Asian American artistic production must be aware of the problems inherent in embracing

ideas of community and representation that are necessarily exclusionary. In fact, the term Asian America covers not only an extremely diverse population but one that is constantly changing. The 1980 U.S. Census included within its designation of "Asian and Pacific Islander Americans" *six* major groups—Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Asian Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese—as well as twenty-two smaller groups, the largest of which were Laotian, Thai, Cambodian, and Pakistani (Barringer 3). Yet critical overviews of published literature and drama by Asian Americans persistently erase parts of this picture. As Lisa Lowe points out, it is all too easy to skew the idea of "Asian America" toward certain kinds of experience by taking Chinese and Japanese American experience as representative—an approach that erases differences of gender, national origin, class, education, and age in favor of a totalizing "Asian American" identity (30–31). For reasons discussed later, this familiar pattern is unfortunately repeated in this book, for the majority of the plays considered were written by second or later generations of college-educated Chinese and Japanese American playwrights; dramatic works by Asian Indians, Pacific Islanders, Southeast Asians, and others are conspicuously absent.

This cautionary note leads us to consider how "Asian America" as articulated through theatrical participation might be less useful in describing a full range of real lives than in articulating imaginary or desired states of being and relation. If, as Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd suggest, "minority individuals are always treated and forced to experience themselves generically," that experience might in fact provoke not only a rebellious individualism but also an impulse toward community: "Coerced into a negative, generic subject-position, the oppressed individual responds by transforming that position into a positive, collective one" (10). The attempts of various playwrights, performers, audiences, and critics to make a "real Asian American theater" might reflect, if not an easily understood "us" in terms of a homogeneous community of ordinary Asian Americans, then at the very least an intensely imagined com-

mcnality shared by a number of diverse individuais and social groups. Theatrical acrivity by Asian Americans is intimately linked to the Asian American movement of the 1960s and after, in which an urgent call for political solidarity among minority groups **took** precedence over internal differences and a sense of collective identity was forged out of the experiences of groups with highly disparate bazkgrounds Although a fully shared group identity is felt by many Asian Americans to be unachievable and perhaps undesirable, the legacy of the Asian American movement is a continuing emphasis on pan-ethnicity. These felt affinities and the imagined communities they produce can influence playwrights, I will argue, as much as the actual sites and logistics of production, audience, and reception do.

In some ways, the need for a new, more flexible understanding of the term Asian America, especially in theatricd performance, has come out of the common legacy ***of*** misrepresentation. **As** James Moy, Gina Marchetti, Darrell Hamamoto, and others have noted, American audiences have long had a fascination with viewing the "Oriental," whether in plays, musicals, and traditional Asian theater performances or through more vernacular forms such as movies and television shows, tours of Chinatown, or fair exhibits. The depiction; of Asian Americans in these venues range from a vague "Oriental" exoticism to more complex and disturbing characterizations. Comic types such as Mark Twain and Bret Harte's Ah Sin—a wily and unredeemably "foreign" figure who spoke in gibberish—became popular in farce and caricature in the late nineteenth century.' The character of Fu Manchu, the "yellow psril incarnate in one man," was created **by** British author Sax Rohmer in a series of thirteen nsvels, the first published in 1913. Subsequently, in 1932, the character appeared in an MGM film starring Boris Karloff. Fu Manchu developed into a racial archetype that has maintained its popularity, resurfacing in csmic book villains such as *Flash* Gordon's Ming the Merciless and feature films such as ***The Castle of Fu Manchu*** (1968). The familiar figure of

detective Charlie Chan, created by novelist Earl Biggers in 1925, is a self-effacing, polite, "domesticated" Asian who speaks in broken English despite his native-born status, spouts pseudo-Confucianisms, and exemplifies loyal service to a white superior.

Such ste-eotypes suggest a clear **link** between social tensions and cultural representation. As Gary Okihiro comments, both Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan present a complex blend of "feminine" and "masculine" ettributes, reflecting a larger American anxiety over its relations with Asian countries internationally and with Asian Americans domestically *(Margins ard Mainstreams* 142–45). More recent typing of Asian males as comic geeks, such as in the **1984** movies *Revenge* of *the Nerds* and *Sixteen Candles,* continues the trend set by the exaggerated characters Ah Sin, Fu Manchu, and Charlie Chan of ridiculing and disempowering the Asian American male. The ideology motivating the dissemination of these stereotypes of Asian American males—effecting a symbolic castration—is strongly tied to the historical immigration and antimiscegenation laws that prevented the immigration of Chinese womer., thereby closing off options for marriage and procreation and creating large bachelor communities of Chinese and Filipino immigrants. It is no surprise, then, that the prevailing stereotypes of Asian women reference a white rather than an Asian masculine desire. The objectification of Asian women through these stereotypes of evil seductresses, "dragon ladies," geishas, or frail lotus blossoms in early plays, films, anc books inevitably related to a white male protagonist. As Jessica Hagedorn points out, contemporary films from *The World of Suzie Wong (1960)* to *Casualties of War* **(1989)** continue to portray Asian women as 'decorative, invisible, or one-dimensional" **(79).**

Just as these racial stereotypes influenced popular sentiment and fueled racism toward Asians by displacing the actual body in favor of the exaggerated image, so did white actors' portrayals of Asian characters on the theatrical stage pass for the real thing. C. T. Parsloe's "Great and Original

Creation of THE HEATHEN CHINEE" in the stage version of Twain and Hart's Ah *Sin* (1877) was praised for "truthfulness to nature and freedom from caricature" (Moy, *Marginal Sights* 25, 29). Farsloe's success undoubtedly led to the viability of actors playing in "yellowface," a tradition that was sustained in the forty-seven feature-length Charlie Chan movies in which the title character was played mainly by white actors, although his sons were played by Asian Americans (Wei 52). White actresses playing Asian women were equally popular on the stage and in film; Gina Marchetti notes that by playing the film roles of Asian temptresses, butterflies, or geishas, white actresses such as Mary Pickford or Shirley MacLaine could play roles that capitalized on a transgressive sexuality, thus allowing white women the power to subvert Western patriarchy (83–84, 176–201.) Unfortunately, even in these limited scenarios of feminist empowerment, Asian women were entirely overlooked.

Throughout the twentieth century, makeup books for the stage actor have provided instructions for how white actors should play the "Oriental," "Mongolian types," or "the Chinaman."[8] Although such instructions are no longer to be found in chapters titled "Exotics" or strategically grouped with makeup techniques for playing the "Hag *or* Witch," "Mephisto or Devil" (Liszt **42–43),** or, more frequently, "minstrel" blackface, they are otherwise remarkably uniform. There is no longer an insistence on long fingernails, full body coloring, or the half-bald, half-queued portrayals of the "classic type," yet even recent makeup guides exaggerate and distort the features of the "Oriental" body through their directions and their illustrations.' These books invariably contain special details telling actors how to use makeup or sometimes a mask in addition to "appropriate hairstyle, costume, and Oriental mannerisms" in order to achieve "a believable Oriental appearance" (Bagar **143).** These descriptions are often illustrated with caricatures or photographs of white actors in yellowface rather than of Asians themselves."

The persistent performances of the all-too-familiar stereotypes of lite-

ature, theater, film, and television can be linked to a succession of anxieties felt on a national scale: a fear of the "yellow peril" contaminating the racial purity of an America ideologically designated for the "lovely White," the moral justification of overseas imperialism, and, later on, economic neocolonialism in the Third World." But the discursive force of stereotypes is not restricted to a particular time and space but disseminates into a more amorphous and pervasive cultural vocabulary. As Edward Said suggests, Orientalism does not describe a specific Orient but instead is "a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces" (202–3). Although they are locatable in geographically and temporally specific anti-Asian sentiments, these distinctive stereotypes are often perpetuated without the accompanying critical and historical contexts that would render viewers more critical. In particular, musical works such as Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885) continue to be presented as "classics."[12] Bruce McConachie notes that the success of "Oriental" musicals such as South *Pacific* (1949) and *The* King *and I* (1951) can be attributed in part to their enactment of theatrical metaphors that legitimated U.S. foreign involvement in Southeast Asia." The highly profitable reincarnations of different versions of the Butterfly story, from David Belasco's *Madame Butterfly* to Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg's *Miss Saigon* (1989), might well embody a "long line of Western misrepresentation of Asians, perpetuating a damaging fantasy of submissive 'Orientals: self-erasing women, and asexual, contemptible men" (Yoshikawa 276). But critiques of these works have only just begun to appear, and they rarely accompany the frequent productions of these popular shows.

The legacy of the Oriental stereotypes has haunted Asian American performers. On the one hand, Asian Americans have performed and been acclaimed in a variety of roles and venues, including traditional Asian theater and opera, the "Chop Suey" vaudeville circuit, and nightclubs such as San Francisco's Forbidden City, as well as dramatic and

musical theater.[14] Individuals such as the silent film stars Anna May Wong and Sessue Hayakawa or, more recently, television and film actors Keye Luke, Bruce Lee, George Takei, and Pat Morita have also achieved professional recognition and commercial success.[15] But for the most part, fame and fortune, if any, cculd be earned only by playing versions of a stereotype. The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical ***Flower Drum*** Song (1958), based on Chin Yang Lee's novel of the previous year, gave employment to a number of actors, both on Broadway and in the subsequent film version. The film was the first commercial film to feature Asian Americans erclusively in singing, acting, and dancing roles, and the talented Miyoshi Umeki, who won an Academy Award in 1957 for her role in ***Sayonara,*** played a starring role as Mei Li (Hamamoto 11). But, as Misha Berson notes, the characterizations of ***Flower Drum*** Song were not much of an improvement: "a wise Confucian patriarch, a China Doll vamp, a submissive, fresh-off-the-boat bride . . . familiar Asian stereotypes dressed up in new clothes" (xi).

Even as they recognize the limitations of these pervasively stereotypical roles, actors also acknowledge their economic dependence on them, as Philip Gotanda details in his play ***Yankee Dawg You Die.*** Although opportunities for Asian American actors have increased, even actors of a more recent generation—some of whom have distinguished themselves in striking and original portrayals—have subsequently found themselves once again relegated to theatrical invisibility in stereotypical roles. Casting practices still overwhelmingly discriminate against actors of color. Harry Newman cites a four-year Actors' Equity survey revealing that over 90 percent of all plays produced professionally during the mid-eighties had all-white casts (55). The pessimism expressed by members of the Asian American Performing Artists (formerly the Oriental Actors of America) in 1976 still seems pervasive. As one actress said, "I will never play Suzie Wong or a Vietnamese whore again. I want to play Blanche and Nora, Medea and Desdemona. I have a lot to contribute, but . . .

they won't cast me." Another expressed even more resignation: "If you have not worked for many months or years (as I have not), it becomes very difficult to make any artistic choices when you are hungry. . . . Unemployment runs out" (Y. L. Wong **14).** Such desperation is clearly a factor in the continued reenactment of stereotypes. When Actors' Equity protested the import of British actor Jonathan Pryce for the role of the engineer in *Miss Saigon,* producer Cameron Mackintosh threatened to withdraw the show entirely, thus depriving a number of Asian American actors of potential jobs. The concerns of these actors in part convinced Equity to withdraw its protests, and Pryce took on the role.

One alternative to performing in traditional venues and in often stereotypical rules, was to create new spaces in which both the "Asian" and the "American" could be reimagined by Asian American actors, plays, and audiences. Frustration over the formulaic Oriental stereotypes and the lack of opportunities for nonwhite actors in Hollywood led to the establishment of the first Asian American theater company. In **1965,** the Los Angeles company East West Players was formed by **a** group of Asian American actors led by the acclaimed actor Mako, who became its first artistic director. East West Players was followed by the establishment of other Asian American repertory companies such as Kumu Kahua ("Original Stage") in Honolulu, in 1971; the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco, in 1973; the Pan Asian Repertory in New York, in 1977; and the Northwest Asian Theater Company (formerly the Asian Exclusion Act) in Seattle, in 1976. In the eighties and nineties a number of theaters also emerged in the Midwest, including Angel Island Theatre Company in Chicago and Theater Mu in Minneapolis. In addition to presenting works by Asian American playwrights, these companies bring to popular attention the talents of Asian American actors, directors, and designers, staging works by Shakespeare, Chekhov, and Ibsen with Asian American actors and working with Asian actors in intercultural productions.[16] Thess alternative theaters serve as the primary venues of perfor-

mance for many plays by Asian Americans. In so doing, they serve an important symbolic function as specific sites of contestation and identity formation for their audiences.

Both these repertory companies and their productions were profoundly affected by the Asian American movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which drew awareness to the social and legal history of Asians in the United States, a history marked distinctively by naturalization policy, land laws, and immigration restrictions. As William Wei suggests, political reform based on a pan-ethnic identification was at the core of the movements activism, which was galvanized by the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam War protests:

> Among the last of the "ethnic-consciousness movements," the Asian American Movement has been essentially a middle-class reform movement for racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment in a culturally pluralist America. . . . The concept ***Asian** Americans* implies that there can be a communal consciousness and a unique culture that is neither Asian nor American, but Asian American. In defining their own identity and culture, Asian Americans bring together previously isolated and ineffective struggles against the oppression of Asian communities into a coherent pan-Asian movement for social change. (1)

Ultimately, Wei argues, it was the creation of "an inter-Asian coalition that embrace[d] the entire spectrum of Asian ethnic groups and acknowledge[d] their common experiences in American society" that allowed a new kind of theater and theater audience to be both imagined and realized (1).

One of the immediate manifestations of this inter-ethnic solidarity in the theater was the way it transformed the meaning of cross-ethnic casting. Pan-Asian casting has had a long history in Asian American theater; an example is the fiery performance of Korean American Randall Kim as

:he Chinese American Tam Lum in the 1972 American Place Theatre performance of *The Chickencoop Chinaman.* In a pan-ethnic context, however, the practice of cross-ethnic casting is transformed: where it was once used to perpetuate a myth of interchangeability ("all Asians look alike") made notorious by indiscriminate Broadway and Hollywood casting practices, it now signifies the formation of a newer pan-Asian sensibility.

Asian American political and cultural activism has historically been rooted in local communities. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant note, Asian American groups in urban centers have become galvanized in the fight to preserve low-cost housing for community residents or to preserve Chinatowns, Manilatowns, or Japantowns from the commercial transformation that would disperse longtime residents (104). One aspect of Asian American theater thar deserves more recognition is the community-based theater group that comes into existence to address specific local issues, such as the now-disbanded Asian American Tactical Theatre, which used guerilla street theater to raise consciousness about issues concerning New York's Chinatown (Y. L. Wong 17). Large urban centers with increasingly diverse populations may now be home to several different Asian American theaters, including newer theaters such as the Silk Road Theater, in New York, which focuses on Korean American issues, and Teatro Ng Tanan (Theater for the People), a Filipino youth theater in San Francisco. The emphasis on local communities continues to shape Asian American theatrical performance even when theaters seek to appeal to a broader, racially mixed audience. In some sense Asian American theaters avoid sragnation because they are pressured to speak to local concerrs, respond directly to political events, and deal with changing demographics. Asian American theaters are forced to cope with new questions about the nature of individual and collective identity; thus, the many different ways in which "Asian America" can be conceived provide a tension that drives theater practice. Productions such as *Pea Yog Hmoob:* We *are Hmong*

(1993) and *The* Garden of *the Soul* (1995), by Pom Siab Hmoob Theatre (formerly the Hmong Theatre Project, founded in 1990) in Minneapolis draw attention to the ways in which newer immigrants and refugees continue to change the definition of Asian American. Theater Mu's ***Mask Dunce*** (1992, 1995) deals specifically with the concerns of adopted Korean Americans growing **up** in the small towns of Minnesota. Recent **pro**ductions and readngs of plays such as Elizabeth Wong's *Kimchee and Chitlins,* Karen Huie's *Columbus Park,* Brenda Wong Aoki's *The Queen's Garden,* or Chay Yew's **A** *Language* of *Their* ***Own*** have dealt with contemporary issues such as AIDS, homelessness, gang violence, and inner-city conflicts between Asian Americans and African Americans. Asian American theaters have also grown increasingly active in exploring differences of gender and sexuality within various Asian American communities.[17]

But Asian American theaters have not been the only venue for Asian American playwrights. David Henry Hwangs winning of a Tony Award for *M. Butterfly* in 1988 was greeted enthusiastically as mainstream recognition of Asian American drama. This acclaim somewhat obscures the fact that a number of notable productions by Asian American playwrights have taken place outside of alternative Asian American theaters. The first producton of Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* took place in 1972 at the American Place Theatre in New York **City,** and Chin's *The Year of the Dragon* not only debuted there in 1974 but was also subsequently videotaped for PBS's *Theatre in America.* Performance and multimedia artists Winston Tong, Ping Chong, Jessica Hagedorn, and others identify more with New York–based experimental art collaboratives than they do with Asian American theater. Artists such as Chong sometimes openly resist the label Asian American." Recently, theaters such as the New World Theater, in Amherst, Massachusetts, Mixed Blood, in Minneapolis, or the Group Theater, in Seattle, have regularly mounted productions of Asian American plays. By taking a comparative approach to

works by playwrights of color, these theaters allow an even more radical reimagining of community.

A number of changes in the past few decades, including the political activism of Asian American groups, an increased visibility for artists of color, and the establishment of alternative theaters, have opened up new possibilities for redefining performance. At the same time, they have raised different questions about, and prompted new theatrical vocabularies for, performing race and ethnicity on stage. The imagined common ground of Asian America—as it is envisioned in the plays examined in this book—is not located solely in a resistance to racist stersotypes. Nor does it necessarily reside in the similar historical experiences of immigration, racism, or assimilation, or in a shared cultural background. Instead, these plays presume a more complex imagining of how "Asian American" is performed, individually and collectively. Although a theater **performance** always takes place in a specific time and space, the imagined audience projected by this theater, its range of identifications and concerns, cannot be limited to a particular region, group of people, or time frame. Frank Chin's Chinatown locales, Genny Lim's Hawaiian cane fields, and Wakako Yamauchi's Imperial Valley can have meaning for a variety of audiences in different places.

In a humorous moment in *A Grain of Sand,* Nobuko Miyamoto's retrospective on the Asian American movement, Miyamoto enacts how Asian American activists had to find a proper radical chic in their dress, music, and dance steps in order to establish their political presence alongside African Americans and Chicanos. In *Turning* ***Japanese,*** third-generation Japanese American David Mura writes of his decision to learn Butoh dance, envisioning a reconciliation with his "essential Japaneseness" through a new form of movement: "I suddenly realized that with my stumbling Japanese, perhaps the only way to break the barrier of language was to enter the culture through my body, through sight" (28). Both these episodes illustrate how racial or ethnic identity is deeply in-

vested in particular forms of embodiment, the quest for the appropriate body or performance mode. In many ways, the common ground for Asian American playwrights exists in the questions raised about performing race and ethnicity, how to negotiate and reform "racial etiquette" in a changing society.

Within this negotiation and reformation, certain questions involving form and content recur. Asian American plays that differ considerably in time and geography can be startlingly similar in their dramatic preoccupations. For instance, some plays written in Hawaii in the first half of the twentieth century have affinities with mainland plays written after the Asian American movement, illustrating how Asian American identities might be both differently and similarly construed in particular times and places.

Hawaii's historically multiracial islands have a long history of Asian Americans, amateurs and professionals, writing and performing for the theater. Theaters such as the Honolulu Theatre for Youth (1955) and Kumu Kahua (1971) were preceded by many kinds of Asian and Asian American performance in Hawaii, including traditional theater, pageants, and history plays. Often, as in the case of Kumu Kahua and other Hawaiian theaters, the works are strongly defined by their location and time. Yet Hawaiian plays from even the early twentieth century address issues in ways that connect them with the later mainland movement. These performance strategies include the use of realism to depict the "authentic" situation of Asian Americans, the development of dramatic tensions centered on differences between East and West, and experimentation with devices such as the doubling of characters. These techniques suggest the emergence of a theatrical vocabulary that enables playwrights in very different contexts to talk about ethnic and racial differences In this sense, the plays written in Hawaii prior to the Asian American movement might be thought of as the rightful dramatic predecessors of mainland works written decades later.

These plays preceded the larger consciousness-raising of Asian Ameri-

can activism in the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, a preoccupation with the questions and tensions involved in enacting racial and ethnic difference is also paramount in these works In 1947, Bessie Toshigawa's *Reunion* was mounted by the University of Hawaii Theatre Group; it was the first full production of a contemporary play written in pidgin. *Reunion* is concerned with the homecoming of World War Two veterans from the Japanese-American 442nd combat team. On one level it is a gently humorous play, full of local color, about the decisions faced by young men after their military service On another level, it raises the issues that preoccupied later generations of Asian Americans: how these young men were to face changes in their particular community, the problems they experienced assimilating into mainland life, the effects of racism on their war experiences.

In a similar vein, Edward Sakamoto's *In the Alley* addresses issues that are as relevant today as they were at the play's first performance in 1961. Sakamoto's play provides a pessimistic sequel to Toshigawa's *Reunion.* As the play opens, a group of young men meet to socialize, drink beer, and complain about the lack of opportunities for them and their families. The playful aggression of their good-natured bantering and wrestling turns violent as Joe, a *haole* serviceman, wanders by with a local woman. Angered by the sight of the interracial couple, the men attack Joe. When Joe's friends retaliate, it is the innocent Tojo who becomes the scapegoat; his unconscious body is left alone on the stage at the play's end. The violence is presented most immediately as the result of misguided aggression and youthful bravado rather than as an act of systematic racism. Yet Sakamoto makes clear that the roots of these tragic acts lie in larger social issues—not in the individual characters, but in the environment in which they exist. The themes of Sakamoto's play—the anger of sons toward their ineffectual fathers, sexual jealousy, poverty—are inextricably linked to the dynamics of race. These are the very concerns that were taken up in the next decade in the groundbreaking works of Frank Chin.

What brings these plays together as Asian American is their commcn

interest in questioning, by means of the theater, how race and ethnicity might be performed. This exploration entails a fusion of formal and thematic concerns that refuses easy distinctions between what is artistic and what is political. As Stuart Hall has said, "how things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role. . . . [Q]uestions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation—subjectivity, identity, politics—[have] a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life" (27). Asian American theater sees itself as part of a continuum of transformative political acts that contest rather than work within established forms of representation. Within these theater spaces, playwrights and performers have established alternative communities in which systems of meaning and signification can reinvent themselves.

What's "Asian American" About It? The Question of Inclusivity

The term Asian American not only hghlights tie tension of hyphenation, it also draws attention to its owr incompleteness as a category. As Victor Bascara has suggested, Asian America is not accurately described as a diaspora of scattered people, but is better portrayed as an "archipelago with insular 'islands' differing not only in location, but also in historical circumstance and, therefore, differing in cultural/political concerns" (Bascara 6). Not only are there major distinctions to be made in terms of any of ti-e constituent groups' history of immigration, country of origin, economic background, language, religion, and culture, but important differences also exist within ethnic groups in terms of gender, age, class, education, and other factors. As Barringer, Gardner, and Levin conclude in their study of 1980 census data, "Asian Americans do not represent a single block of persons about whom one can generalize easily" (320).

That, as Philip Gotanda puts it, "our culture is a live beast"[19] makes apparent a tension that will be inherent throughout the remainder of this discussion. On the one hand, it seems necessary to speak of a set of shared concerns, an imagined common ground where different theatrical events might produc: symbolic meaning. On the other hand, to call a playwright, a play, or a theater Asian American inevitably conjures an image of Asian America as a coherent whole, promoting a dangerously simplistic "racial" category that erases diversity within itself. Although this book might disclaim a complete, comprehensive, or representative analysis of Asian American drama, any work on Asian America risks creating a monolithic and homogenizing category.

For the purposes of this study, I have used primarily printed material such as playtexts, reviews, histories, and literature, My justification for doing so is that the playtext is not only the most fixed part **of** the playwright's **work,** it is also the only part I can share on an equal footing with the reader." But by limiting myself to plays that are readily available in published form, I have had to exclude many theatrical and literary representations of "Asian America" that do not accommodate themselves to the formal literacy of publishing. To put it bluntly, "Asian American" is here construed as primarily Chinese and Japanese American, upper-middle class, college-educated, English-speaking, and heterosexual. Not explicitly represented in my study are the concerns of newer immigrants and refugees, as well as others whose life experiences do not fit this limited view of Asian America. Such a bias may have been influenced by the inseparability of Asian American theater from the larger political and cultural work of the Asian American movement, which from the beginning maintained strong ties with academic institutions and was dominated by second- and third-generation Chinese and Japanese Americans. Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out some of the ways in which the production of plays and the publication of dramatic literature may limit us to a particular view of Asian America.

By what process do the requirements of publishing constrain the development of dramatic literature and contribute to an artificial canon? As Roberta Uno has suggested, dramatic literature by Asian Americans has been a relatively recent development for practical reasons. Plays must be produced in theaters as well as written; their primary mode is performance rather than script (introduction, *Unbroken Thread* 4). This implies additional criteria in the selection process by which plays reach their public, introducing yet another level at which exclusionary practices can take place. Adding to the traditional elitism of modern and contemporary American theater is the pressure to conform to literary models that privilege language-centered, single-author plays that appeal to a broader, racially mixed audience. That published plays are aimed at English-literate readerships immediately excludes plays by writers with limited or no English skills (first-generation immigrants, for insiance), or those writing primarily for a non-English-speaking audience. We might note that although characters with limited or no English have frequently been depicted, such as in Frank Chin's *The Year of the Dragon,* David Henry Hwang's *Family Devotions,* or Han Ong's *Mrs. Caang,* their authors are native speakers of English. The preference for language-centered performance scripts also negatively affects the publication of theater works that rely on movement, dance, or music, where the primary modes of action cannot be captured through verbal description. This point becomes especially meaningful when one considers the number of productions by Asian Indian and South Asian immigrant communities, such as Minneapolis': Theater Mu's 1994 *River of* Dreams (which featured works by Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese writers and performers), that have been dance- and music-centered theater works. Similarly, the traditional relationships between playwright and theatrical company, which encourage a "finished" playscript—detachable from its initial performance venue and marketed to individual readers and theaters for re-production—do not allow for a more probing investigation of performances

such as the many one-actor pieces by Asian Americans such as "Charlie" Chin, Amy Hill, Nobuko Miyamoto, Lane Nishikawa, Jude Narita, Nicky Paraiso, Canyon Sam, and Denise Uyehara

Perhaps the most obvious way in which publishing norms control the dissemination of dramatic literature is that publishers of literature prefer authors who have already gained mainstream recognition. With the notable exception of Berson's 1990 ***Between*** *Worlds* anthology, published by the Theatre Communications Group, mary of the collections of recent Asian American dramatic literature have been published by university presses and intended for a limited academic market. The only single-volume play that is currently marketed by a trade press is Penguin's edition of David Henry Hwang's M. ***Butterfly,*** which at the time of publication had already won numerous awards, including a Tony; Penguin has also subsequently republished a number of Hwang's other work in *FOB and* ***Other*** *Plays.* With such an emphasis on validation by mainstream theatrical institutions, it is not surprising that any claim that theatrical production can make for having value for a specific local community is discounted when plays are repackaged as "dramatic literature." Theater that is directed at specific communities—and much of the theatrical **work** by Asian Americans falls into this category—is automatically excluded by virtue of its topical nature. Vernacular forms of theater such as yearly shows, pageants, or displays in local Asian American communities are screened out in this selection process.

By making evident the limitations of studies such as this one, I hope to encourage other studies and publications to contest and build beyond, rather than reproduce, these problems. We must acknowledge the constraints that still exist at the levsl of dissemination of material One obvious task is to publish or otherwise make available a broader range of dramatic works, as well as to acknowledge the limitations of what is currently promoted as Asian American drama, literature, and art. Such a critical dialogue is necessary, particularly at a time when such works are

used as self-promotion or to establish a claim to pluralism in the theater season or academic curriculum. The danger of limiting "Asian American" performance to particular groups is accentuated when the inclusion of only one or two new plays in an anthology, a production season, or a reading list disguises itself as progress.

We also need to move toward a critical method that investigates the changing manifestations of what it means to perform—as opposed to simply be—Asian American. The rapid expansion and diversification of Asian populations in the United States renders suspect the notion of a monolithic Asian American experience or identity. Accordingly, this book cannot define what the quintessential Asian American play is or should be. Instead, I have attempted to outline some of the leading questions that we face in thinking about what **is** Asian American, and about what happens in the theatrical event. The plays I consider necessarily cover a broad range of subjects and dramatic styles. What they share are certain theatrical strategies that make issues of performance, dramatic form, and audience response inseparable from considerations of ethnicity and race. Traditional theories of theatrical presentation have not allowed for a discussion of how the perception of race and ethnicity affects cognition and meaning in the theater. In order to understand the emerging ways of constructing not only what is Asian American, but what is more generally racialized or ethnicized, I suggest that we begin by developing a more complex critical vocabulary and a theoretical position from which to talk about the theater.

Organization of the ***Book***

I start this dialogue by discussing, in Chapter 2, how the use of realism by Asian American playwrights forces a reconsideration of theories of spectatorship in the theater. Feminist critics such as Jill Dolan are suspicious of realism's tendency to allow the spectator to become the un-

seer., privileged voyeur of theatrical scenes. For Dolan and others, realism seemingly prctects a masculine spectator's privileged position of consumption, preventing the events of the drama from ever challenging his uninterrupted viewing pleasure in the feminine object. These terms—the masculine spectator and the feminine object—are easily translated into a critique of realism's portrayal of racial others, and in *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America,* James Moy paves the way for such a reading. Although he does not directly target realism, Moy does use a model of spectatorship similar to Dolan's, illustrating how a relationship of masculinized white spectator to feminized Asian object is preserved in a variety of artistic modes. Moy finds this guilty paradigm of Asian bocies "consumed)) by white spectators at work not only in the use of Oriental stereotypes, but also in plays written and produced by Asian Americans. For Moy, viewing pleasure of this sort can only be victimization: Asians as the objects of the white gaze. There is no room for the Asian American spectator in this paradigm without making such a subject-position complicitous in its own oppression.

The positioning of imagined "ethnic" spectators, as suggested by certain plays by Asian Americans, complicates these binary viewing paradigms. The rigid model of the exotic Asian object, constructed for the pleasure and consumption of while spectators, affords only limited possibilities beyond simple recognition or refusal of racial and ethnic difference, Realism might in fact work in another way, by self-consciously countering stereotypical portrayals of Asians and teaching an audience how to see "real" Asian Americans. Moreover, the ways in which ethnic identification works in realistic plays are more complex than either Dclan's or Moy's paradigms allow. Two plays in particular, Frank Chin's *The Year of the Dragon* and David Henry Hwang's *Family Devotions,* illustrate how even within the confines of the fourth wall, realistic plays can complicate notions of a homogeneously "white" audience having power over the objectified Asian object. In *The Year of the Dragon,* this viewing

relationship is made self-conscious by Fred's monologues and other moments that focus attention on the voyeurism of the audience and that openly deride the consumption of ethnic people by the tourist's gaze. In ***Family*** *Devotions,* several viewing perspectives are suggested, particularly through the figure of Chester, who is placed as an observer of the other characters. Moments of discovery in the play remind spectators of their exclusion from full knowledge and mastery.

For Asian Americans, dramatic realism is particularly potent, for it imagines the self as real and authentic and the audience as homogeneous and unified. But I do not end Chapter 2 with a celebration of ethnic solidarity, an idealized vision of Asian American theaters full of Asian American audiences. Instead, I find that Rey Chow's notion of the "ethnic spectator" is more useful, insofar as it allows for a more partial and trntative identification. This theorizing of spectatorship allows us to understand how audiences from highly different backgrounds can identify with characters, even those who sometimes take on a stereotypical and demeaned form.

In Chapter 3 I discuss how Asian American writers, notably Frank Chin, have adopted a violently masculinist stance to counter a perceived emasculation of the Asian male and the threat of extinction of the Asian American social body. The passionately patriarchal, homophobic, and sexist discourse that constitutes Chin's repudiation of the effeminate writer and informs his creation of the heroic outsider as Chinaman also drives his play, *The Chickencoop Chinaman.* I argue that the theatrical power of this play comes not only from its social commentary, but also from a Freudian fantasy of castration and rebirth in which Chinaman and black man are allied in their heroic struggle to transform bodily scars into marks of valor.

Chin is not the only dramatist to attempt such a redemption of the Asian American male. A later play, R. A. Shiomi's ***Yellow Fever,*** can be read in similar fashion, as a response to the symbolic emasculation of the

Asian male through historical racism and stereotypical representation. It is also a play that, by translating the detective hero Sam Spade into Sam Shikaze, envisions filmmaking as a means of making men whole. However, Shiomi's more playful handling of the terms of castration and scarring also marks a broader flexibility in this masculinist paradigm. The play can be read not only as the realization of a desire, first articulated by Chin's protagonist Tam Lum, to make a film that confers the normative values of masculinity on the Asian Canadian male, it can also be interpreed as a fantasy that ultimately erases gender distinctions in favor of ethnic ones. in ***Yellow*** Fever, castration is conceived as a historical wounding that affects women as well as men. From this reading, I conclude that masculine identifications in recent plays by Shiomi and others are often constructed within parodic and self-conscious contexts that allow more than one kind of viewer identification and spectatorial pleasure.

Chapter 4 uses two plays—Philip Kan Gotanda's Yankee *Dawg* ***You*** Die and Hwang's *M. Butterfly*—to focus on a highly charged theoretical issue: the reappropriation of Oriental stereotypes by Asian American playwrights. Earlier I suggested that theatrical realism might displace and counter these exaggerated images. These twc plays are more problematic, however, in that they reproduce characterizations such as the grotesque villain or the submissive tragic female, evoking rather than ignoring the theatrical power stereotypes possess. Such works are either celebrated by critics who believe that reproduction of the racist stereotype subverts it, or decried by those who argue that repetition of the stereotype perpetuates the values of its ugly past. Homi Bhabha's formulation of the colonial stereotype as a fetish that reveals an implicit anxiety is useful in resolving this critical conflict. For Bhabha, the repetitive and violent natur: of the stereotype exposes the uncertainty in the power dynamic between the white self that seeks to imagine itself as coherent and its parodic "mimicry." From this perspective, Hwang and Gotanda create

versions of stereotype with exaggerated, undiminished powers. Far from defusing them into empty signs, the plays emphasize the overdetermination and pervasiveness of stereotypes. I suggest that whereas stereotypes cannot be reappropriated without evoking their racist history, their performances can nonetheless reveal the inner dynamics of a stereotype and suggest the potentia for its disruption.

Both ***Yankee*** *Dawg You* ***Die*** and *M. Butterfly* use similar strategies. First, they rob the stereotype of its power to substitute for the natural or essential being and reveal it as a social construct, the product of specific historical and socia circumstances. The stereotype becomes an enactment rather than a state of being; the characters are explicitly actors who either choose or are compelled to enact these stereotypes. This historicizing works to provide a specific context for these performances and reveals the anxiety inherent in the historic encounters that call them into being. The second strategy is to take advantage of the stereotype's inability to account fully for the body of the Other. A parodying of the stereotype in these plays makes obvious its inability to contain the excesses of the body. When the body of the actor is marked as "authenticaly Asian"—when an Asian stereotype is played by an Asian actor—the performance of the stereotype can become noticeably extravagant and hyperbolic. Finally, both plays openly acknowledge Asian Americans in the audience and play to their possible identification with Asian and Asian hmerican characters, even those presented in stereotypical form. The two readings in this chapter consider the marketing of the stereotype to the public by unwilling actors and—a much more disturbing issue—the erotics of the stereotype.

Chapter 5 discusses the implicit agendas and strategies behind Asian American history plays and the relationship of those theatrical strategies to recent historical narratives about Asian Americans. Both history books and history plays participate in constructing ethnic and racial identity by strategically formulating the past. In this sense, no strict division between

history as fact and theater as fiction is possible. Both are less reenactments of past events than a selective interpretation of details that reflect current impulses and tensions in the formation of Asian American identity.

For instance, the historian Ronald Takaki and others argue that Asian Americans have been singled out at significant moments as unassimilable; their exclusion was institutionalized by American naturalization policy, land ownership laws, and immigration restrictions. Dramatic histories also contest preconceived assumptions about America as the melting pot where immigrants assimilate by some natural and inevitable process, and instead draw attention to inequalities marifested in the social and legal history of Asians in the United States. Even though there are a variety of subjects for the history plays and a range of historical experiences of immigration and settlement, this impulse connects the histories and theatrical works. The action of plays such as Momoko Iko's *Gold Watch* and Wakako Yamauchi's *12-1-A* demonstrates tnat failure to assimilate is not so much the fault of a character's irreconcilable cultural differences, a stubborn refusal to let go of the old ways, as it is the inevitable result of exclusionary laws, institutions, and economic practices of a white-dominated America.

In the second part of Chapter 5 I examine how plays such as Hwang's *The Dance and the Railroad* and Yamauchi's *And the Soul Shall Dance* emphasize the close connections between Asian immigration and American labor practice. What is unique about the theatricalization of this history is its insistence on defining Asian American characters in excess of their pur: functionality as part of the workforce. Characters are consistently portrayed, in their physical and emotional life, as not fully containable within the system that exploited them. The plays tor-struct the "self' of the characters by emphasizing human action and experience in tension with the forces that seek to reduce them to laboring bodies, statistics, or profit margins. Finally, both written and performed history aim

to create a sense of pan-Asian community, emphasizing common interests over disparate cultural backgrounds. These Asian American history plays emphasize the past as a site of collective formation, thus implicitly constructing the present performance as a moment of coalition-building. The theatrical devices and techniques used in the plays foster a sense of ethnic, pan-Asian, and intergenerational bonding, emphasizing the transmission of symbolic objects or knowledge from generation to generation and focusing on younger characters as the recipients of such legacies. Yet, as I suggest for Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore,* both written and staged history are not without their more problematic tendencies. I conclude Chapter 5 by looking at Darrell Lum's *Oranges Are Lucky* in order to see how a play might resist a tendency toward celebrating and mythologizing the heroic individual.

Asian American scholars have recently pointed to the tension between collective action and individual self-interest on the part of young Asian Americans, a tension that affects such issues as activism, affirmative action, and the myth of the model minority. As interpreted by some, individualism is historically encouraged by the larger capitalistic system, which seeks to divide and undermine potentially subversive alliances. Chapter 6 examines a trope common in both Asian American drama and literature a violent doubling in which Asian American characters are pitted against their more Asian counterparts. This Asian American schizophrenia has received a variety of treatments in plays such as David Henry Hwang's *FOB* and Elizabeth Wong's *Letters to a Student Revolutionary.* Although each play performs and resolves this doubling differently, all call attention to the persistent divisions within characters who internalize the impulse toward individual success and repudiate a collective Asianness. The resulting tensions are indicative not so much of a split between Asian and American as of a rupture in a distinctly American system of values.

Chapter 7 considers the ways in which Asian Americans can be

thought of as "passing," as moving between the demarcatioas of race described on the physical body. Instead of imagining fixed geographic or psychic spaces of self and other, theatrical boundaries that reccgnize and mirror preexisting differences, certain theatrical **works** by Asian Americans **work** toward a more fluid understanding of race and ethnicity. Beginning with a melodrama by Gladys Ling-Ai Li, *Th? Submission of Rose Moy,* I examine how plays inscribe racia! and ethnic differences onto bodies, objects, gestures, and stage space. Velina Houston's *Tea* further explores the possibility of passing through cultural bcundaries. Houston's staging of passing, both in the stories of characters and in the transformations of the actresses in the theater, reveals the preoccupation with "mixed" blood, intermarriage, and geographic transplantation that is central to many other Asian American plays. Chapter 7 concludes with readings of Ping Chong's *Kind Ness* and Jeannie Barroga's *Walls.* Although these two plays are quite different in structure and aesthetics, both challenge preconceptions about racial and ethnic difference as it is marked within the boundaries of space, object, and body.