Significant Other: Staging the American in China.
By Claire Conceison. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004; 297 pp. $55.00 cloth.

Claire Conceison’s *Significant Other: Staging the American in China* is a groundbreaking study of identity politics and cultural representation in Chinese theatre. Conceison illustrates practices of signification of the “foreign Other” in China through the analysis of seven contemporary spoken dramas featuring American characters or other portrayals of American culture. Indeed, as the title of this cogently argued study suggests, “the American” has often represented a very “significant Other” in Chinese international politics and popular imagination.

Specifically, Conceison addresses an “open-ended,” “self-consciously temporal,” and “paradoxical” practice of “othering” that she categorizes as Occidentalism (54). The complexities of the Occidentalist paradigm are expounded in chapter 1 (“Setting the Sino-American Stage”) and chapter 2 (“Occidentalism (Re)considered”). Here Conceison provides the cultural-historical context and theoretical framework of her inquiry. She meticulously reassesses previous discussions of Occidentalism such as those by Edward Said, Xiaomei Chen, and James Carrier, thereby challenging dominant perceptions of both Occidentalism and its older and better-known sibling—Orientalism. She thus provides for the first time a systematic overview of the genesis and evolution of Occidentalism as a critical discourse and—most crucially—compels readers to think of it in new, thought-provoking ways.

Occidentalism is far more than a “response” to or a “reversal” of Orientalism, Conceison argues. She foregrounds Occidentalism’s connection to Orientalism in terms of their relationships to the “speaking subject” and “othered object,” yet rejects the notion of an East “incapable of othering” as well as conventional dichotomies of an “othering” West versus an “othered” East (50). In fact, China has long been a prolific producer of images of the foreign Other and not merely a passive victim of Orientalist scrutiny.

Referring to the widely accepted assumption that “representations of an objectified Other reveal as much, if not more, about the objectifying subject as the ‘othered’ object” (42), Conceison underscores the necessity of exploring the impact of such figurations on the “othered” community, contending that “such images, while articulating national and/or cultural identity [...] also do indeed speak for the Occidental Other in addition to the Oriental Self” (48). This is a decisive contribution to current conceptions of the Orientalist/Occidentalist paradigms.

Dramatic shifts in Sino-American relations occurred over the period in which the plays surveyed by Conceison were produced (1987–2002). For instance, the intensification of US-Taiwan diplomatic relations as signaled by a visit of Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui to the US in 1995 provoked indignant reactions in Beijing, for the US was seen as tacitly acknowledging Taiwan’s claims to sovereignty against the Chinese mainland. Tensions between the PRC and the US heightened further following the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. These events impacted heavily on the configuration of Chinese Occidentalism, as reflected by the plays scrutinized in Conceison’s book. These revealing texts operate as catalysts...
of the varying institutional, intellectual, and popular sentiments that surfaced in the period under examination—from the positive fascination with the American Dream prevailing in the 1980s to a proliferation of Ugly Americans taking the stage a decade later. Conceison underscores the multiple implications of such images through detailed examination of the plays and their production processes.

Chapter 3 (“Immigrant Interculturalism: China Dream”) illustrates the largely optimistic perception of the American in 1980s China as expressed by Sun Huizhu and Fei Chunfang’s Zhongguo meng (China Dream; 1987), an account of the interethnic romance between Mingming, a Chinese émigré to the United States, and the American Sinophile John. In contrast, Wang Peigong and Wang Gui’s Da liuyang (The Great Going Abroad; 1991), discussed in chapter 4 (“Exilic Absurdism: The Great Going Abroad”), chronicles the unsettling experiences of a Chinese exile in America, which is portrayed in this instance as a land of danger and alienation. The text delves into tropes of geopathology and traumatic displacement, hence dismantling previous idealistic views of the intercultural encounter while articulating metaphors of intracultural violence. Guo Shixing’s Niaoren (Bird Men; 1993), surveyed in chapter 5 (“Cultural Cross-Examination: Bird Men”) focuses on the troubled interactions between a bunch of Beijing bird raisers and three American or “Americanized” characters: a Chinese American psychoanalyst, a Caucasian American officer, and a Chinese ornithologist with a Westernized education. The bird raisers’ antiforeign remarks and their “observers’” skeptical attitudes towards them reveal oblique criticism of domestic policies alongside disparaging depictions of American culture and society as consequences of China’s shifting international agendas.

The deterioration of China-US relations that occurred in the mid- to late ’90s is powerfully voiced in the plays examined in chapter 7 (“Anti-Americanism: Dignity and Che Guevara”): Sha Yexin’s Zumyun (Dignity; 1997), and Shen Lin, Huang Jisu, Zhang Guangtian, and Guo Jianguo’s Qie Gewala (Che Guevara; 2000). Dignity is a courtroom drama about an overseas Chinese student suing her American employers for mistreatment, whereas Che Guevara is a “staged poem” about the iconic Cuban Revolutionary, featuring a group of American “baddies” among the characters.

A crucial shift in terms of identity politics and cultural representation occurs when “real” foreigners eventually are cast to play foreign roles in local productions in place of Chinese actors “in foreign drag” (31), thereby redefining the rules of the (mis)representation game. Early instances of this are Yu Luosheng’s Feida furen (Student Wife; 1995), which is explored in chapter 6 (“American Self-Representation: Student Wife”), and Sun Huizhu and Fei Chunfang’s Qiuqian qingren (Swing; 2002), the focus of chapter 8 (“Self-Occidentalism: Swing”). Student Wife addresses the trials endured by a couple of Chinese émigrés after moving in with an American couple—the latter played by two Chinese-speaking foreigners. Likewise, Swing shows the turbulent relations between two couples in America—two overseas students from China, and an American-born Chinese and her Caucasian American partner. This last character was once again played by a foreigner and, once again, came across as a fairly villainous one. As Conceison notes, in fact, self-representation does not always engender a debunking of Occidentalism but can also produce unwitting “self-Occidentalizing” acts (198).

Conceison’s assessment of the manifold implications of the elusive yet crucial concept of Occidentalism represents the most valuable and enduring contribution of her monograph. Surely, her comprehensive survey also benefited from her long-time involvement in the Chinese theatre scene, as it transpires from the engaging accounts of her experiences as an “Other” in China as well as the exhaustiveness and variety of bibliographical sources such as records of interviews, unpublished scripts, archival documentation, and other materials concerning the production and reception of the plays. The book also includes a set of photographs of the performances.

Ultimately, the value and scope of Conceison’s critical model extends far beyond the fields of Chinese or theatre studies. As her epilogue on Asian American theatre also suggests, any
discipline engaging with identity politics, cultural translation, and practices of (self-)representation will surely benefit from this study. Otherness is not a single and fixed entity, but a multifaceted and metamorphic one. Thus Conceison’s book will assist future scholars in exploring the intricate maze of cultural representation, and make sense of their own “significant Others.”

—Rossella Ferrari

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I once attended a staged reading in San Francisco; I recall neither the play nor the venue. What I do remember is that it was going badly. The play was a modern-day minstrel show with an African American cast and deployed disparaging stereotypes that were all too familiar to both the audience and the performers. Perhaps because actors typically rehearse staged readings for only a few hours, the play was desperately struggling to find its feet. The anxiety of the racially and ethnically mixed audience was growing by the moment: was this supposed to be funny? Then, in the midst of a particularly offensive chicken-stealing scene, two of the actors were no longer able to suppress their giggles. The audience paused, momentarily stunned, and then dissolved into gales of laughter. We laughed until tears streamed down our faces, until some of us really were weeping, but still laughing, too. I do not want to make too much of this moment: our collective laughter and tears did not serve as evidence of a singular audience experience or perspective. The unexpected and unscripted affective moment did not transcend our differences in favor of a universalized subject position, but it did allow us to recognize ourselves as a “temporary public,” and it allowed us, if only for a moment, to laugh in spite of horrific histories (25).

I offer this meditation on my own theatregoing experience as a kind of homage to Jill Dolan’s Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre, in which Dolan’s own description of moments she calls “utopian performatives” are descriptive, moving, and evocative. Ever mindful of the ways utopia and humanism have been deployed to coercive and fundamentally conservative ends, Dolan nevertheless works to reclaim affective experiences of hope, collectivity, and communitas, both for theatre scholars and for progressives, more generally. The theatrical experience, Dolan proposes, sets the stage for the emergence of the utopian performative, a “wish-oriented moment” that performatively enacts the imagining of a better world (6). Dolan builds on J.L. Austin’s (1975) use of the performative, in which saying something—as in pronouncing a couple as married—makes it so. That is, the performative enunciation enacts what it claims. But Dolan also resists the absolutism in this framework, emphasizing the political and social dimensions of the utopian performative. She turns to the words of José Muñoz to
describe this distinction, articulating her use of the utopian performative as a “blueprint for a possible future” (Muñoz in Dolan 174).

Dolan writes elegantly about nearly a dozen works of contemporary theatre, documenting and detailing the utopian performatives that each work enacts. Much of the first half of the book addresses contemporary solo performance; the second and third chapters investigate the autobiographical solo performances of Peggy Shaw, Deb Margolin, and Holly Hughes, and the multiple-character solo performances of Danny Hoch, Lily Tomlin, and Anna Deavere Smith, respectively. These performances provoke the intersubjective act of “finding our feet in one another’s shoes” (63). Dolan mines these performances for moments that envision a world that does not merely “tolerate” difference, but actively embraces cultural identities as fluid, mobile, and multiple.

In the fourth chapter, Dolan draws on theorists of the public sphere—Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, and Chantal Mouffe—to examine how certain kinds of theatre can construct what Mouffe calls a “political community” of radically engaged spectatorship (101). Through strategies of direct address, Dolan argues, this mode of theatrical performance can function as a site for the rehearsal and enactment of participatory democracy. Dolan sees this engagement modeled in *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway* (2002), which rewrote the “rules” of polite Broadway theatre spectatorship by encouraging the young audience to sing along with a DJ prior to the show’s ostensible beginning, generating a call-and-response relationship between the stage and the house. Dolan further investigates theatre’s relation to the public sphere in her critique of Tectonic Theatre Project’s February 2000 documentary play *The Laramie Project*, which chronicled life in Laramie, Wyoming, after a young gay man, Matthew Shepard, was beaten to death in 1998. Dolan identifies utopian performatives in the 2002 Austin, Texas, production of *The Laramie Project*, but also uses the November 2002 New York production as a cautionary example, identifying “the pitfalls of truly trying to embody another’s experience” (115). In the final chapter of the book, Dolan charts the utopian performative in relation to what she calls theatrical moments of “militant optimism” in the works of Mary Zimmerman, Ann Carlson, Deborah Warner, and Fiona Shaw. In what Dolan calls “the long moment after September 11,” these militantly optimistic performances reanimated hope without dispensing with grief; for Dolan, they seemed to offer an alternative to political performances of mourning that called exclusively for vengeance.

*Utopia in Performance* unabashedly embraces affective experiences in the theatre, moments that, as theatre scholars, many of us have been reluctant to subject to the rigors of scholarly analysis. Those readers who have been trained or have trained themselves to resist such explorations may initially find Dolan’s own “militant optimism” a difficult challenge to their own reflexive habits. Reclaiming humanism and the power of liveness at the theatre is no easy task, but Dolan astutely re-theorizes concepts of utopia, and turns to Herbert Blau’s work on the mortality of the actor to counter Philip Auslander’s critique of “liveness” and “presence” in the theatrical experience (40, 81). But Dolan’s insistence on the progressive social and political significance of affect is the book’s most important proposal. The most compelling questions she poses interrogate the political efficacy of affect, particularly in a post-September 11 world, where affect has been essentially co-opted by right-wing fearmongering. What is the relationship, Dolan asks, between being emotionally moved and instigating progressive political movement? That is, how can imagining a better world in the confines of the theatre’s walls enable progressives to constitute that world once the performance is concluded? Dolan leaves these questions open but powerfully suggests that what happens inside the theatre can (and must) have a direct relationship to political enactments outside its walls, that dreaming of change collectively is the first step that theatre allows us to take.

As an investigation of some of the most compelling work taking place in theatre at the turn of the 21st century, Dolan’s book is indispensable. Advocating radical humanism in both the academy and in politics, *Utopia in Performance* has stimulated a provocative and productive
conversation that has already deeply informed theatre and performance studies. Most significantly, however, Dolan’s frank embrace of the theatre’s pleasures will encourage readers to bring a new sensibility to their theatrical spectatorship; perhaps pleasure need not be guilty after all.

—Paige McGinley

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Dancing from Past to Present: Nation, Culture, Identities. Edited by Theresa Jill Buckland. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006; 320 pp.; illustrations. $55.00 cloth, $24.95 paper.

In her introductory essay, “Dance, History, and Ethnography: Frameworks, Sources, and Identities of Past and Present,” Buckland lays out the principle issues that run throughout this collection. Ethnography and history, as fields of inquiry and as methodologies, have typically been opposed, insofar as dance ethnographers primarily work in the “field” whereas historians are concerned with material to be found in archives. But with the crossing of disciplines, synchronic and diachronic perspectives also merge, enabling dance scholars to consider dance forms as historically situated yet ethnographically accessible cultural practices. “Folk culture,” as a concept that engages ethnic and national identity in opposition to European high culture or civilization, for example, is complicated in East European scholarship, where state-funded folk cultural studies still dominate. Government-funded institutes of ethnology and ethnography were long colored by the “folk paradigm,” beleaguering folk studies today with debates about “political affiliations with nationalism” (6). Similarly, uses of the past in the nation-building projects of 19th-century Europe set concepts of tradition and modernity into motion in the evolutionist paradigm of 19th-century scholarship, but were challenged by postcolonial interrogations of culture and authenticity, continuity and change.

In her essay, “Dances and Dancing in Tonga: Anthropological and Historical Discourses,” Adrienne L. Kaeppler interrogates the designation of “history” as a linear account of events, replacing it with an idea of history according to which only some fortuitous “moments” are noted. Her own experience as a participant-observer of Tongan dance in the 1960s and 1998, and her use of the theoretical analogy of dance with language, style, and aesthetics, enabled her to draw an idiosyncratic picture of the evolution of dance in Tonga by juxtaposing her experi-
ence with an 18th-century record described in Captain James Cook’s journals. For Kaeplinger, the transformation of the dance genre now known as *lakalaka* is predicated upon changing social structures: whereas the more poetic and obscure form of danced poetry based on the *heliaki* style was prevalent in earlier periods, by the 1990s, the gesturally and rhetorically complex, and highly metaphorical, form of address was replaced by an overtly political, narrative, chronological account of local history and biography. This enabled regents to speak publicly to a wide audience about national affairs in the public celebrations at which the dance is performed. Court and national ancestors’ names and deeds were now stated simply, without the gestural and rhetorical allusions characteristic of the *heliaki* style. For Felicia Hughes-Freeland, stories about the historical origins of court dance in Javanese culture are deeply embedded in a national rhetoric about Indonesian national identity. In “Constructing a Classical Tradition: Javanese Court Dance in Indonesia,” she argues that modern Indonesian culture is largely reactive, created contrapuntally to postindependence and postcolonial modernization processes. A myth of origins is transposed onto dance forms to grant legitimacy to the Indonesian state in much the same way as tenth-century Hindu-Javanese regents sponsored dance-drama performances to claim their supremacy. For Janet O’Shea, in “Dancing through History and Ethnography: Indian Classical Dance and the Performance of the Past,” *bharata natyam* is based on a movement vocabulary derived from the past, but contemporary dancers take some liberties with the forms. They elongate their gestures and broaden their floor patterns to accommodate proscenium-stage conditions and individual choreographic initiatives. As a performer, historian, ethnographer, and dance analyst, her own shifting terrains of inquiry enable her to perform oral history while training with dance masters, yielding a picture of competing claims to authenticity within “tradition.”

Judy Van Zile argues in “Interpreting the Historical Record: Using Images of Korean Dance for Understanding the Past” that the use of iconographic records, even if they have been produced by the royal court for the explicit purpose of documenting events, is problematic insofar as the images rarely show performable actions. The records were used in the Confucian tradition to teach moral lessons, hence their distortion of physical reality: the actions are aestheticized. For Van Zile, this should cause scholars to pause when relying on such archival materials in their research.

Somatic memory in dance research is a subject broached by Lynn D. Maners in her essay on “Utopia, Eutopia, and E.U.-topia: Performance and Memory in Former Yugoslavia,” and Deidre Sklar in “Qualities of Memory: Two Dances of the Tortugas Fiesta, New Mexico.” Maners examines the relationship between dance and political economy, suggesting that more research on specific political economies be conducted regarding state-sponsored, professional folk dance ensembles. This provides a contrast to research focusing on authoritarian uses of folklore to produce national history, offering instead a view of folklore ensembles as promoting tolerance of social and cultural difference through the performance of regional and cross-regional dances by professional or amateur groups. For Sklar, kinesthetic sensations constitute ways of knowing and remembering that are actualized in dance. Thus, in Tortugas, the “Tigua dance” works as a mnemonic device to remember or reembody a time before the missionaries arrived and Christianized the local population.

Concepts of tradition and authenticity are addressed by Buckland in “Being Traditional: Authentic Selves and Others in Researching Late-Twentieth-Century Northwest English Morris Dancing.” She argues that neat divisions into “traditional” and “revival” practices obscure complex relationships between past and present (199). “Traditional” morris dance forms were often seen to belong to rural, uneducated, working classes and to predate the folk revival movement of the early 20th century, while “revivals” were seen as part of a national program of recovery performed by educated men and women moved by “false nostalgia for a vanishing cultural past.” This opposition between tradition and revival is complicated in the mid-20th
century in a second movement of national regeneration that attracted a more socially diverse following concerned with local and regional variants (202).

Dance scholarship itself seen through a historical perspective is provided by the pioneer dance ethnographer Elsie Ivancich Dunin, for whom dance ethnology as a university discipline is necessary for understanding the role fieldwork plays in the study of dance in social context, and the challenges posed by its record and analysis. In “Romani Dance Event in Skopje, Macedonia: Research Strategies, Cultural Identities, and Technologies,” she describes her own history as a pioneer ethnographer at UCLA in the 1960s, and her fortuitous experience witnessing 10,000 “Gypsies” gathered in Skopje in 1967 (184). With the gradual acceptance of technologies of video documentation among Macedonian Gypsies, she was able to produce a “longitudinal ethnographic investigation” based on sustained, “multilevel contacts.” This provides her with footage spanning a number of years, tangible evidence of the continuity and changes in the Romani community. Such an “ethnographic strategy” provides the opportunity to move through historical dimensions, across past and present (195).

These essays taken together interrogate methods of inquiry employed in contemporary dance scholarship, offering dance and performance historians, anthropologists, and ethnographers a varied take on performance practices and their study around the world. This volume will undoubtedly set the tone for future research on history, culture, and ethnicity in dance, and on the historiography of the arts and social sciences.

—Kéлина Gotman

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In Performing Consumers: Global Capital and Its Theatrical Seduction, Maurya Wickstrom examines the fraught manner in which lifestyle brands insert themselves into the lives of consumers, who, in turn, perform their social identities through the process of consumption. Through her analysis of five case studies, examples of what she terms the “branded superstore” in the American economy, Wickstrom traces the development of the central metaphor of the theatrum mundi, the great theatre of the world, from its Platonic roots through the Renaissance, culminating in the theatricalized consumption of present-day culture.

Wickstrom appropriates architectural journalist Otto Riewolt’s description of a “brandscape,” which he defines as those stores whose goal is to “get the customer to identify with the world of the brand” (15). In
order to serve as one of Wickstrom’s “performer/consumers,” one must enact a kind of immaterial labor. Immaterial labor is intangible both in its process and its resulting product. Rather than a concrete object, it “produces the immaterial so increasingly indispensable to postmodern capitalism: information, communication, ideas, and emotional responses” (15). In a media-saturated society, the performance of consumption creates the very product vital to maintaining and perpetuating the capitalist system: more consumers. Each of the five superstores and shopping complexes that Wickstrom examines (Niketown, the Ralph Lauren flagship store, the Forum Shops in Las Vegas, the Disney Store with its ties to The Lion King musical, and the American Girl Place) creates a physical space in which the transformative act of consumption may be performed. The goal of such brandscapes transcends the purchase of any physical object. Instead, according to a Nike spokesperson, they serve to sow “the seed of a memory in your customer’s mind, so that you can […] harvest it—weeks, months, years, or even decades later” (14). Thus, by entering into the brandscape, consumer/performers are actually becoming part of a narrative, stepping into a lifestyle story in which their own imaginative capacity as well as their physical presence proves essential to forming a long-term brand relationship. In this labor process, shoppers function both as performers and sites of performance within an imaginative space, which the brandscape both acts upon and is enacted by.

Each superstore markets its own special narrative, but they all demand the physical presence of the shopper, a fact crucial to understanding how Wickstrom sees the brandscape working on consumers in an age of internet shopping as “an embodied comprehension” (17). Even as the narrative sold by the store takes root in the consumer’s mind, he or she must first be physically present in order to experience the “mimetic environment in which there is a ‘palpable, sensuous connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived’” (17). This environment destabilizes consumers, plunging them into a state of indeterminacy in which they doubt their own authenticity and value, and then lures performers with the possibility of reinvention, an opportunity to become someone else. Wickstrom sees this act of reinvention as fulfilling a specific need within the postmodern culture, namely allowing performer/consumers the opportunity to feel that their “identity is escaping foreclosure” even though simultaneously “the script of the place re-encloses” them “into the corporate agenda” (20). Consumers create the use of the brand, precisely because it allows consumers to experience the reassuring illusion that they have been able to escape the constraints of modern society, to “slip off the grid” (27).

Treating Niketown and the Ralph Lauren flagship store as emblematic examples, Wickstrom elucidates the very physical process through which different brandscapes offer mimetic environments. The processes are similar, necessitating certain differences in their respective brand identities and somatic worlds. Niketown must give birth to a new consumer, one who needs their running shoes as part of their new identity. Ralph Lauren offers the possibility of class transgression, of entering into the “old money” lifestyle as one climbs each floor of the flagship. In both cases, however, Wickstrom locates the physical body of the consumer as the crucial space in which the transformation must occur. The store becomes an obvious stage, on which the consumer serves as performer, first losing and then finding him or herself again. Wickstrom aligns her “spaces[s] of emergence” with the shifting implications of the metaphor of the theatrum mundi (37). In the Christian worldview, “the theatrum mundi was used to make people understand their life as performance, an imagined construction scripted and spectated by God” (49). During the Renaissance, the theatrum mundi moved toward a secular conception, in which “the market displaces God as playwright and audience” (50). In this conception, humans possess a creative ability, akin to that of the divine creator, an idea that destabilized both the fixed nature of social roles and the notion of identity itself. Thus, just as class barriers became permeable, so did the idea of the self become inextricably bound up in the demands of the emerging capitalist market. Wickstrom sees the embodiment of this theoretical progression in Las Vegas, specifically the Forum Shops in Caesar’s Palace, where actors and robots encourage shoppers to participate in various dramatic scenes, culminating in the apocalyptic performance of “Atlantis.”
In a sense, Wickstrom’s location of the theatrum mundi in Las Vegas epitomizes the postmodern consumer mentality that she describes, as “people come to Las Vegas fully aware of the dangers of their own greed […] In a consummately commodified environment, we are reassured that, through the commodity itself, the devastating effects of greed can be redressed” (65). The more commodified the society, the greater the need for the commodity that promises escape.

In later case studies, Wickstrom explores the various permutations of this “consummately commodified” world, from the Disney Store, which produces aesthetic satisfaction through “mimetic transformations and correspondence,” to the often grotesque marketing strategies of the American Girl Place, which offers “tweens” the opportunity to become a true “American Girl” by purchasing dolls and accessories, even as the achievement of this goal recedes from their reach (84). Each instance highlights the cyclicality of the process: The more jaded the consumer becomes, the more saturated with the pervasive brandscape, the more essential the process of escape through creative, or consumptive, reinvention becomes. In the eternally possible space of the brandscape, a new self is always accessible, even if true escape never is—the feeling of freedom, of limitless possibility, comes from holding fast to the very grid that pinions us.

—Carla Mastraccio

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