

INTRODUCTION

“It’s not right for a body to know his own origins”



Chinamen are made, not born, my dear. Out of junk-imports, lies, railroad scrap iron, dirty jokes, broken bottles, cigar smoke, Cosquilla Indian blood, wino spit, and lots of milk of amnesia. —TAM LUM, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*

The “multi-tongued word magician” and title character of Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman* burst onto the stage in 1974 with a spectacular case of logorrhea. Argued by some to be the play that inaugurated contemporary Asian American theatre, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* opens with Tam asleep on a plane, dreaming/fantasizing a conversation with a baton-twirling “Hong Kong Dream Girl.”¹ Responding to her seemingly simple question (“Where were you born?”), Tam launches into a three-page rant that moves from fervent Bible-thumping sermon (“in the beginning there was the Word! . . . And the Word was CHINAMAN”) through a jazzy, beat-inspired fable of a chicken named Mad Mother Red (“running for pork chop suey in the dead of night”) and an exuberant sales pitch (“For I am a Chinaman! A miracle synthetic! Drip dry and machine washable”) before concluding ambivalently, “It’s not right for a body to know his own origins” (Chin 1981, 6–8). Although Tam’s witty, free-wheeling declaration of agency and self-authorship—that Chinamen are “no more born than nylon or acrylic”—might be seen as either sarcasm or “sheer bravado” (McDonald, xvi), it is also an apt response to the question, perhaps the only possible response. The Hong Kong Dream Girl inquires after Tam’s nativity in hopes of thereby determining his *real* identity; her assumption is that his birthplace—China or the United States—will *explain* him and that the distance between these two sites is stark and dispositive. Tam thwarts this genealogical approach by asserting a synthesized identity that does not conform to her model. For Tam (and Chin), although the label *Chinaman* was a designation first formulated and deployed to objectify and belittle Chinese immigrants,²

it is a *productive* construction. Tam's monologue problematizes that prior, injurious usage, (partially) reclaiming the term by celebrating its elasticity and foregrounding its artificiality.

In a way Tam's genealogy of *Chinamen* charts the trajectory of this book. A collapsing of nationality, race, ethnicity, and bodily identity popularized in the nineteenth century in newspaper editorials, legal decisions, literature, and theatre of the period, *Chinaman* marked Chinese Americans as fundamentally different from (and inferior to) a "norm," as politically and biologically not-"American"—this despite the fact that by the turn of the century 118,000 Chinese Americans lived and worked in the United States, establishing businesses, communities, institutions, and families here, much like every other immigrant group before and since (Hing, 48). *Chinaman*, then, marks a process of *abjection*, an attempt to circumscribe and radically differentiate something that, although deemed repulsively *other* is, paradoxically, at some fundamental level, an undifferentiable part of the whole. Tam's (fantasized) triumph over that racist circumscription is achieved by playing with the abject term, neither wholly disproving it nor altogether sanitizing it of its racist origins; rather, with fierce defiance (and no small measure of irony) Tam occupies the position of the abject in order to expose and exploit its contradictory nature.

Like *Chinaman*, *Asian American* is a category both produced through and in reaction to abjection within and by dominant U.S. culture—a discursive formation that both describes a demographic category and calls that category into being. Yen Le Espiritu notes that panethnic Asian Americanness was self-consciously produced as the result of a confluence of anti-Asian hostility, demographic enumeration (that is, census categories), political protest, and coalition building that resulted in "reactive solidarities" (135).³ As Espiritu, Glenn Omatsu, William Wei, and others have shown, "Asian Americanness" as a panethnic, self-identified political and social coalition/identity is a mid-to-late-twentieth-century creation, an antiracist coalitional strategy;⁴ but the amalgamation of a wide range of ethnic communities descending from and including immigrants and refugees from various countries in East, South, and Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands through legal, social, and political racism began long before that. As I elaborate in the remainder of the introduction, both uses of the term/category have continued currency into the present day; and in using the term *Asian American* throughout this study I hope to retain that tension between anti-Asian racialization and political coalition building—for it is in that tension that the productive potential of abjection lies.

Tam's phrase "made, not born" invites us to examine the production and performance of Asian Americanness within the context of a U.S. culture that

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has historically, repeatedly (although not uniformly or continually) insisted on its cultural and political abjection. It poses the question, “How might studying performance help us better understand the relationship between ‘Asian Americanness’ and (U.S.) ‘Americanness?’” Not absolutely or permanently excluded from that latter identity and yet not quite representative of it, I want to suggest that Asian Americanness functions as *abject* in relation to Americanness. Julia Kristeva defines *abjection* as both a state and a process—the condition/position of that which is deemed loathsome and the process by which that appraisal is made—and she deems “abject and abjection [as] . . . the primers of my culture” (1982, 2). It is, for her, the means by which the subject/“I” is produced: by establishing perceptual and conceptual borders around the self and “jettison[ing]” that which is deemed objectionable, the subject comes into (and maintains) self-consciousness. Read as abject, Asian Americanness thus occupies a role both necessary to and mutually constitutive of national subject formation—but it does not result in the formation of an Asian American subject or even an Asian American object. The abject, it is important to note, does not achieve a (stable) status of *object*—the term often used to describe the position of (racially or sexually) disenfranchised groups in analyses of the politics of representation. Rather, I deploy the discourse of *abjection* in describing Asian American performance because (as in Kristeva’s formulation) “there is nothing objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier” (1982, 9). For what characterizes Asian Americanness as it comes into visibility in the present study is its constantly shifting relation to Americanness, a movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation; it is that *movement between* enacted by and on Asian Americans, I argue, that marks the boundaries of Asian American cultural (and sometimes legal) citizenship. For U.S. Americanness to maintain its symbolic coherence, the national abject continually must be both made present and jettisoned. In positing the paradigm of abjection as a national/cultural identity-forming process, this book offers a way of “reading” Asian Americanness in relation to and as a product of U.S. Americanness—that is, as occupying the seemingly contradictory, yet functionally essential, position of constituent element and radical other.⁵

In employing the lexicon of abjection I do not intend to import the entire apparatus of psychoanalytic theory with respect to the formation of the subject nor to suggest that a uniform, linear process takes place in the psyches of all (white? non-Asian?) “Americans” who experience and process the “difference” posed by Asian Americans in order to arrive at a determination of Asian American abjection. Nor am I arguing for abjection as a sole causal explanation of the transhistorical construction of Asian Americanness. Certainly there

are other, complementary ways of understanding the history and consequent performance of Asian Americanness—many of which I cite throughout this study; however, I utilize *abjection* as a descriptive paradigm in order to posit a way of understanding the relationship linking the psychic, symbolic, legal, and aesthetic dimensions of national identity as they are performed (theatrically and otherwise) by Asian Americans.⁶ What *National Abjection* attempts to grapple with is the complex relationship between affective experience and cultural expression in the formation of Asian Americanness; the concept of abjection describes how that relationship may be understood as a *process* in a way that accounts for the trajectory of Asian American theatre, including the ineffectiveness of some political/performance responses to anti-Asian American racism, and the effectiveness of others.

Judith Butler briefly references the apparatus of abjection to analyze and critique gendered social subjectification in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Butler considers how certain bodies (white, heterosexual males) come to *matter* or function as centralized within social discourse, whereas others do not: "The object," she writes, "designates here precisely those 'unlivable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject" (3). What I find profitable in these formulations are the links they articulate connecting psychic, social, visual/perceptive, and bodily experiences of identity. Scholars of the politics of representation, and particularly of *performance*, must grapple with the connections linking the body, the image, and the polis, in other words, connections between affect and effect; so although I may defer from adopting the *corpus* of Western psychoanalytic narratives, values, and assumptions as universal, I have found portions of that lexicon productive for this project.⁷



On the most material level, as feminist, critical legal, and critical race theorists have demonstrated, the legal parameters of U.S. Americanness have been premised on racialization (and sexualization) in order to construct the "ideal" subject of the law as an Anglo-European heterosexual male.⁸ By examining the history of the adjudication of race in the United States, Ian Haney López has concluded that it has been produced both physiologically and conceptually through the court. The prerequisite laws establishing whiteness as prerequisite to naturalized citizenship, in effect in various forms from 1878 to 1952, writes Haney López, "have directly shaped the physical appearance of people in the United States by limiting entrance to certain physical types and by alter-

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ing the range of marital choices available to people here. What we look like, the literal and ‘racial’ features we in this country exhibit, is to a large extent the product of legal rules and decisions” (15). Even more fundamental to American whiteness for Haney Lopéz are the conceptual or perceptual ways law has constructed race in the United States (whose effects extend well beyond the period governed by the prerequisite cases), by creating the legal categories that largely determine our understanding of “biological” racial difference and by “defin[ing] the content of racial identities and . . . specify[ing] their relative privilege or disadvantage in U.S. society” (10). That is, the cultural or symbolic dominance of whiteness in the conceptualization of “U.S. citizen” has been supported through the periodic, systematic exclusion of nonwhites through immigration regulation and the differential allocation of material and social privileges along racialized lines.

In similar fashion Asian Americanists have argued that the literal and symbolic exclusion of Asians (among other groups deemed undesirable) has been fundamental to the formation of (legal and cultural) U.S. Americanness. “In the last century and a half,” writes Lisa Lowe, “the American citizen has been defined over against the Asian immigrant, legally, economically, and culturally” (4, emphasis in original). Lowe argues that discursive manipulation of the categories of (Asian) “immigrant” and “citizen” (and material control over their respective bodies) has been foundational in the production of U.S. American citizenship, both legal and symbolic, often by defining them as mutually exclusive. The conceptual U.S. citizen-subject comes into being, in other words, through the expulsion of Asianness in the figure of the Asian immigrant.⁹ Certainly, the history of the regulation of Asian immigration includes repeated incidents of symbolic and literal expulsion as a means of establishing and maintaining a racially specific “Americanness,” albeit punctuated by intermittent periods of (partial) inclusion/assimilation. Acts of Congress and rulings by federal and state courts denying entry or reentry, citizenship, and other rights to Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, South Asians, and Hawaiians on the basis of their incapacity to “assimilate” and the threat thereby posed to “real” American citizens and culture span the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries; and although many of the early cases/regulations have been overturned and/or superseded, they are nonetheless worth consideration for their explicit articulation of many of the rationales that continue to justify cultural/symbolic Asian exclusion in order to conserve “American” identity and resources.

In *re Ah Yup* (1878), the first federal adjudication of a racial prerequisite to naturalization, for example, is instructive for its linkage between “race” and social/cultural assimilation as mutually reinforcing justifications for Asian exclu-

sion. In deciding the case, federal Circuit Judge Sawyer (writing for the Court) consulted *Webster's Dictionary* (on race), the *New American Cyclopaedia* (on ethnology), and debates on the floor of the U.S. Senate regarding "the Chinese problem" (which largely focused on the issue of Chinese immigration and its effects on the U.S. labor market). Sawyer concluded that despite the fact that "none can be said to be literally white, and those called white may be found of every shade from the lightest blonde to the most swarthy brunette," based on consultation of these materials "it is entirely clear that congress [sic] intended by this legislation to exclude Mongolians from the right of naturalization" (223, 224; 1 F. Cas. 223 [C.C.D. Cal. 1878]). Similarly, *In re Kanaka Nian* (1889) based its ruling (denying the plaintiff's naturalization application) in part on evidence that "it does not appear to the satisfaction of the court that the applicant understands the principles of government of the United States or its institutions sufficiently to become a citizen." The Utah Supreme Court based its decision on evidence that the petitioner could not read the U.S. Constitution in English (although he testified to having read it in translation) and could not name the U.S. president at the time (259; 6 Utah 259 [1889]). Claiming that "the man entrusted with the high, difficult, and sacred duties of an American citizen should be informed and enlightened [and] . . . should possess a feeling of moral obligation sufficient to cause him to adopt the right," the Utah Supreme Court thus established moral and literacy parameters for Americanness, which the petitioner was found unable to meet. Finally, the most sweeping and explicit expression of this impulse to exclude Asianness, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, barred entry (and later reentry) of resident alien Chinese altogether. In its review of the circumstances leading to the passage of the act, the U.S. Supreme Court (in *Chae Chan Ping v. United States*) noted that Chinese immigrants gained an (unfair) advantage in competition for labor opportunities because "they were generally industrious and frugal," and "they remained strangers in the land, residing apart by themselves, and adhering to the customs and usages of their own country. It seemed impossible for them to assimilate with our people or to make any change in their habits or modes of being."¹⁰ Based on these sentiments, the Court reasoned, the Exclusion Act was found to be constitutional. The failure of Chinese persons to assimilate (and subordinate themselves economically) to a cultural norm of Americanness justified their exclusion in the eyes of the Court.

In these and numerous similar cases it seems the courts are searching for that elusive, incontrovertible proof of (excludable) foreignness or, rather, the cultural or (better still) scientific means by which to mark the "frontier" of Americanness by using Asianness as its limit case. We know what American-

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ness is, these decisions seem to imply, by pointing to the ways in which Asian applicants are not that. But as Judge Sawyer's admission in *In re Ah Yup* indicates, the evidence that should be most clearly dispositive—the raced body—proves paradoxically the most difficult to interpret and, therefore, the most difficult to regulate. Ironically, a “racial” prerequisite to citizenship that is theoretically based in biological/genealogical descent may prove vulnerable to attack precisely at the moment the biological body offers itself as testimony/evidence. In *United States v. Dolla*, for instance, the petitioner, an Indian-born Afghani, offered (and prevailed through the use of) physical evidence of “whiteness.” The U.S. attorney filed a writ of error, but in reviewing the case the U.S. Court of Appeals dismissed the writ, noting that in the naturalization hearing it was documented that

the applicant's complexion is dark, eyes dark, features regular and rather delicate, hair very black, wavy and very fine and soft. On being called on to pull up the sleeves of his coat and shirt, the skin of his arm where it had been protected from the sun and weather by his clothing was found to be several shades lighter than that of his face and hands, and was sufficiently transparent for the blue color of the veins to show very clearly. He was about medium or a little below medium in physical size; and his bones and limbs appeared to be rather small and delicate.¹¹

Putting aside momentarily the humiliation these details prompt one to imagine the petitioner might have suffered in this examination, it is ironic that in taking the racial prerequisites literally and faithfully, the immigration officials find on physical inspection of the plaintiff a truly “blue-blooded” American after all.

The immigrant body, then, poses a particular kind of threat to the (literal and symbolic) “American” body. As David Palumbo-Liu argues, exclusionist and antimiscegenation psychologists, sociologists, and jurists found a particularly effective synthesis in the “science” of eugenics/ethnology and the rhetorical politics of racial exclusion in the early twentieth century, conceptualizing the body of the nation as one in dire need of protection from infection: “A particular discursive formation evolved [during the 1920s and 1930s] that blended science with politics, economics with sociology, national and international interests, within which the nation was imagined as a body that must, through fastidious hygienic measures, guard against what passes from the exterior, excise the cancerous cells that have already penetrated it, and prevent any reproductive act that would compromise the regeneration of its species in an increasingly massified and mobile world” (24).

The bodily discourse that fueled the anti-immigrant, anti-immigration legislation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (and that arguably resurfaced in the 1990s, as evidenced by the passage of anti-immigrant legislation such as California's Proposition 187) constructed the figurative "national body" as an organism that must be protected from contamination or infection by the contagion—both literal and figurative—that the immigrant body represents.¹² Kristeva draws a similar metaphoric relation between the body and cultural formation in her formulation of abjection. Ostensibly elaborating a theory of culture, Kristeva argues that the quintessential experiences of abjection are decidedly rooted in the body: "as in true theatre . . . refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. . . . My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. . . . If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (1982, 3, emphasis in original).

The corpse is, for Kristeva, "the utmost of abjection" precisely because it cannot be categorically or permanently "jettisoned": our bodies are continually approaching that state, and waste marks the presence of mortality and decay *within us*—evidence of the impossibility of successfully or permanently achieving "radical exclusion" of the object: "It is death infecting life. Object. It is something rejected from which one does not part" (1982, 4). This paradoxical recognition of the abhorrent as already internalized marks a second aspect of abjection relevant to the present study: for as radically other/foreign to U.S. Americanness as courts (often reflecting more widely held cultural politics) have insisted Asianness is, there has been a consistent, simultaneous rhetoric (both legal and cultural) of "melting pot"/"multicultural" inclusion that envisions Asians as assimilable (or unavoidably assimilated) to U.S. Americanness. Certainly, exclusionary laws and policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1908 Gentlemen's Agreement (restricting immigration of Japanese laborers) were eventually repealed; even before those repeals U.S. citizenship was extended to (first U.S.-born, then naturalized) Asian Americans in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, albeit not without dissent. Citing the determining relevance of English common law, the majority compared the relative merits of citizenship based on parentage (*jus sanguinis*) and citizenship based on place of birth (*jus soli*) and weighed in on the side of *jus soli*. Two dissenting justices, however, made the somewhat unorthodox suggestion that the determination of citizenship is political and as such should not be made on the basis of English common law. Nonetheless, the end result was to convey birthright

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citizenship to American-born Chinese, despite the bar to naturalization for resident aliens.¹³

That process of (ambivalent) inclusion, as Palumbo-Liu and others have shown, is not only formative of Asian Americanness, but it is constitutive of (U.S.) “Americanness” itself. In the early twentieth century, a crucially formative period in the development of modern U.S. Americanness according to Palumbo-Liu, the prevailing cultural and political perceptions of Asian Americanness had their origins in prevailing cultural and political perceptions of Asia (either conceived collectively or as particular nations/regions) in relation to the popularly held mythologization/celebration of American modernity and westward expansion:

The very shape and character of the United States in the twentieth century—specifically, in the imaginings of modern American development in the global system—is inseparable from historical occasions of real contact between and interpenetrations of Asia and America, in and across the Pacific Ocean. The defining mythos of America, its “manifest destiny,” was, after all, to form a bridge westward from the Old World, *not just* to the western coast of the North American continent, but from there to the trans-Pacific regions of Asia. (Palumbo-Liu, 5)

The historical positioning of the United States in relation to “Asia,” he argues, has in turn directly influenced the perception of Asian Americans as either proof of the triumph of American modernity or, alternatively, as a call for careful risk management and/or exclusion. Similarly, Lowe notes that as a synonym for *immigrant*, Asian Americans “have been fundamental to the construction of the nation as a simulacrum of inclusiveness” (albeit limited by “the project of imagining the nation as homogenous,” which necessitates the simultaneous positioning of Asian immigrants as “fundamentally ‘foreign’ ”) (5). The nation-building mythology of Western expansion, then, colludes with those of immigrant assimilation and melting-pot democratization to the extent that they may provide an account of, and justification for, the presence of Asians in America.

This seeming contradiction—a history of expulsion and exclusion of Asian-ness and the discourse of multiculturalism/diversity and inclusion of Asians and other nonnormative subjects—is captured by the dilemma posed by abjection: it is through abjection that stable borders/subjects are constituted; but by definition that process of constitution can never be complete because, in Kristeva’s words, the process of abjection “does not radically cut off the subject

from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (1982, 9). And because the process is never fully successful or complete, the “deject” (“one by whom the abject exists”) must repeatedly reinforce those boundaries: “[a] deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh” (8). It is this dynamic and unstable aspect of abjection that makes it a peculiarly apt model for charting Asian Americanness. For if “Asianness” is what must be radically jettisoned in order to constitute “Americanness,” it is also (has always been) a source of “contamination.” If an element of abjection is the impossibility of wholly or finally differentiating it from the *deject*, what I am suggesting is that it is an (in)ability shared by the nation in its attempt to concretize national boundaries and that it is this inability that positions Asian Americans as a site of national abjection within U.S. American culture. Racialized as (always potentially) foreign, we nevertheless cannot be differentiated from the “legitimate” U.S. American subject with an exclusion carrying the force of law and therefore cannot be openly, completely, or permanently expelled; thus, to maintain the legitimacy of the dominant racial/national complex, the process of abjection must continually be reiterated or re-presented.¹⁴

The contradictory impulses of abjection were driving forces in the internment of mainland Japanese Americans during World War II.¹⁵ Ostensibly on the basis of “military emergency” (the rationale of the Supreme Court’s finding of constitutionality), in 1941 nearly 120,000 people of Japanese descent (along with their non-Japanese spouses and multiracial children in some cases) were evacuated from their homes on the West Coast (many forced to abandon homes, farms, and other livelihoods) per President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066. The evacuees were relocated inland to “camps” (military outposts fenced and secured with armed guards). Of course, as Gordon Hirabayashi and other defendants who challenged the constitutionality of internment (and lost) pointed out, many of the internees were U.S. citizens; that is, the very entity being concretized/defended in the expulsion of a “foreign” threat (“American” lives, values, and property) included, indeed, required inclusion of that which was being expelled. The democratic principles ostensibly being defended abroad—freedom from racist genocide and colonial/nationalist brutalities—led directly to racist-nationalist oppression and property theft at home. The internment camps themselves can be seen as spatializations of abjection: their locations chosen precisely on the basis of their interiority (remoteness from the West Coast), the camps were fenced and patrolled by armed

guards to keep a *foreign* threat out by, paradoxically, drawing it further in. The rhetoric of the Japanese American Citizens' League (JACL) similarly exemplified this abject contradiction: by peaceably submitting to the War Relocation Act and thereby embracing the role of the abjected (symbolic) foreigner, its leaders advised, internees would be demonstrating their exemplary Americanness. In his memoirs then-JACL leader Mike Masaoka recalls his reasoning at the time. Given advance notice of the army's intention to relocate West Coast Japanese, he (and Saburo Kido, fellow JACL leader) concluded they would advocate compliance:

In a time of great national crisis the government, rightly or wrongly, fairly or unfairly, had demanded a sacrifice. Could we as loyal citizens refuse to respond? The answer was obvious. We had to reason that to defy our government's orders was to confirm its doubts about our loyalty.

There was another important consideration. . . . Cooperation as an indisputable demonstration of our loyalty might help to speed our return to our homes. Moreover we feared the consequences if Japanese Americans resisted evacuation orders and the Army moved in with bayonets to eject the people forcibly. . . . I was determined that the JACL must not give a doubting nation further cause to confuse the identity of Americans of Japanese origin with the Japanese enemy. (Masaoka and Hosokawa, 92)

Masaoka, Kido, and other JACL leaders urged the Japanese American community to prove its Americanness by consenting to its removal. These exhortations to "patriotism" complicated the exclusionary impulse of the relocation, claiming the "insider" status of Americanness by embracing the position of the (abject) "outsider." This paradox was heightened further when Japanese Americans in or en route to camps were drafted (or volunteered) to serve in the U.S. Army; although foreign enough to require "radical jettisoning" from their homes, they were simultaneously seen as sufficiently American to serve "their" country abroad—as combat soldiers in Europe, as well as, in many cases, translators in postwar occupied Japan.

Although Congress passed (and Presidents Reagan and George Bush Sr. signed) acts providing monetary and other reparations for former internees in 1988 and 1992, the injuries of others abjected in World War II have not been redressed.¹⁶ For nearly a decade Filipino veterans of World War II have been fighting for the benefits they earned fighting alongside or as part of the U.S. Army, and their struggle illustrates even more explicitly the ways that abjection functions not only symbolically but literally, materially, and legally. When the U.S. entered World War II and engaged the Japanese army in the Philippines,

more than 250,000 Filipinos were ordered into service by President Roosevelt. Promised U.S. citizenship and full military benefits, these soldiers served under direct U.S. military command or in concert with U.S. troops. However, when Congress passed the postwar Recision Act in 1946, it reneged on its promise to provide citizenship and/or benefits to many Filipino veterans.¹⁷ Coerced into “inclusion” in a wartime symbolic “Americanness” through military service, in other words, these veterans were symbolically “expelled” once the war ended; their pursuit of justice (which continues as of this writing), in calling attention to their claim to “insider” benefits, produces the characteristically vacillating and ambivalent discourse of abjection. Although President George Bush Sr. revived the citizenship promise in 1990 and a significant number of veterans patriated as a result, Filipino veterans continued to receive only half the compensation of other U.S. veterans. A “Fact Sheet” distributed by the Department of Veterans Affairs (“VA Benefits for Filipino Veterans”) distributed in September 2000 explains the dilemma posed by this discrepancy:

the difference [between full benefits and half benefits] was intended to reflect the differing economic conditions in the Philippines and the United States. Through the years since World War II, however, many Filipino veterans and their dependents have immigrated to this country. Filipino veterans living in the United States face living expenses comparable to those for U.S. veterans. Limiting payment of subsistence benefits to those Filipino veterans results in an undue inequity and potential hardships to this group of beneficiaries.

What signals abjection in this excerpt, I would argue, is its insistence on a qualitative distinction between “Filipino veterans living in the United States” and “U.S. veterans,” even as it suggests their living expenses are “comparable.” These Filipino veterans were drafted by the U.S. government and fought under U.S. command with the assumption that such service would secure U.S. citizenship. It is difficult to understand, then, in what sense these veterans are not U.S. veterans—especially given the fact that in many cases they applied for and obtained U.S. citizenship once it was made available to them in 1990. Their struggle for benefits foregrounds the tensions that bring symbolic citizenship into visibility: these veterans performed perhaps the ultimate citizenly duty, risking and in many cases giving their lives in defense of “America,” yet this exemplary performance is not (or is only begrudgingly) recognized as entitling them to “American” benefits under the law.

In 2000 President Clinton signed into law new regulations providing full VA benefits—but only for those Filipino veterans residing in the United States.

(Veterans who return to the Philippines receive 75 percent of their Supplemental Social Security Income, or ssi). The new program includes restrictions for Social Security, pensions, and disability income, which render the new “benefits” practically unfeasible, according to veterans’ advocates. “If you deduct everything,” argues Lourdes Santos Tancinco, board president of the San Francisco Veterans Equity Center, “you end up with zero” (qtd. in Wells). Veterans advocacy groups continue to press for full benefits for all veterans, but the current state of the law illustrates how abjection works to ramify (and, in this case, reestablish) boundaries between inside and outside, by recognizing the ways in which Filipino veterans are functional participants in U.S. Americanness (by virtue of their military service) then forcing them to either assimilate (through citizenship) to sameness or be jettisoned (by forgoing or surrendering citizenship and returning to the Philippines, thereby forfeiting the benefits they earned). In other words, their situation highlights the instability, inconsistency, and perhaps arbitrariness with which legal citizenship (and its attendant rights and benefits) tracks the symbolic performance it purports to codify; abjection of these veterans, through insistence on their *difference* from “U.S. veterans,” settles (gives the appearance of settling) that uncertainty.

In his account of the contradiction that marks Asian/ Americanness (which he characterizes as “a tenuous, historicized, provisional, and contingent consolidation of a nation against ‘itself’”), Palumbo-Liu suggests that “the deployment of the model minority myth is an exemplary instance of [the] negotiations of social and political subjectivity” (170–171). Indeed, the popular depiction of Asian Americans as a “model minority” illustrates the very contradictions that characterize abjection. Praised and valued for their ability (and inclination) to *assimilate* into the “mainstream” (with an eye toward eventually disappearing in/as it)—indeed, to surpass even “normal” Americans (that is, whites) at being ideal manifestations of American success and self-determination at a particular historical moment (the early period of the civil rights movement), Asian Americans were singled out for their aptitude for conforming to dominant models of “proper” American citizenly values and practices (including subjection to the law, heteronormative and patriarchal “family values,” and especially the pursuit of higher education), over and against what were seen as other, less tractable, more antihegemonic racialized minorities.¹⁸ The ambivalence of abjection is coded into the oxymoronic term itself, which embraces Asian Americanness as exemplary of the correct embodiment of Americanness even as it marks that group out as distinguishable from “normal” Americanness by virtue of its racialized minority status.¹⁹

As Keith Osajima has observed, “model minority” rhetoric underwent modi-

fication over the next twenty years. By the 1980s, Osajima found, popular press references to the model minority frequently noted the shifting ethnic composition of Asian America and often focused on “newer” immigrant groups rather than on Chinese and Japanese Americans, although he concludes that “the continued reliance on culturally based explanations for success mirror the same dominant ideological assumptions that articles from the 1960s rested upon. Asian American success once again reaffirms that America is a land of opportunity” (169). It is not incidental that Osajima’s two phases of model minority discourse span an important period for Asian American abjection: the Vietnam War and subsequent refugee resettlement. The Vietnam War as a historical event constitutes a dilemma for the project of U.S. nationalism: a deeply divisive war that ended in retreat, its moral ambiguities continue to plague the national conscience, challenging the national narrative of the U.S. as paternalist protector of (Third World) innocents. An event that “shook the stability and coherence of America’s understanding of itself” (Lowe, 3), the Vietnam War thus constitutes an abject history, one that has repeatedly reasserted itself as a “wound” in need of “healing” (and thereby disappearing from our national conscience and self-image) and that (as I discuss in chapter 1) achieved a semipermanent “jettisoning” by being overwritten with a U.S. “victory” in the Persian Gulf in 1991.

Of particular relevance to the present study, the influx of Southeast Asian refugees resulting from the war and its aftermath may be seen as literal embodiments of that abject history, which threatened to (and occasionally succeeded in) collapsing the conceptual borders protecting a phantasmatic U.S. Americanness free from the “taint” of that war. Refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia by their very presence forced a reckoning by U.S. Americans with “our” involvement in the history that brought them to the United States and with their complex but undeniable claim to “Americanness.” Operating on the assumption that these populations would be more quickly absorbed/assimilated into “American” society (and thereby cease to be functionally recognizable as abject), the U.S. government pursued a policy of dispersal (via the Interagency Task Force, commissioned by President Ford in 1975, and later the 1980 Refugee Act), providing incentives to social services providers sponsoring the refugees to place the newcomers in areas without large Asian American populations, and to avoid placing perceptible numbers of refugees within a single community. But as Bill Ong Hing and others have noted, these “misguided” (Hing, 129) attempts to sanitize this population of its abject taint through rapid absorption/assimilation met with considerable resistance, both from more entrenched “Americans” who nonetheless saw the

newcomers quite clearly as abject and from the refugees themselves, who constructed a “counterdiscourse of resistance” (Palumbo-Liu, 247) by remigrating, reconstituting ethnic-identified communities, and cultivating a visible and well-defined sense of ethnic identity. That is, it is precisely by actively pursuing and reinhabiting the position designated as culturally “abject” that Southeast Asian Americans have resisted coerced assimilation to mainstream Anglo-Americanization.

The destabilizing threat posed by this contradiction, in turn, produces spectacularly divergent results—images and representations, as well as legal rulings and governmental policies, that vacillate wildly between positioning Asian Americans as foreigners/outside/deviants/criminals or as domesticated/invisible/exemplary/honorary whites. Radically unresolvable, the tension generated in that social/historical contradiction results in the production of *racial stereotypes* of Asian Americans in representation. As Homi Bhabha points out in positing the function of racial stereotypes in the colonial context, “an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition” (1994b, 66).

Thus colonial discourse functions, through the racial stereotype, to establish a self in opposition to an other by making that other abnormal, monstrous, and thereby fixed and *characterizable*. However, Bhabha continues, this fixity is “paradoxical” because a crucial second feature of the racial stereotype is its necessary *ambivalence*. “The stereotype,” he continues, “is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (66). Just as the abject perpetually threatens encroachment on the self and so must be continually abjected, so the racial stereotype can never be a single, definitive object. Through the racial stereotype, writes Bhabha, “what is being dramatized is a separation—*between* races, cultures, histories, *within* histories—a separation between *before* and *after* that repeats obsessively the mythical moment or disjunction” (82, emphasis in original); and the obsessively repeated tropes governing Asian American representation in dominant culture focus on two (related) characteristics: sexuality and nationality.

A defining characteristic of the Orient (in the eyes of the orientalist as described by Edward Said) is its status as “a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe” (Said 1978, 190). In her study of Hollywood representations of East-West sexual relations Gina Marchetti similarly

concludes, "One of the more enduring aspects of Western visions of Asia involves the East's supposedly intrinsic seductiveness. Associated with material opulence, moral laxity, sensuality, cultural decadence, and exotic beauty, this seductiveness implies a peculiar spiritual danger and often hidden threat to the Westerner" (67). This heightened or aberrant sexuality associated with Asia, then, functions to circumscribe the West in terms of sex, sexuality, and gender by defining its other. Kristeva suggests that the abject is similarly eroticized, virtually by definition (1982, 55), and indeed popular representations of Asian Americans can be characterized most prominently by their aberrant (and often contradictory) sexualities. Writing about filmic representations of Asian women in her essay "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed," Renée Tajima notes that "there are two basic types: the Lotus Blossom Baby (a.k.a. China Doll, Geisha Girl, shy Polynesian Beauty), and the Dragon Lady (Fu Manchu's various female relations, prostitutes, devious madames)" (309). As for Asian men, Tajima notes, "quite often they are cast as rapists or love-struck losers" (312). But as Richard Fung observes, even the "rapist" has fallen from view in recent iterations;²⁰ nevertheless, he offers a similarly antonymic pairing: Asian men in representation are "consigned to one of two categories: the egghead-wimp, or . . . the kung-fu master/ninja/samurai. He is sometimes dangerous, sometimes friendly, but almost always characterized by a desexualized Zen asceticism." In short, he concludes, "the Asian man is defined by a striking absence down there" (1991, 148). That these stereotypes should occur in contrasting pairs is significant, as Bhabha points out: "It is recognizably true that the chain of stereotypical signification is curiously mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse, an articulation of multiple belief. The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces" (1994b, 82).

But although Bhabha sees this split functioning to demarcate a linear progressive narrative ("under certain conditions of colonial domination and control the native is progressively reformable" [1994b, 83]), the coincident or simultaneous split in the case of Asian American stereotypes can also be understood as a product of abjection. Because the radically excluded abject is not wholly objectifiable (cannot be definitively differentiated from "real" Americanness), the image constantly wavers, attempting to reconcile itself to that condition/dilemma and thereby resulting in often diametrically opposed stereotypes, both purporting to represent "Asian Americanness."²¹

More accurately, these opposing stereotypes are often invoked in order

to represent Asianness (in the guise of Asian Americanness); to the degree Asian Americans are abjected in representation, they are frequently conflated with Asian foreigners. Abjection, in other words, functions to make Asian Americanness into Asianness. If Asian American identity functions as a site of racial/sexual/national abjection, then it can only be represented (objectified) once it has been radically excluded; as “ordinary” Americans, Asian Americans are often simply incomprehensible or invisible. This, finally, is the dynamic that largely dictates Asian American representation: if (paraphrasing Kristeva) the nation must abject itself within the same motion through which it claims to establish itself, it does so by abjecting Asian Americanness, by making it other, foreign, abnormal, *not-American*.

Countless other historical examples of Asian American abjection could be included in this list—the preceding discussion is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. What I hope becomes clear through these examples is a pattern of contradiction on the part of the U.S. government and mainstream culture with respect to various Asian American communities—at times embracing/ingesting them, at other times violently (if often symbolically) expelling/excluding/segregating them—and that these “contradictions” may be understood as a product of the continually collapsing project of abjection as a fundamental element of national identity formation.



Given this dilemma, how might the Asian American body be *performed*? Asian Americans have, after all, been engaged in (theatrical and quotidian) performance for more than two hundred years, and (self-proclaimed) Asian American theatre—as a dramatic genre/institution—has been in existence for more than forty years, a benchmark that prompts me to wonder *how* these images are seen, the process through which they become visually comprehensible. Those images did not arise *ab initio*, of course, but rather emerged from/against a centuries-old backdrop of racist portrayals of “Orientals,” “geishas” and, of course, “Chinamen.” Asian American performers never walk onto an empty stage; as James Moy, Robert Lee, and others have demonstrated, that space is always already densely populated with phantasms of orientalism through and against which an Asian American performer must struggle to be seen.

That those racist representations have a long and spectacular history has been well documented in excellent studies such as Moy’s *Marginal Sights* and Lee’s *Oriental*, along with another invaluable resource for Asian American theatre scholars, Dave Williams’s *The Chinese Other, 1850–1925: An Anthology of Plays*, which collects some of the earliest U.S. theatrical representations of “China-

men” and yellowface performance. These representations do not merely serve as a historical antecedent to contemporary Asian American performance, however; orientalist/yellowface performance continues unabated, enacting an ongoing process of national-racial abjection of Asian Americanness and providing a foil/backdrop/motivation for contemporary Asian American performance interventions. Chapter 1 thus focuses on a relatively recent instance of (mainstream) Asian American abjection in order to situate the Asian American performance responses/alternative strategies discussed in subsequent chapters. Examining in detail the controversial U.S. premiere of the musical production *Miss Saigon*, this chapter considers how that box office record-breaking representation of U.S. Americanness and Vietnameseness/Asianness effectively abjects Asian Americanness, precluding the possibility of its affirmative representation or visualization. Although *National Abjection* is not primarily focused on (abjecting) mainstream representations of Asian Americanness, it is nonetheless useful to begin here; for if the overwhelming force of dominant representation is to abject Asian Americanness, it is crucial to understand how it works, in order to decipher and evaluate Asian American responses and counterperformances. And although it may be fairly obvious that *Miss Saigon* is a problematic representation, it is still instructive to dissect that text and consider *how* it is problematic and, more important, what happens to the problems texts such as this set in motion. Abjection governed not only what was represented (or not) onstage but also the framing of the issues surrounding the controversial casting of white British actor Jonathan Pryce in the Eurasian role of the Engineer and the Asian American activists protesting that casting. Coinciding with the Persian Gulf War, the controversy came to signify not only a battle for “artistic freedom” (in the words of the show’s producers) but also for the embattled integrity of (white, heterosexual male) U.S. Americanness.

Turning from dominant cultural representations governing Asian American (in)visibility, beginning with chapter 2 I then consider Asian American performance in relation to that larger field of representation. What interests me about Asian American theatre/performance—which encompasses both the institutions and the genre(s) of dramatic literature and performance texts—is the way it can negotiate that process of coming into visibility. Clearly, one cannot simply opt out of the process of abjection/racialization through sheer force of will; but as I argue in chapter 2, the dramatic space is one where audiences are arguably willing to relax those otherwise punitively enforced restrictions on bodily identity and so may afford if not a complete repudiation of those imposed identities then at least (and at its best) a problematization of or critical engagement with them. The theatre is a place where one may (somewhat

safely) scrutinize the abject—a feature that renders it, in the eyes of performativity theorists such as Butler, less powerful: “In the theatre, one can say, ‘this is just an act,’ and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real. Because of this distinction, one can maintain one’s sense of reality in the face of this temporary challenge to our existing ontological assumptions . . . the various conventions which announce ‘this is only a play’ allow strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life” (Butler 1990, 278).

But as Kristeva’s discussion of the corpse (“as in true theatre . . . refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside” [3]) reminds us, abjection is at once a specular and affective process: one abjects (that is, becomes a deject) through a process of *looking at* (which may or may not result in *seeing*) that which is designated abject and recognizing one’s own bodily relation to abjection. What I am suggesting is that there is also a way to conceive of that process from the perspective of the one being looked at (or looked past/through), the one inhabiting the body and space of abjection, and that this constitutive and dynamic relationship between seeing and being, between seeing and feeling, is what makes *performance* a particularly fruitful site at which to examine the process of national abjection that produces Asian Americanness. Although the theatrical occasion may, in one sense, render the presentation of the abject “safe,” the theatre can also function to destabilize the rigid categories of self/other, subject/object/abject—not only on a self-consciously fictive or diegetic level but on an experiential one as well.

Certainly, this suspension of punitive identification between bodies and particular identities/abjections is only partial: one does not check all visual/cultural associations at the door of the theatre (hence the very possibility of cross-racial and cross-gender casting as political/aesthetic praxis); but it is precisely for this reason I argue theatre is an ideal place in which to interrogate the process of abjection. In speculating on “the future of the hyphen” (that is, intercultural exchange in theatre) Una Chaudhuri asserts that inherent in the medium is an awareness of the abject, “a whole hidden poetics of alterity”: “consciousness of otherness,” she writes, “is tightly woven into the fabric of the dramatic medium which—for all its vaunted commitment to liveness and presence—is always also projected into the future, into other times and places of its potential reincarnation” (1991, 202). The very fact that there is a body onstage, an actor who, all tacitly agree, is enacting a role/identity that is not “her own” necessarily implies a threat (and tacit acceptance) of the destabilization of the opposition between (to paraphrase Butler) bodies that matter and bodies that don’t.

Chapter 2 also considers the formation of some of the founding Asian American theatre companies, such as East West Players (Los Angeles), the Asian American Theatre Company (San Francisco), the Northwest Asian American Theatre (Seattle), as well as New York's Pan Asian Repertory, Hawai'i's Kumu Kahua, and Minneapolis's Theatre Mu. Through interviews with some of the founding members of these companies, as well as with artists who worked (deliberately or otherwise) outside those institutions, I argue that these companies operate alongside mainstream or racially nonspecific U.S. theatre in a dynamic that could be understood as an "abject/deject" relation: they serve an audience of community members, actors, and playwrights who, in most cases, would not otherwise be served/seen and who have been excluded/abjected from mainstream theatre; paradoxically, however, by definition they serve to reiterate their own abjection from the "mainstream" theatre industry. At the same time, these theatres maintain a complicated and dynamic relationship to both mainstream theatre and "Americanness," thus exhibiting the ambivalence and vacillation characteristic of abjection. Although not intended as an exhaustive history of Asian American theatre companies, this chapter posits a way of understanding why these institutions emerged when they did, as well as how they came to take up the political and aesthetic forms they currently inhabit as a relation/response to national abjection.²²

In light of that history chapter 3 examines the ways several early Asian American plays, as well as some more recent additions to the genre, reiterate (self-consciously or otherwise) the abjection of Asian Americanness. Plays such as Wakako Yamauchi's *12-1-A*, Elizabeth Wong's *Letters to a Student Revolutionary*, and Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *Year of the Dragon* all illustrate the integral role of abjection in the production of a (racialized) national subject. Further, these works provide an occasion to begin to consider discursive subject formation and bodily identity—and the vexed relationship between the two in conceiving Asian Americanness: by what alchemy, this chapter asks, do racial stereotype and nationalist rhetoric produce the *racialized body*? In each instance the abjection portrayed in these plays takes place primarily (but not exclusively) at the level of discourse, and the Asian American body onstage is deployed to challenge or disprove the discursive racial formation. In effect these plays attempt to produce a *counterdiscourse* using the raced body as its source text, explicitly challenging the abjection of Asian Americanness by representing Asian Americans as fully formed and fully materialized subjects, in stark contrast to the abjected (and therefore invisible) or objectified (and therefore hyperbolic and stereotypical) representations imposed by dominant culture.

Although these challenges to abjection are important antidotes to dominant

representations and are useful in helping us delineate the contours of racialized national abjection—they help us, in effect, see how abjection produces or circumscribes a certain kind of Asian Americanness—they simultaneously constitute the limits of comprehensibility and thereby risk essentializing Asian American identities. It would be a mistake—or at least insufficient—to consider only those ways in which Asian American theatre can represent the Asian American body as “not-abject.” Noting that citation of a norm (and the concomitant construction/rejection of its abject) offers itself as “an occasion to expose the norm itself as a privileged interpretation,” Butler raises the possibility (albeit limited) for transgression within this system: for those relegated to that position of abjection, “the task is to refigure this necessary ‘outside’ as a future horizon, one in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome” (1993, 53). How might that be done? Following Irigaray’s formulation of a woman’s strategy of “play[ing] with mimesis” (1985a, 86), Butler interprets Irigaray’s rereading of Plato’s *Timaeus* as a call to “citation, not as enslavement or simple reiteration of the original, but as an insubordination that appears to take place within the very terms of the original,” a strategy Butler terms “critical mimesis” (1993, 45). This is precisely the strategy at work in Asian American performance works such as those I consider in chapter 4: Velina Hasu Houston’s *Tea*, Jeannie Barroga’s *Talk-Story*, Philip Kan Gotanda’s *Yankee Dawg You Die*, and David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*. Rather than an outright disavowal or rejection of stereotypical, racializing/nationalizing discourse, these plays critically reterritorialize the position of the “abject” through mimicry, not necessarily to render Asian Americanness nonabject but to redeploy the threatening force of abjection. Moreover, in order to be effective in theatrical performance, critical mimesis cannot work primarily or exclusively through discourse: because theatre by definition consists of physical bodies taking on explicitly fictive roles, to merely *speak* or *role-play* the abjecting discourse is not enough to effect resignification. These plays are effective, to the extent they are effective, because they do not merely re-speak the discourse of abjection (perfectly, playfully, or otherwise); rather, they self-consciously engage the effects of that discourse *on the Asian American body* and recirculate and redirect the force of abjection through and on that body. In other words, in contrast to the plays discussed in chapter 3, these works do not re-present the process of abjection so much as they *perform the abject imperfectly*. Where the earlier works attempt to “truthfully” represent Asian American experiences and to assert that truth as a curative to the misrepresentations that make Asian Americanness comprehensible (that is, the racist stereotypes discussed earlier), the works examined in this chapter willingly, if playfully,

embody culturally comprehensible stereotypes even as those stereotypes are deconstructed.

Chapter 5 considers in depth the work of theatre artist Ping Chong. Focusing specifically on two plays in his “East-West” series (“Deshima” and “Chinoiserie”), I consider the pleasures, perils, and potential in deploying a critically mimetic representation in a transnational context. Chong’s historiographic series investigates the production of Japaneseness, Japanese Americanness, Chineseness, and Chinese Americanness as each of those concepts/positions/identities has accrued meaning and materiality over time. Looking backward (as well as forward) from the contemporary moment of globalization and transnational diasporan movement, Chong reembodies history in order to embody it differently. By contextualizing the process of Asian American abjection within a historically embedded transnational framework, Chong’s characters performatively re-vision national abjection onstage.