

DORINNE KONDO

# WORLD- MAKING

RACE, PERFORMANCE,  
AND THE WORK OF  
CREATIVITY



# W O R L D M A K I N G

*W O R L D*

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Race, Performance, and

# *M A K I N G*

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the Work of Creativity

Dorinne Kondo

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FOR  
ROY JISUKE KONDO  
AND  
MIDORI KONDO

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## *acknowledgments*

Acknowledgments are where authors usually perform gratitude, joy, and pride. In the spirit of the genre-bending this book performs, I fiercely insist on ambivalence, acknowledging joy, gratitude, *and* mourning.

This book “should have” been done by December 2015, but my life was abruptly interrupted by what doctors told me was the need to have open heart surgery for a leaky valve—a congenital issue that many women share. I was a “good candidate,” otherwise healthy, someone who watched her diet, exercised daily since grad school, didn’t smoke or drink. The surgery was a partial success; they repaired the valve. (Replacements must be redone every ten years, so the repair was a relief.) The surgeon also cut into my septum, the heart wall; I’ve received two different stories about why. Two years later I am at best two-thirds of my “presurgery” self. Violent fatigue and flagging energy/spirits are part of everyday life, even as the demands of academe are unrelenting. Most difficult for me: even my passion, theater, exacts a toll. Matinees are staged during my nonnegotiable afternoon downtime, and I cannot stay up for the typical 8–11 p.m. performance. If I muster extra energy to go, the pleasure comes at the cost of a few days of recovery. In the face of trauma and truncated pleasures, I feel valiant in having completed this book at all—particularly since the long-awaited reader comments and subsequent revisions coincided with both the school year and the transitioning of my mother to assisted living. I have dedicated my finite energy and lucidity to daily, short bursts of work. In the midst of an especially hectic semester, trudging through the demands of academe

and everyday life, I find that my pride and relief in finishing a book are laced with mourning and exhaustion. The end doesn't seem quite real.

In the contemporary United States, we are supposed to “think positive” and to “fight” our diseases. Emily Martin and Donna Haraway have analyzed the martial masculinity at play in these metaphors of combat in figurations of the immune system. But are those who die those who didn't fight adequately? Are we blaming them for a failure of will? Barbara Ehrenreich's book says it succinctly: *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Ruined America*. If illness and surgery have taught me anything, it is the way we are disciplined into performing “happiness,” positivity, in ways that feed productivity for the institution and promote the subject's grandiosity/omnipotence. We are enjoined to split off pain, discouragement, loss. Splitting can take the form of projecting vulnerability onto the other: “poor you” allows “me” to feel all the stronger in the face of your “weakness.” (Bullying operates through the same dynamic.) Doctors authorize us too soon to return to work, to drive, thus risking accidents, injury, death. We disavow the possibility that minds and wills cannot always overcome bodily trauma easily—or, perhaps, ever. We sanitize death: the death rattle is real, y'all! We theorize “vulnerability” and “fragility.” How much harder it is to embrace those qualities in our everyday lives, for to do so would require us to confront mortality and finitude. Acknowledging pain, limitation, and “negative” emotions is not weakness; rather, it is an attempt to grapple squarely with the unavoidable realities that will, eventually, face us all. Vulnerability is our condition of existence. Perhaps my passion for theater emerges precisely from the ways that theater recognizes—indeed, prizes—emotion and vulnerability.

Flying in the face of manic, oppressive positivity and a capitalist, masculinist imperative to view vulnerability as personal weakness, my acknowledgments refuse to perform the conventional heroics of the Master Subject who has triumphantly completed a master work against great odds. I refuse to perform what Sara Ahmed calls “the duty of happiness” and thus risk dismissal as a (disabled) killjoy. Instead, I insist that we unsettle the Master Subject by recognizing limits, pain, trauma, loss, fear, rage, indeterminacy, and ambivalence as inevitable forces shaping our everyday lives. Just as inevitably, I hope that by the time this book is in readers' hands, I will have recovered more of vibrancy that approximates my presurgical self.

Our primary vulnerability and fragility spotlight our interconnectedness. Over the twenty or more years since I began this “work of creativity,” my

debts are innumerable and would constitute a list miles long. Apologies in advance for what are sure to be many omissions.

To the artists who feature in act 2—Anna Deavere Smith and David Henry Hwang—thank you for the inspiration of your art and for allowing me to participate in various capacities in your work of creativity.

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My transition to playwriting has occurred over a good twenty years. *Seamless*, unlike my other plays, has spent an unusually long time in development. I’m grateful to Moving Arts Theatre and to Aaron Henne’s playwriting workshops. Readings there, at New York Theatre Workshop and, crucially, at the Lark Play Development Center (thank you, Suzy Fay!) propelled *Seamless* on its journey. Mad props to the directors who worked on this play: Darrell Kunitomi, Liz Diamond, Victor Maog, Eric Ting, and Ralph Peña. Many actors have cycled through various roles in *Seamless*. The process has continued for so long, Emily Kuroda was first Diane and now is Diane’s mother! Casts have included Alberto Isaac, Joanne Takahashi (LA Diane), Sab Shimono, Cindy Cheung (NY Diane), Jackie Chung, Jojo Gonzalez, Mia Katigbak, Suzy Nakamura, Matthew Boston, Marcos Nájera, Kipp Shiotani, Jeanne Sakata, Ken Takemoto, Takayo Fisher, Ping Wu, Haruye Ioka, Diane Takahashi, Shaun Shimoda, Samantha Whitaker, Deb Piver, Sarah Wagner, and Terence Anthony. Ellen Lewis, Karen Shimakawa, and Renato Rosaldo offered insightful comments at a reading at the Lark. Karen Shimakawa and Dan Mayeda shared their expertise on constitutional law and the structure of a legal career respectively, informing my portrayal of Diane.

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Finally, to my parents—Roy Jisuke Kondo, who died in 2009 at the age of ninety, and Midori Kondo, who passed away this year at ninety-nine, *yoku ganbatte kuremashita*. Wish you could have seen this book. *Sabishiku narimashita*.

## *overture*

It's a sunny, hot Los Angeles day. I drive into Silver Lake and park in a mostly Latino neighborhood of wooden houses and small businesses, across from the 7-Eleven at the corner of Virgil and Santa Monica. I cross the street, enter a small, dark building, and step onto the stage of East West Players, the country's oldest Asian American theater company and the longest continuously running theater of color in the United States. At this point, it is still a ninety-nine-seat, Equity Waiver black box.<sup>1</sup> Though I'm a recent transplant from Boston, I've been to East West many times to see plays, hungry for Asian American theater after so many years in a city where such performances were rare.

Today is different. I'm here for the inaugural meeting of the first David Henry Hwang Playwriting Institute. Not, mind you, because I think I possess dormant playwriting talent, but because I can use it as a fieldwork technique: to meet people in Asian American theater, to find out about the pedagogies of playwriting, to learn the elements of the craft. No matter how embarrassing, I tell myself that it will be worthwhile for my ethnographic project. I later think that my attitude is a defense for dealing with the unknown, the scariness of actually trying to write in a different register, when my only connection with the creative had been bad high school poetry and fairy tales I used to write and illustrate in grade school.

We students meet our three mentors: our principal teacher, Ric Shiomi, Japanese Canadian author of *Yellow Fever*, cofounder and artistic director



of Theater Mu in Minneapolis for twenty years, and now co-artistic director of Full Circle Theater in Minneapolis; playwright David Henry Hwang; and playwright/screenwriter/director Brian Nelson. The teachers talk to us about what is in store, each in his own distinctive voice: Ric is self-deprecating and witty; David displays his usual sparkling brilliance; Brian talks about his graduate training. Recruiters for film school brought him to see equipment, while in the theater school, he enjoyed direct interactions with live people. I emerge from our first meeting exhilarated and apprehensive in equal measure.

At first a methodological tool and a lark—"just to see"—the playwriting soon takes on a life of its own. Invariably I am tired and grumpy as I drive to playwriting class after a full day of teaching, committees, and office hours at the Claremont Colleges, forty-five minutes away. Yet what I discover at East West—the necessity of hearing, and not merely reading, the scenes; ways that acting can transform words; that I actually can write drama—is revelatory. By the end of class, my whole being feels awakened to the thrill of theater. The drive home flashes by; my mind is racing. I feel so alive and so energized that I can't sleep! I know then that theater and playwriting will have to become a significant part of my life, for this level of passion is something I have never felt before. To see rehearsals and the significant shifts of meaning that a gesture, a change of lighting, an inflection, can evoke; that moment, sitting in the theater, when the curtain rises and I feel alive with anticipation; the magic of an opening night, when the messiness, frustration, and worry of rehearsal are alchemically transformed into a radiant production . . . these moments make theater for me a testament to the life-giving capacities of the arts. This book is a tribute to that life-giving capacity and to the artists who create works of beauty that provoke us, enrapture us, challenge us.

In what psychoanalysis would see as splitting, this romance led me to place my academic work on hold. The academy was for several years a "day job," routine and boring, while creative work was the place of life, excitement, discovery. I see this split as arising from a more fundamental, culturally encoded one: our disciplining into Cartesian dualisms. In the academy, the enshrining of analysis and the intellect, and, in the corporate university, a Taylorist drive toward relentless productivity compel us to repress the body, the emotions, and the powers of fantasy and comedy. Theater is precisely a realm that nurtures—indeed, treasures—these repressed elements. Perhaps because of this exclusion, my plays all rely

on fantasy and on comic moments. Certainly, outrageousness and humor are not allowed in conventional academic discourse. For example, scholars can write in discursive registers about comedy, but norms discourage us from writing in comedic ones. And though Clifford Geertz and others have authorized anthropologists to deploy lyrical language, we generally domesticate extremes of emotion—exuberance, pain—into “experience-distant” prose. Theater allows me to mobilize elements the academy would have us repress, in a larger project of integration that should make us think *and* feel.

After some affirmations, I feel I can legitimately call myself a playwright. My first play, *(Dis)graceful(l) Conduct*, won Mixed Blood Theater’s “We Don’t Need No Stinking Dramas” national comedy playwriting award, an amusing distinction it always gives me great pleasure to mention. In 2003, I received my first production, at the Asian American Repertory Theater in San Diego, of my relationship comedy *But Can He Dance?* That same year New York Theater Workshop, a theatrical venue with an illustrious history—*Rent* and Tony Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul* premiered there—held a reading of my play *Seamless*. A different incarnation of the play, significantly revised, was a finalist in the prestigious Lark Development Center’s New Play Festival in 2009, and took second place in 2014 for the Jane Chambers Award for women playwrights. I include *Seamless* in this book to theorize the afterlife of historical trauma, to contest regnant ideologies of the postracial, to reflect on the epistemological implications of becoming a scholar-artist, and to subvert what James Clifford (Clifford, pers. comm., 2013) calls the “law of genre.” Throughout my career, I have sought to expand what counts as theory, but this is my boldest attempt thus far.

After the production of *But Can He Dance?* I began to suffer from chronic repetitive stress injuries from years of furious typing, usually at desks that were “made for large men.” Bodily limits and the physical toll our profession exacts imposed themselves in ways I could not evade. During the worst periods of pain, I was physically unable to write—and rediscovered my passion for intellectual inquiry. During that year, I was able to reencounter the transformative work of Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze, the generative contributions of queer theorist Judith Butler, works in critical ethnography such as Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* and Anna Tsing’s *Friction*—scholarship that inspires, pushing forward our theoretical paradigms in exciting ways. This book re-members my intellectual passion, integrating it with the passion I felt for theater.

## Integrating the Creative and the Critical

This re-membling occurs on multiple levels. First, *Worldmaking* is an ethnography of the theater industry. Ethnographic, *participatory* observation<sup>2</sup> grounds insights into the theater world, through my work as dramaturg, playwright, scholarly critic, character performed onstage, and student in acting class. As in classic ethnography, I delineate the “setting”—*mise-en-scène*—of racialized economies that marginalize theater, despite its “upper-middle-brow” cultural cachet (Brater et. al 2010), and I challenge assumptions about the merely decorative function of the arts. Here, the *mise-en-scène* includes theater size and classification, labor (casting, production), and income. It is virtually impossible to make a living from theater alone. Assumptions about the aesthetic sublime—that the arts “transcend” everyday reality—help to keep artists poor.

Second, ethnography’s *corporeal epistemologies* enable richly specific, granular insights into *race-making*, a key concept in this book. Participatory observation in theater as both ethnographer and practitioner shapes my distinctive approach to the now foundational concept of race as social construction. *But how*, specifically, do we construct race in our everyday scholarly and artistic practice, and under what structural, historical conditions?<sup>3</sup> Enfleshing “race as social construction” helps us to imagine—thus to make race—otherwise.

Ethnography’s *corporeal epistemologies* compelled me to shift focus from the analysis of representation, the conventional work of drama and cultural studies criticism, to spotlight what I learned as a *participant*: backstage creative processes, the artistic labor that *makes, unmakes, and remakes race*. I ground these insights in my practice as a playwright and my work over the years with Anna Deavere Smith and David Henry Hwang, theater artists of color who are at the pinnacle of their careers. I was a full member of the creative team for three of Smith’s productions and a scholar/informal dramaturg with backstage access to the world premiere of Hwang’s play *Yellow Face*, which addressed the significance of race in a “postracial” moment—the substantive theme of this book. I shared dramaturgical notes with Hwang and with producer/dramaturg Oskar Eustis, which I reproduce in chapter 5.

Theoretically informed creative processes thus take center stage: acting praxis that performs the radical susceptibility among people, rather than assuming the interiority of the actor’s subjectivity; theories of authorship in which interviews and dramaturgical interactions constitute

intersubjective modes of writing; dramaturgy as enacting a politics of agonistics and affiliation; writing as revision, where even a single-authored work becomes the site of discursive struggle among racial ideologies; play-writing that crosses scholar-artist divides, dramatizing the afterlives of historical trauma. Subjects cannot be cleaved from culture, power, or history. All these theoretical practices destabilize the disembodied Master Subject.

Ethnography's corporeal epistemologies led me to these theoretical practices, illuminating the power-laden, multifarious ways we make race backstage, within specific historical political economies. These backstage practices are usually invisible to the audience and considered ex-orbitant to theory. Indeed, while many theater scholars are also theater artists, most scholarship in theater and performance studies and the majority of anthropological studies of performance cross-culturally are written from a spectatorial position. Theater studies tends to separate critics from practitioners, theory from practice; indeed, different journals are dedicated to each (*Theatre Journal* vs. *Theatre Topics*). I trouble the theory/practice, theory/method divides—mind/body dualisms that oppose disembodied thought to mindless action—by according theoretical weight to backstage labor, creative process, “methodologies” that count as theory.<sup>4</sup>

Third, re-membering integrates the creative and the critical through bending genre. The book's formal structure evokes a three-act play or musical, tracing a theoretical, psychic, political journey adapting Melanie Klein's concept of the reparative that I elaborate extensively in chapter 1. Klein's positions—not stages—develop from fusion that generates destructive fantasies to provisional integrations that acknowledge “the real” of separation. Similarly, my romance with theater is shattered through affective violence, then moves toward what I call *reparative creativity*: the ways artists make, unmake, remake race in their creative processes, in acts of always partial integration and repair.

### Corporeal Epistemologies

The corporeal epistemologies of ethnography inform this book at every turn: forms of experiential knowledge emerging from putting one's embodied “self” on the line. Embodied fieldwork encounters shaped my analytic, highlighting enactment, performance, and process; they inspire my writing practice, traversing multiple genres as ways of conveying the layered complexities of social life. This disciplinary affinity for embodied experience is particularly well suited to the turn toward performance.

Like fieldwork, performance involves a bodily, sensorial, affective, intellectually complex encounter with the world. I argue throughout for the ontoepistemological weight of ethnography and of performance.

In its ethnographic approach to theater, this book delineates the contours of a world that was initially exotic to me. Like the shop floor of a Japanese factory and the showrooms and runways of the high fashion industry, the (back)stage has become a familiar, everyday world. For nontheater readers, I treat the theater world like any other ethnographic field site. For theater practitioners, my analysis of tacit assumptions and theater customs might seem commonsensical, but I hope to provoke estrangement, the defamiliarizing of the familiar characteristic of anthropology as cultural critique (Marcus and Fischer 1986) and of Brechtian political practice. Such an estrangement could allow us to imagine otherwise (Chuh 2003).

Engaged involvement tempered my idealized romance with theater, leading me to see the theater industry as a key cultural site for the reproduction of race, performing visions of possibility alongside reinscriptions of hegemonic ideologies, making and unmaking structural hierarchies. Accordingly, my analytic foregrounds a cluster of power-laden concepts: making, work, creativity, process, production, fluidity, emergence, indeterminacy, movement. These animate multiple (and sometimes incompatible) theoretical perspectives: poststructuralist theory (Derrida's *différance*, Foucault's conception of power as both creative and coercive), production studies (analysis of behind-the-scenes production in film and television) (Caldwell 2008), ethnographies of labor, creativity and work, affect theory, work on "support" in performance studies (S. Jackson 2011), queer phenomenology, performativity, and performance (Austin 1962; Butler 1990; Parker and Sedgwick 1995) being among the most prominent. This general trend in scholarship veers away from fixity, essentialism, and the grid, introducing nonteleological openness and orienting us toward process and enactment.

"Making"—what I called in my first book "crafting"—links structures of power, labor processes, and performances of gendered, national, and racialized subjectivities, in historically and culturally specific settings. Making and labor, including the making of race, become forms of power-laden creativity (Ingold 2013).<sup>5</sup> Far from the auratic product of genius, springing fully formed from the artist's imagination, art is work: sometimes joyous and exciting, sometimes tedious, always requiring craft, prodigious effort, and, especially in theater, collaboration. I claim behind-the-scenes cultural

labor as the making of theory, the crafting of politics, and the making and unmaking of structural inequalities such as race. Commonsense binaries between creativity and the arts, on the one hand, and labor, theory, and politics, on the other, split a complex, multilayered process. Creativity is work, practice, method: a site of theory making and political intervention.

I come to these insights through my active participation in theater, which exceeds conventional ethnographic practice. For anthropologists, the immersive, collaborative impulse that informs my fieldwork hews to disciplinary protocols at one level, but the *degree* of my participatory observation remains relatively unusual. Indeed, Oskar Eustis, artistic director of the Public Theater, joked that I had succumbed to Stockholm syndrome! I have joined theater productions as a dramaturg, and as a playwright I collaborated professionally with theater artists during the production of my play *But Can He Dance?* Moving among shifting positionalities, I retain an ethnographic outsider's eye that offers a sometimes skeptical vantage point on taken-for-granted theatrical practices.

In most ethnographies, including the anthropology of media production and performance, anthropologists are positioned as observers, interviewers, who watch processes unfold (Powdermaker 1950; Ortner 2013; Pandian 2015; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002; Dornfeld 1998). Ethnographies of backstage practice have been relatively few, particularly in the realms of opera, symphony, theater, and other forms of Western "high culture."<sup>6</sup> Even more unusual are accounts based on the anthropologist's actual creative participation, aside from the work of ethnomusicologists and a handful of works in theater and the visual arts (Feld 2012; Wong 2004; Hastrup 2004; Fabian 1990; Ossman 2010).

Participating actively and having a stake in the production as a member of the creative team offers a perspective different from observing or interviewing, from Renato Rosaldo's famous definition of ethnography as "deep hanging out" (quoted in Clifford 1997, 188) or even from working alongside one's informants, but not as a full participant, as I did in my first fieldwork as a part-time laborer in a Japanese factory. Anand Pandian (2015) likens ethnography to wildlife photography, waiting for the exemplary moment. My fieldwork in the high fashion industry assumed this sense of waiting: to garner invitations to sales exhibitions, PR offices, and to Paris and Tokyo collections, then waiting for hours in the Cour Carrée of the Louvre to enter the tents for the fashion shows, amid sour appraisals of status and attire. My active participation in theater offers a vivid contrast. As a dramaturg for Anna Deavere Smith, I was not

waiting for something to happen, I was *responsible* for making it happen. The difference between waiting, hanging out, and *full participation* lies in degrees of accountability and the political stakes. The ethnographer as collaborator is a becoming-artist who participates in the work of creativity. Ethnography becomes a way of being in the world and a way to remake worlds through engaged participation.

Collaboration as a member of a creative team more closely resembles a form of activist intervention, where terms like “accountability” acquire crucial significance. Artistic collaboration recalls Kim Fortun’s ethnography (2001) of political advocacy or Aimee Cox’s account (2015) of women in a homeless shelter where she herself was director, involved in the day-to-day operations of the “field site,” in relations characterized by responsibility, partiality of perspective, and shared engagement.<sup>7</sup> The backstage labor of activist involvement in mounting a production fosters heightened appreciation and respect for the artists’ labor of crafting, revision, and battling institutions, which shape the final work. Participating in backstage drama, witnessing institutional constraints on creative process while assisting the artist’s vision, highlights the contingency of the final production. The result of multiple forces, the production on opening night<sup>8</sup> could have been otherwise, a fortuitous confluence of circumstances that exceed interpretations based on a final, polished performance.

### **Collaboration as Political Intervention**

I build on a collaborative relation of alliance and mutual respect with theater artists Anna Deavere Smith and David Henry Hwang, representing one register of my romance with theater. I analyze their encounters with structures of power, as I attempt to keep an equally critical eye on the ways we are all, inevitably, enmeshed in power, culture, and history. Both artists are celebrated theater institutions in themselves, who have won national and international accolades. Smith is a pioneer of documentary theater, who interviews people and performs verbatim portrayals on-stage, blurring lines among journalism, ethnography, and drama. Hwang’s *Yellow Face* problematizes the postracial and blurs the lines among (auto)-biography, journalism, documentary, and well-made play. My genre bending finds inspiration in their work. Smith’s plays and Hwang’s *Yellow Face* feature spectacular cross-racial, cross-gender performances, a focus on urgent social issues, and innovative aesthetic form, unsettling the binary between the real and representation, brute facticity and fiction. They



enact the fluidity of identity within historically specific structural constraints, and offer the possibility of political alliance, as they / the actors onstage embody multiple characters of different races, genders, ages, and sexualities. Over the years, I have engaged their work as audience member, critic, informal advisor, and—for Smith's plays—member of the creative team, enacting my alliance with their aesthetic/political interventions. My involvement with Smith and Hwang adds dimension to transformative discoveries that emerged from my participation in theater as a playwright, audience member, and occasional student in acting class.

Smith, Hwang, and I are roughly contemporaries. We have known each other professionally for over twenty-five years. I came to know Smith while we were both on the National Program Committee for the American Studies Association during the year of the Columbian Quincentennial. The scholars of color on that committee caucused and brought to the larger group our objections to the fact that none of the proposed panels offered even a mild critique of the "discovery" of the Americas. That intervention may have led to Smith's impression that I was politically outspoken, even "blunt," and perhaps led to her asking me eventually to join her dramaturgical team. I served as a dramaturg on three of her plays: the world premiere of *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, in its world premiere at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles (1993); two workshops for *House Arrest: The Press and the Presidency* (Arena Stage, New York and Washington) and *House Arrest: An Introggression* (Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles); and the world premiere of *Let Me Down Easy* (2007, Long Wharf Theatre, New Haven).

Smith won national acclaim for her interview-based plays that spotlight urgent social issues and for her virtuoso solo performances of her interviewees. She is the recipient of the MacArthur Award, a Guggenheim, the National Humanities Medal, two Obies and two Drama Desk Awards for her solo performances, an Obie for Best Play, and the Lucille Lortel Award for outstanding lead actress, among other theater and arts-based honors. She was the Ford Foundation's first artist in residence and an artist in residence at MTV. Smith was a regular on *Nurse Jackie*, frequent guest star on *The West Wing* and now on *Black-ish* and is a series regular on *For the People*, produced by Shonda Rhimes; she played supporting roles in films such as *Philadelphia*, *The American President*, *Rent*, and *The Human Stain*. Smith holds an academic appointment in the Tisch School of the Arts and the Law School at NYU and heads the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue, which nurtures artistic work addressing social issues.



I have written about David Henry Hwang's work since 1988, when I saw *M. Butterfly* on Broadway, a moment I described in *About Face*. It was the first time I felt I *must* write about something, as though my life depended on it. "My" racial affect was produced structurally, by the marginalization of artists of color in the theater world and the resulting absence of portrayals that mirror minoritarian audiences. The vision articulated in *M. Butterfly* was unprecedented on the American stage, for its spectacular staging of the imbrications of race, gender, sexuality, and colonialism, articulated through fantasy, desire, and (mis)recognition.

I underline Hwang's position as our most celebrated Asian American dramatist. Hwang was honored as an American master playwright at the William Inge Theater Festival. Three of his plays have been produced on Broadway; three were nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama. *M. Butterfly* won Tony Awards for both Hwang and for principal actor B. D. Wong; as I write, it is in revival on Broadway, in a version directed by Julie Taymor and starring Clive Owen and Jin Ha. Hwang collaborated on the Broadway musicals *Tarzan* and *Elton John and Tim Rice's Aida* and wrote the book for the revival of Rogers and Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song*. In the 2013–14 season, he was honored at the Signature Theatre Company, which features as part of its season several plays from a major playwright's body of work. Hwang has collaborated extensively on operas, working with composers who include Philip Glass, Osvaldo Golijov, Unsuk Chin, and Howard Shore. He currently writes for the Showtime series *The Affair* and heads the playwriting program at Columbia University. Hwang is the *only* Asian American playwright who has "made it" to this degree. Consequently, he bears on his shoulders the hopes and projections of an entire race and community—a topic about which he writes in *Yellow Face*. Like Smith's plays, Hwang's *Yellow Face* pairs interventions in aesthetic form with challenges to dominant ideologies of race.

This book accords Smith and Hwang a respect for their interventions, while locating them in larger structures of power. I analyze the ways their work disrupts and, inevitably, to some degree reinscribes the racial politics of theater, to the extent that these artists must adhere to certain conventions to be legible in the theater world. They both contest and reinforce foundational assumptions; they reap the benefits of success in their field and, simultaneously, they face challenges related to racialized gender and to their subversion of conventional aesthetic form.

Smith, Hwang, and I are longtime colleagues, in some cases collaborators, linked through mutual respect, shared history, and political affinity.

In this book I trace their evolving concerns and the creative processes animating their work; in so doing, I trace my own trajectory as scholar and playwright. In such an integration, such a reencounter, the writing inevitably serves an archival function. Its temporalities are palimpsestic. Like all books about performance, this one writes against erasure. Despite the impossibility of capturing performance, I hope to convey the immediacy and urgency that animated these past encounters with the artists and their work and to illuminate their historical, theoretical, and political significance.

### Theater and Race-Making

Throughout, I connect realms too often considered disparate: the artistic, the political, the theoretical, the personal. What happens onstage, the affects elicited in the audience and embodied by performers, contest and reinscribe power relations, thus making, unmaking, and remaking race. If theater circulates hegemonic visions, then intervening where the mainstream finds itself mirrored is politically significant. Understanding this significance requires theorizing the distinctive features of theater and the political work of high culture. Sites of cultural production like theater circulate hegemonic racial ideologies, securing temporary consent to those ideologies.

I theorize processes of racialization through *racial affect*, which enlivens some and diminishes others, and *affective violence*, especially in sites assumed to be far from racial violence. Race pervades the realms of art, including theater. Power is not confined to police brutality; it occurs as more “refined” reproductions of racial hegemony. When is it okay to laugh at something? How is enjoyment implicated in the reproduction of power relations? High culture, from opera to symphony to dance to theater, is precisely where hegemonic structures and racial ideologies can be reproduced. Laughter and enjoyment—not equally distributed in the audience—can promote consent to those hegemonies, forging racial dominance through barriers of “stickiness” and “viscosity” (Hartman 1997; Ahmed 2004; Saldanha 2007). Alternatively, laughter can be a form of minoritarian critique (J. Brown 2008; Jacobs-Huey 2006). We must attend closely to the politics of pleasure, which interpellates us more securely into normativity or perhaps animates life-giving visions of possibility (Kondo 1997).<sup>9</sup>

Power-laden representations onstage have a material weight. They interpellate us as raced, classed, sexualized, gendered subjects, and they can

have life-determining impact. Theater, film, and other domains of the cultural can confer *existence* in the public sphere (Kondo 1997). I theorize this racialized, gendered *reparative mirroring*, necessary for the foundation of both majoritarian and minoritarian subjectivity, through Klein's object relations theory, Lacan's mirror phase, and Freudian accounts of narcissism as foundational for subject formation. Some dismiss desires to "see oneself" as "mere" identity politics, but this dismissal occurs from a site of privilege. We all look to be mirrored; we all desire recognition. Minoritarian subjects remain too often excluded from fully rounded public existence.

The dismissal of "identity politics" arises from a power-evasive notion of identity, occluding the racialized, gendered, colonialist power through which that identity comes into being. The whole subject, a bounded, self-sufficient agent, is presumed to be separate from the world, defined by its consciousness and by an essence of the human. A substance-accident/substance-attribute metaphysics defines this subject. Power, race, gender, sexuality, and other markers of "difference" are considered mere accidents or attributes that are incidental modifiers of consciousness, the presumed defining feature of the human self, which is in turn assumed to be a bounded monad distinct from the forces of culture, power, and history. This definition of the individual is the ideological foundation of the US nation-state and grounds its utopian assumptions of unity and harmony as achievable through democracy. The liberal individual's history is deeply imbricated with colonialism and the rise of industrial capitalism (Lowe 2015; Belsey 1980; Macpherson 1962).

Challenging the individual, the anthropology of the twentieth century critiques the personal as a category that is itself an artifact of language and culture, problematizing the subject/world division. Marcel Mauss (1938), Clifford Geertz (1973), and the anthropologies of selfhood (Rosaldo 1980; Kondo 1990) see the person as a thoroughly social being. The spate of ethnographic work on self and emotion of the 1990s, including my own, joined this quest to problematize the Master Subject's pretensions to universality. Many anthropologists link the political, economic, and historical to what appears initially to be "personal experience." These experiences—experience itself is an abstraction—form dense entanglements of power-laden practices, sensations, and cultural and historical ideologies. The subject is inextricable from the structural.

Feminist, postcolonial, and critical race and ethnic studies, and the work of artists of color, have long challenged the universal Master Subject,

revealing his racial, gendered, sexualized, colonial markings. My work shares with Anna Deavere Smith and David Henry Hwang a challenge to the foundational liberal subject that undergirds colorblind ideologies. Power-evasive liberal humanism promotes the pernicious elision of structural inequality under the guise of personal responsibility or individual prejudice. “Hate crime” reduces a structurally predictable phenomenon to individual aberration, while “reverse racism” conflates structural inequality with the hurt feelings of a privileged subject, whose privilege will remain structurally intact. Power-evasive, liberal individualist imaginaries make race by reducing the structural to the individual.

Yet there can be no radical rupture with “the individual,” given that the very invocation of the “I,” with its ideological baggage of possessive, even (neo)liberal, individualism, renders the whole subject inescapable. Liberal theater is based on individual character and emotion; accordingly, aspects of the artists’ and my work inevitably reinscribe that subject to some degree. Both artists and I deploy registers that could be misread as merely “personal,” including the seemingly autobiographical “I.” Yet the “I” is a linguistic, cultural artifact, a narrative convention (Kondo 1990). Smith and Hwang complicate *both* this subject and the notion of the “merely personal” in their work. I hope this book and my play do the same. At its best, the work of artists such as Smith and Hwang foregrounds the arbitrariness of social classifications, including the “I,” while revealing the simultaneously creative *and* coercive power of those ideologies. Subjects are formed through, not transcendent of, racialized power relations.

Another generative perspective on the question of the subject, power, and race requires shifting scale. Foucault’s biopolitics opens up the workings of power beyond monarchical/juridical formations to the promotion of life and management of populations (Foucault 2003). Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s scholarship and activism provoke us to think about racism as systemic structures with mortal stakes: “Racism is the state-sanctioned and extralegal production and exploitation of group differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore 2007, 28).<sup>10</sup> The ways the state manages life can promote this vulnerability. Thinking of race in conjunction with other fields of power resonates with Lauren Berlant’s notion of slow death: “The structurally induced attrition of persons keyed to their membership in certain populations” (Berlant 2011, 102). Structural inequality manifests most insidiously not in the dramatic event but in the long-term leaching of life and health from minoritarian populations through bodily conditions such as obesity and diabetes. Slow death indexes

class, race, and gender as power-laden social disparities, not simply identitarian markers.<sup>11</sup> Thus, racism is an unrelenting, daily affair, not *simply* the spectacular event.

We therefore must attend to structurally overdetermined differences in degrees of vibrant life. One can exist in the flesh, but this is not necessarily “living” in its more expansive sense.<sup>12</sup> Culture matters here. Both in the cultural studies sense of the aesthetic domain of life and the anthropological sense of worldmaking assumptions, culture is a key site where hegemonies are reproduced. Who is allowed to exist in the public sphere? Whose stories are represented on stage and screen? Who counts as the universal? Who is a protagonist, and who is a dispensable supporting player? To what extent do stagings both reflect and shape our understandings of the worth of minoritarian and majoritarian subjects, our right to live and flourish? Whose authority do we accept on stage and off? Whose lives matter?

Smith’s play *Let Me Down Easy* provides an example of the ways that theater might intervene into race and class hegemonies, illuminating the imbrications of the “individual” with power structures. Thematizing bodies, inequalities in the health care system, life and death, and, in its world premiere version, genocide, the play stages race as “vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore 2007, 28). Smith’s work offers connection to what that vulnerability might *feel* like (Cvetkovich 2012; Ahmed 2004). Such an intervention can be salutary in the world of mainstream theater, where the typical audience demographic skews toward the white, middle-aged, and upper-middle class. Here, we face the contradictions of any attempt at intervention. On the one hand, our identification with an individual character can allow us to *feel* the effects of structural violence on the everyday lives of minoritarian subjects. On the other, it inevitably reinscribes the humanist subject and courts the dangers of empathy. We may be empathizing only with projections of ourselves (Hartman 1997; Diamond 1992).

In *Let Me Down Easy*, we see the experience of relentless slow death through the eyes of a subject who enjoys race and class privilege. Smith performs Kiersta Kurtz Burke, a young white doctor who worked in New Orleans Charity Hospital during Hurricane Katrina. Burke provides a point of entry for the privileged audience members into the biopolitics of race and class as vulnerabilities to premature death. Idealistic and dedicated, Burke is convinced that FEMA will soon rescue the African American patients and staff. As the days unfold, she realizes otherwise. “The

patients at Charity. . . . The nurses at Charity . . . knew we were gonna be the last ones out . . . they knew that the private hospitals were gonna get private helicopters and . . . it wasn't a shock to anybody. But the fact that it wasn't a shock to people was so shocking to me. . . . I'm privileged and this is the first time I've ever been totally fucking abandoned by my government, right? But this wasn't the first time for my patients or the nurses . . . it must feel like that your whole life. . . . That constant feeling of abandonment" (A. D. Smith 2016, 38–39).

Integrating race as vulnerability to premature death, the arts, and questions of the subject and power, I claim affect as a realm where hegemonies are reproduced. I use "affect" provisionally, to indicate a form of public feeling.<sup>13</sup> The uneven distribution of what in English we call enjoyment, rage, depression, envy, and delight can constitute structured inequalities that make race. While I retain an anthropological skepticism about the affect/emotion binary as culturally constructed, I propose that *racial affect* represents a power-laden zone where subjects, feeling, and structural violence intertwine.

Theater helps us theorize racial affect, linking the phenomenological and the structural, in vividly experiential, embodied performances of public feelings. "In performance emotion is a key product, part of the aesthetic excess of drama" (Batiste 2011, xvii). Affect can be mobilized politically (Gould 2009). "Applied theatre" has turned from "effect"—visible, measurable outcomes—to "affect," the joy, beauty, and pleasure that the arts give us (J. Thompson 2009). Still, affect may work differently for minoritarian subjects, whose access to the pleasures of fully dimensional humanity in the arts, as elsewhere, is structurally limited. I have long argued that such pleasures can be life giving, while structural erasure and oppressive stereotypes can flatten liveliness. "The politics of pleasure" (Kondo 1997) animates aesthetic/political/theoretical work.

Questions of the subject, power, and affect are thus central in cultural theory and to this book. Theater—a domain that traffics in embodied subjects and affectual exchange—is a generative point of entry for examining these theoretically and politically urgent questions. Structures and subjects are co-constructed in complex ways, including circuits of feeling and the (re)production of power. Theatrical creativity performs this work. While many accounts of the power of performance and artistic creation highlight affect, few connect it to the reproduction of racial power relations. The same is true for the literatures on public feeling that may gesture

toward race but focus primarily on gender and sexuality. *Racial affect* addresses this elision. For minoritarian subjects, a trip to the theater can be a scene of *affective violence* or, too rarely, *reparative mirroring*. Precisely because theater capitalizes on the powers of the sensorium and affect/emotion, it can be life giving for some, life diminishing for others.

**RACIAL AFFECT AND  
AFFECTIVE VIOLENCE**

**January 2012**

*An evening at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, the city's premier regional theater for new work. I have great affection for the Taper, where Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight* premiered in 1993. The audience is another matter. Like most regional theater, it skews middle-aged or older, and overwhelmingly white. I see Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park* with Shana Redmond, a colleague in African American Studies.*

*Clybourne Park is inspired by Lorraine Hansberry's classic *A Raisin in the Sun*, a tale of the African American Younger family's dreams for a better life. Raisin stages the consequences of Langston Hughes's poem "A Dream Deferred": "Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun. . . . Or does it explode?" Matriarch Lena Younger buys a new home in a white neighborhood, prompting the visit of Karl Lindner, representative of the Community Association of Clybourne Park, who tries mightily to discourage the family's move. At the close of Raisin, the Youngers leave their home for 406 Clybourne: the setting for Norris's play.*

*Clybourne Park takes up where *A Raisin in the Sun* leaves off. Act 1 takes place on the same day Raisin ends, but this time Lindner arrives to dissuade the white family who owns 406 Clybourne from selling their home. Act 2 takes place in 2009, fifty years after act 1. At this point, the formerly*



white neighborhood has transitioned, in ways Lindner both predicted and ensured, into a predominantly black, “troubled” area that is undergoing “gentrification.” Lena, the grandniece of Raisin’s Lena Younger, is a representative of the neighborhood association; they seek to prevent the white, yuppie couple who has moved into 406 Clybourne from remodeling the home in ways that destroy its historic value.

We settle into our seats. As the play unfolds, the largely white audience responds enthusiastically, sometimes laughing uproariously, while my colleague and I are increasingly appalled, both at what is happening onstage and by our fellow spectators. As the evening proceeds, I feel increasingly marginalized, an “affect alien” (Ahmed 2010) who cannot join in the laughter. Yet the affective chasm is more than simple alienation. This is crazy-making. Am I / are we, the only ones who see? Why is the audience laughing? Are they sharing the laughter of discomfort? Recognition? Their laughter feels like Fellini’s 8 ½, the screen crammed with faces that taunt: laughing at, not with.

My colleague describes her experiences viewing mainstream theater as an African American woman. The sense of marginalization and invisibility begins with the overwhelmingly white audience and grows. Not only does one not laugh when others laugh, one feels appalled at what is happening onstage. At the end of the play, when the rest of the audience leaps to its feet for the ovation, we race for the exit, escaping our evening of affective violence. As historian Robin Kelley later wrote to me, the play was “an assault.”

This affective violence—a form of structural violence—and racial affect are all too common at the theater and in other realms of high and popular culture. One way that theater makes race is through affective violence as the enactment of exclusion. The abyss between our reactions and the play’s rapturous mainstream reception intensifies the feelings of anger and wrenching disjuncture between the “killjoy” of color (Ahmed 2010) and the dominant. Predictably, Clybourne Park garnered rave reviews on Broadway, won the Pulitzer in 2011 and the Tony for Best Play in 2012, and enjoyed a long run in London, where it won the Olivier Award for Best Play.

Mainstream theater too often deepens the grooves of problematic racial ideologies, producing discouragement, weariness—what Ann Cvetkovich (2012) calls “political depression,” the predictable outcome of histories of inequality, dispossession, colonization. Frankly, one could spend all one’s time in ideology critique, so numerous are the plays, operas, and ballets that stage racial affronts or that assume the universality of whiteness. The weary affective response of the killjoy of color is far more than pathological individual weakness. It is a structurally predictable reaction to Amiri Baraka’s (1967) “the changing same.”

Clybourne Park is objectionable in multiple ways that I will elaborate in another article, but my surmise is that its “innovative” advance, noted in mainstream reviews, is the staging of white anxiety and guilt. How does the dominant experience dominance? In Clybourne, African Americans are yuppie—“we” can meet “them” on the ski slopes and in our offices—but the play also stages white fear. Blacks will jump on “us” if “we” say a wrong word. White anxiety about what to say, how to interact, how to avoid the charge of racism, pervade act 2. The disquiet is connected to guilt for historical privilege, presumed to be a thing of the past. This guilt can act as its own form of self-excitement, preempting concrete efforts to make things better. Apparently, seeing these racialized dilemmas onstage was a source of enormous pleasure—or uncomfortable recognition, which can be its own source of bonding, a “stickiness” (Ahmed 2004) that binds the largely white audience.

The success of Clybourne Park lies precisely in its knowledge of its demographic, skillfully tapping that segment’s anxieties. Norris baldly states,

People ask how come I don’t write plays about, say, people in housing projects, and I say, “well, because those are not the people who go to the theatre.” You can say, “We should get them to the theatre,” but in actual fact, people who buy subscriptions . . . are usually wealthy people. They are almost always wealthy, liberal people. So why not write plays that are about those people, since those are the people who are in the audience? If you actually want to have a conversation with that audience, then you should address them directly. That’s what I always think. . . . There is no political value in having sensitive feelings about the world. . . . You go, you watch, you say “That’s sad,” and then you go for a steak. (Norris 2012)

Norris’s response is both predictable and shocking. For him, theater is not a site of the political, unlike the views of the artists of color in this book. Norris rejects the idea that theater can conjure Walter Benjamin’s “wish images,” what I call “visions of possibility” (Kondo 1997). Perhaps the upper-middle-class white audience is seeking self-confirmation rather than an expansion of consciousness: narcissism, indeed. But that self-confirmation is itself political. It can be life-giving to the dominant. Perhaps this play gives white audiences a moment to discharge their racial anxieties before they go for a steak. Maybe they enjoy the self-recognition of laughing at their own dilemmas and hypocrisies, of having their foibles validated and lightly satirized. I am still at a loss as to how to explain the enjoyment the audience evidenced during the play, since neither my colleague nor I found the play funny, entertaining, or compelling.

*One of the ways power functions is to invisibilize the minoritarian subject—to enrage her, to make her feel crazy. No one else sees what s/he is seeing. Surely, then, it is her fault that she is excluded from the laughter and the enjoyment? Perhaps for minoritarian subjects, the creative can provide a register for responding to these power-laden affective assaults. Redressive outrage has served that function for my own playwriting, and I see it in the work of Smith and Hwang.*

*The artistic director of Baltimore's Center Stage, Kwame Kwei-Armah, created a counterhegemonic response to Clybourne in his play Beneatha's Place, spotlighting a character from A Raisin in the Sun: the aspiring medical student Beneatha. In act 1 Beneatha and her Nigerian husband, Joseph Asagai, arrive at their new home in Nigeria. The house's white missionary residents are about to move out. They patronize Beneatha, who is misrecognized as a "provincial" Nigerian woman. Asagai has been excommunicated from a political group for his anticorruption stance and for his support for market women. He leaves the house for a meeting. We hear an explosion. Act 2, repeating the structure of Clybourne Park, occurs fifty years later. Beneatha is now an internationally renowned social anthropologist and chair of ethnic studies at the university. The same house, left intact, serves as meeting place for the department, whose mostly white faculty in African American studies propose changing the departmental focus to critical whiteness studies. As in Clybourne Park, act 2 recenters white discomfort in the face of challenges from people of color. This time, however, the outcome dramatically differs. The vote carries, but Beneatha triumphs in a clever plot twist. Center Stage mounted A Raisin in the Sun, Clybourne Park, and Beneatha's Place in rep: a rotating performance schedule that featured many of the same actors in all three plays. Though some might label this a liberal strategy—hearing all sides—few theaters are this visionary.*

*Clybourne Park is only one of many theatergoing experiences that enact racialized affective violence. The work of Tracy Letts—especially the celebrated August: Osage County, winner of every major theater award, and a film starring Meryl Streep—is exemplary here. The dysfunctional white family saga features a Native American maid who scarcely speaks and who exists to further the journey of the white characters. Letts's The Man from Nebraska and Superior Donuts circulate equally hoary tropes: white man rediscovers joie de vivre through travel, art, and a woman of color; white man achieves redemptive masculinity through "saving" a young black man.<sup>1</sup>*

*Robert Schenkkan's All the Way—a Tony winner and HBO film—heroicizes LBJ's role in civil rights legislation, marginalizing the pathbreaking work of*

*Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. Indeed, Dr. King appears as an irritant rather than a catalyst for change. The award-winning Avenue Q espouses the liberal “everyone’s a little bit racist,” conflating individual prejudice with structural inequality, while performing stereotypical portrayals of people of color. The most spectacular, most problematic Broadway spectacle is the winning yet breathtakingly offensive The Book of Mormon. Expert stagecraft, the alluring underdog narrative, the seamless integration of music and movement, and superb singing and acting render the musical irresistible at one level. I saw the talented Ben Platt as the lead; he went on to win a Tony in Dear Evan Hansen. Yet this talent underwrites the “hipster racism” of equal opportunity racial offense. If Avenue Q depends on the presumed equivalence that makes “everyone a little bit racist,” occluding the structural inequalities that differentially position people of color and white people, The Book of Mormon comically heightens the gulf between Ugandan villagers and first-world Mormon missionaries. As a regular theatergoer, I find such affective violence to be more norm than exception. Yet to talk about such violence risks being labeled, by progressive and conservative colleagues, as killjoy, hypersensitive, stuck in superannuated civil rights politics inappropriate for our “postracial” age.*

Racial affect buttresses structures of constant “microaggression,” the (too often unattributed) term coined by my Harvard mentor, Chester Pierce (Pierce and Carew 1977). Microaggression can escalate into full-frontal affective assault, making creative attempts to counter such affective violence even more precious. In mainstream theater, the work of artists of color such as Anna Deavere Smith and David Henry Hwang, among others, thereby becomes even more life-giving. My own attempt at playwriting is one fledgling foray into reparative creativity. Even if nothing escapes the reinscription of power, the difference between affective violence and reparative mirroring matters, even if it is inevitably imperfect and partial. If structural violence can rob us of material well-being and affective violence can relentlessly drain energy, spirit, and the will to live, reparative mirroring can spark racial affects of jubilation at coming into existence, however illusory that subjecthood (Lacan 2002). My mother, a consummate hard worker who survived the Depression and Japanese American incarceration, calls this “giving you a lift”—because “a lift” can be life-giving.

Clybourne Park exemplifies the state of mainstream theater and the circulation of power-evasive discourses in this putatively postracial moment. Problematic plays such as Clybourne and the oeuvre of Tracy Letts circulate internationally to critical and popular applause, marginalizing alternative, minoritarian visions. Still, hope exists. While Clybourne was on Broadway, so were new plays by and about people of color: Lydia Diamond’s *Stick Fly*, Katori

*Hall's Mountaintop, David Henry Hwang's Chinglish. The critical and box-office sensation of 2015 was Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton. Simultaneously, the problematic Orientalist warhorse The King and I won acclaim for its splendid production.*

*Though nothing is ever beyond reproach or beyond power, vibrant works by playwrights of color stage acts of reparative creativity. They, and the artists about whom I write, remind us why work by progressive artists of color remains so vital, so urgent, so necessary.*

ACT I



MISE-EN-SCÈNE

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