

EMPATHIC IMAGINATION:
PERFORMING INTERRACIAL INTIMACY
IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S DRAMA

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Abstract

“Empathic Imagination: Performing Interracial Intimacy in Contemporary Women’s Theatre” interrogates the centrality of emotion in the representation of race and gender relations, focusing on contemporary drama. I read dramatic works by African American and Asian American women writers from the 1980s to the present as key sites by which to examine empathy, a social feeling often seen as a necessary basis for liberal multicultural communities. As many feminist scholars have suggested, women’s culture often operates on the expectations for universal experiences and feelings. For example, the genre of melodrama facilitates viewers’ empathetic identification with subaltern suffering by appealing to ‘universal feelings.’ However, this optimistic belief that material differences among women can be transcended through affective mutuality has been opposed within the feminist circle: for example, Laurent Berlant argues that sentimental culture reproduces a contained pseudo-political space and displaces conflicts of social realities onto emotional spheres. While the imagined intimate public enables women who rarely share public spaces in real life to form a sense of attachment to other women, it does not suggest radical changes or structural transformation of human relations outside women’s cultural space.

I argue that theater works produced by women of color in the post-Civil Rights era debunk such a fractured and illusory nature of an empathic community when it purports to negotiate race relations. Women playwrights from Velina Hasu Houston to Lynn Nottage initially suggest female alliance based on shared feelings as a way to effectively negotiate race: they reconstruct spaces for cross-racial identification where the act of sharing intimate stories and desires with other women makes us recognize ourselves as a ‘temporary public.’ The yearning for interracial affinities, however, is intertwined with failures and anxieties that these plays make palpable through various performance strategies. My analysis of individual plays attends to various empathic modes of representation in theatre that simultaneously mobilize and disrupt white liberal viewers’ desires to identify with racialized characters. Through my project’s affective approaches to contemporary multiracial theatre, I introduce a critical method for testing empathy as a political sentiment and the political role of theatre.

Chapter One interrogates the ambivalent nature of spectatorship where cross-racial sympathy is inextricably intertwined with voyeuristic desire. I analyze two plays that restage the black female body as a performance strategy: Robbie McCauley's performance piece, *Sally's Rape*, and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*, a play on the notorious Hottentot Venus show from late nineteenth century Britain. Borrowing Eric Lott and using phenomenological approaches to spectatorship as 'embodied,' I show how these plays complicate reciprocity between racial spectacles and spectators. For instance, I read white liberal feminists' identification with black female characters not just as a kind of dutiful universalism, but to project onto them their own erotic desires. I argue that such white simulation of a black woman leads to a "double rape" of the female black body, as physical violation of the body and as cultural theft of identity. I show how McCauley and Parks restage and challenge the fetishizing spectatorship by implicating the audience in the theatrical event and highlighting the embodied nature of race experience.

Chapter Two analyzes ways in which transnational women are constructed as 'sentimental subjects' in contemporary theater as a way to claim their American citizenship. I argue that the sentimental representation of Japanese female immigrants in Velina Hasu Houston's *Tea* and *Kokoro* reveal the ambivalences of women's solidarity based upon affective commonalities. These plays use melodramatic spectacles of racial suffering to evoke and challenge the commonality of female feeling, which process complicates cross-racial identifications between Japanese women and presumably white female audiences. My analysis shows how each play challenges the coercive nature of universal feelings and gender and racial stereotypes, and the limits of sympathetic spectatorship.

Chapter Three moves beyond a binary frame of white versus non-white and considers some of the ambivalent ways cross-racial empathy works for racial minorities. It compares Anna Deavere Smith's melodramatic portrayal of racial victims of the Los Angeles Riots in *Twilight* with Elizabeth Wong's Brechtian approach to a similarly motivated interethnic conflict in urban multiracial communities in *Kimchee and Chitlins*. I argue that Smith's empathic approach to racialized subjects creates highly selective forms of cross-racial affinities; this process reproduces ethnic stereotypes for mainstream audiences that obscure diverse processes of racialization in the American context. In

comparison, Wong's work exposes the precarious business of cross-racial identification when a model minority is faced with demands to pledge allegiance to multiple groups.

Chapter Four focuses on the multiracial and transnational communities portrayed in Sun Mee Chomet's *How to Be a Korean Woman* and Diana Son's *Satellites* and reconsiders the way in which theater envisions a sense of belonging in so-called 'post-racial' and transnational settings. Son's play debunks the myth of colorblindness and highlights our race-inflected perception of certain bodies that we would refuse to read as racialized. Chomet's play shows how a Korean adoptee's attempt to re-connect to her mother/land underscores possible ways in which empathy is mis/translated in the process of forming and navigating affective relations in the transnational context. While the disillusionment about familial intimacy, identity, and homeland/origin characterize these plays, I suggest that the shared acknowledgment of such sense of loss might enable a new bond of relatedness – a kind of kinship – within and outside of the theater.

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Introduction

Performance has been a buzzword for many artists and critics alike who seek space filled with potential for social change. Despite its temporariness, it is often deemed to create such moments of collective transformation by forging a sense of community among audiences and performers, on stage, and offstage. For instance, many theatre scholars have offered utopian readings of political potentials of theatrical events and cultures that presumably generate like-minded communities through collective enjoyment of or participation in such events. Jill Dolan, for instance, expresses a profound belief in the utopian possibilities of performance and proposes that performance enables us to collectively envision a better future. She explains that what draws people to live performances is the very communal yearning to experience the possible ‘elsewhere’ in the presence of each other. She attends to how “small, specific and profound moments in performance” make people feel aligned with each other, within the spatially and temporally limited theater space, where we get a glimpse into “a world in which our commonalities would hail us over our differences” (Dolan, “Utopia” 164-166). This ephemeral experience, Dolan argues, translates into people’s profound desire to change the world:

How can such a moving experience of utopia be conveyed or carried into the world outside the theatre? ... The utopian performative, by its very nature, can’t translate into a programme for social action, because it’s most effective as a *feeling*. [The desire to feel, to be touched, to sense my longing addressed, to share the complexity of hope in the presence of

absence and know that those around me, too, are moved, keeps me returning to the theatre, keeps me willing to practise a utopian vision for which, in some tangible way, no direct real-life analogy exists.] The politics lie in the desire to feel the potential of elsewhere. The politics lie in our willingness to attend or to create performance at all, to come together in real places to explore in imaginary spaces the potential of the ‘not here’ and the ‘not yet.’ (170)

For Dolan, our desire to change the world is ‘the desire to feel the potential of elsewhere,’ which takes place on an affective level. What theatre offers is a sentient experience where spectators and performers cohabit. Although not actualizing an action in concrete forms, the moments of collective ‘feeling’ are meaningful in that they signal the emergence of yet-to-come utopia manifested in desires of real bodies gathered in such real spaces as theatre.

But what if such hopeful conjectures turn out to be just wishful thinking on the part of an optimist? What if a play *almost* arouses what Dolan refers to as a sense of alignment among strangers, only to make us realize that we are somehow misguided into the soothing but false sense of transcendence? Would the feeling of being ‘slightly above ourselves’ still matter? More importantly, what does such a play would gain by shattering our dreams about a community? When the optimism dissipates, what is left for us? What is at stake – being optimistic, or the content of the optimism?

I would like to rethink these voices that extol the political viability of performance by considering the workings of particular feelings in creating the presumed

sense of community. I suggest that we simultaneously question the authenticity of these politically *good feelings* that performance and women's empathic community produce. I am interested in the particularly gendered way in which feelings have been constructed and mobilized in the realms closely related to women, spaces that encourage the sense of intimacy and affiliation among the participants. In this respect, one sees how the rhetoric of transcendence and utopianism in performance is consonant with the discourses around empathy in recent feminist discourses. The latter has been often associated with utopian possibilities that might be realized through women's solidarity grounded in mutual recognition of womanly feelings and its transformative power to change the social realities of a male-oriented world. In theater, stories and spectacles of subaltern suffering (women's suffering as well as subaltern suffering that is often manifested in a feminized form) that are staged in emotionally heightened modes of representation would draw the viewing public's collective sympathy. But how about when theater, in the guise of a public space, only gives a kind of vicarious, voyeuristic pleasure to the participants whose privately held feelings have been displayed and purged? Viewed in this light, performances might end up producing feelings that gratify private desires of privileged individuals and alleviate their sense of guilt.

Therefore, this dissertation examines empathy that contemporary feminist plays evoke and/or challenge as a way to imagine alternative communities in theater performances. The dramatic structures and performance strategies each play adopts varies from stage realism to its radical subversion and thus implicate audiences in the performative space in differing levels. However, what these plays have in common is their simultaneous invocation of and challenge against the potential of performance to

create a sense of community among the audience based on fluidity and multiplicity of cultural identities.¹ Rather than assuming identities that enter theatre space as rigid and unchangeable, performance creates moments “in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public” through affectively sharing the vision of a better world. While admitting the *ephemeral* nature of performance which admits the illusion of ‘transcending’ differences, the contemporary plays I examine in this dissertation envision “a site of difference” where “differences that are not only sexual or only racial, economic, or (sub) cultural, but all of these together, and often enough at odds with one another” (de Lauretis 14).

Feminist Approaches to Empathy

Sentimental feelings associated with women and expressed through literature and drama, have been frequently discussed in feminist criticism as affective strategies that define gender and race in interracial encounters and relationships. While sentimentality has often been denigrated for its passivity in relation to radical social change within a male-centered American literary tradition, Jane Tompkins, Linda Williams, and Christine Gledhill find aesthetic and political value in literary and cultural forms such as melodrama.² Emotional genres, including the nineteenth-century domestic novel, the early-twentieth-century Hollywood film, and the soap opera often evince the political potential of a sentimentality that may “reorganize culture from the woman’s point of

¹ See Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*.

² See Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*; Williams, “Something Else Beside a Mother”; and Gledhill, “Home is Where the Heart Is: Sentiment, Melodrama, and the Woman’s Film.” See also Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*; Williams, “Something Else Beside a Mother”; and Gledhill, “Home is Where the Heart Is: Sentiment, Melodrama, and the Woman’s Film.”

view” and provide revolutionary ideas and visions (Tompkins 124). Far from being asocial and apolitical, this sentimental power may call forth the audience’s desire for moral justice, which will ultimately lead to transformations in the world outside. Spectacles of subaltern suffering – whether by racial minorities or women – will mobilize the viewers’ sympathy, and empathy thus heightened will presumably extend beyond the realm of fiction. Sentimentality makes us confront and challenge the dominant social mores of the time and envision a community that transcends the racism or patriarchy dictated by social reality.

On the other hand, such feminist critics as Laurent Berlant suggest various forms of women’s culture tend to channel desires for intimacy into romantic fantasies involving the power of personal relationships to solve larger structural issues of power such as racism and sexism. As Berlant argues, such commodity cultures consumed by women – namely, cultural media marked by femininity such as sentimental novels, chick-lit, Hollywood films, and soap operas – appeal to the already-existing desires of readers and viewers that they *want to* identify with other women based on their shared ‘emotional lives’ as women. Such women’s culture has produced a fantasy of an affective community based on certain emotional commonalities, which Berlant calls a “mass-marketed intimate public” that willingly admits friends and strangers alike regardless of differences of social status. As Berlant describes:

A view that the people marked by femininity already have something in common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief even when it is mediated by commodities, even when it is

written by strangers who might not be women, and even when its particular stories are about women who seem, on the face of it, vastly different from each other and from any particular reader. (*The Female Complaint* ix)

While these discourses of intimate public seem to gratify women's collective desire and identification, they covertly function as a coercive, promoting a cultural ideology that attempts to solve structural problems in an imaginary pseudo-political space through the means of emotionally gratifying images of a happy community. Therefore, expectations for emotional reciprocity are almost always followed by disillusionment, or disappointment about the promise such emotional project had initially set by women's intimate discourses.

Berlant's critique of empathy also raises suspicions about the totalitarian aspect of a belief that "pain provides the common language of humanity" (Hartman 18). When it functions as a cultural ideology, this resort to affective power of an imagined community asserts a coercive power over the members of the community. It emphasizes the commonality of women's experiences and the mode in which empathy is expressed and felt, overlooking the diverse and distinct racial and cultural histories that shape the empathizer and the emphasized. Other feminist scholars also pointed out the uneven power structure that shapes how empathy operates as a tool for social justice. For instance, M. Caygill and P. Sunder are cautious about using empathy as a tool for

building coalition within feminism because of its universalist assumption.³ While empathy promises reciprocal understanding on an equal footing between privileged empathizers and the underprivileged, it also can be a colonizing gesture because it draws parallels between different situations by ruling out and removing the feelings and experience of the “other.”

This problematic dimension of empathy is prominent in cross-cultural and transnational contexts. As Sara Ahmed suggests, feelings shared by a community can bring about a stronger social bond, but feelings associated with and promoted for the good of a community are essentially exclusive and come with normative demands. Some members of the community are inevitably left out, whose feelings are marked with cultural and historical differences and therefore do not conform to the mainstream sentiments. Therefore, a notion of happiness, or harmony, grounded in shared feeling often “redefine[s] social norms as social goods” and serves to justify oppression of the marginalized (Ahmed, *Promise 2*). Carolyn Pedwell’s study also raises the problematic aspect of assuming empathic bonds in the transnational context. In *Affective Relations* (2014), she extends the anti-racist and feminist scholars’ work on affect and suggests both potentialities and limits of empathy as a transformative political force in the transnational context (5). As empathy travels, it inevitably goes through ‘translations’ and is received differently in varying cultural contexts. Empathy is often attached to other emotions and therefore the “affective translation” reveals the murkiness of empathy. Through literary examples that illustrate the promises, frustrations, and contradictions of transnational empathy, Pedwell suggests that “transnational formations of empathy

³ Caygill and Sundar differentiate empathy from sympathy, which is presumably based on a vertical power relationship between the advantaged sympathizer and the disadvantaged “other.”

produce transformative connections” but they also may “generate damaging exclusions, ... involve unevenness, failure and ‘translations that go awry’ (xii).

I take up these critiques of empathy in women’s culture as a way to reconsider the political potential of theatrical empathy to generate ‘intimate publics’ and its ability to provide us with visions of alternative communities beyond the present one. I read contemporary plays by women of color as key sites to examine empathy, a social feeling often seen as a necessary basis for liberal multicultural communities. As my analyses of Velina Hasu Houston, Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks, Anna Deavere Smith, Diana Son, Elizabeth Wong, and recent stage productions on transnational adoption will show, the dramatic conventions and performance strategies serve as conduits of intimacy that bridge racial and cultural differences. I contend that such primary modes of empathic representation are interlaced with potential failures and disruptions in live performances as well as within the dramatic structure. The plays initially deploy various dramatic modes and performance strategies that generate strong, presumably universal emotions and promote a sense of affiliation among multiracial women characters and audience members. Construction of plots and characters follows the conventions of melodrama, often stigmatized as a women’s genre, to facilitate the audience’s identification with female characters that might or might not share the same race experiences. These aesthetic devices facilitate the formation of an affective community through the viewers’ emotional attachment to and sympathy for others, which bond transcends all the differences dictated by identity categories. At the same time, they consciously (or unintentionally) grapples with the difficulties of intimate bonding among women, which reaffirms that identification is anything but perfect. Therefore, the plays I examine here

not only challenge assumptions about sympathy, identification, and moral rectitude, but also suggest alternative ways to approach the political dimension of affect and American racial attitudes.

This dissertation grapples with two main questions: Why do we turn to empathic identification even when we recognize its limits, if not its falsehood? And what alternative visions of communities do these plays reimagine by evoking and challenging our empathetic desires? I suggest that contemporary theater approaches interracial intimacies through dramatic structures and forms that reflect and refract the clash between the empathic desire for and the wariness towards cross-racial identification. Discourse around empathy as a political and aesthetic tool in theater provokes us to question why playwrights often resort to the excess of emotions even when their ultimate ends profess to be a social change. Despite its triteness and overuse, our empathic capability is constantly called upon in numerous moments of these plays that simultaneously require our critical assessment of the socio-political status quo. How might one explain such co-existing tendencies for tears and neutrality?

These plays often adhere to dominant representational modes such as melodrama instead of opting for more subversive and experimental forms. While they negotiate different nodes of identity, they do so *within* dominant dramatic conventions and performance tradition that are familiar with the audience. These troubling moments in these plays where empathy falters might be viewed as the moments when the ‘disidentificatory desires’ manifest themselves. These moments, rather than being self-contradictory, can offer creative and critical perspectives on the workings of affect that pervade the plays. They can be read as gestures to prevent the principle of empathy from

becoming a monolithic and authoritarian doctrine by expressing dissenting voices in recognizable forms within and through the reappropriation of a dominant representational mode. To borrow Jose Esteban Muñoz, these dis-identifying moments seem to work as a ‘survival strategy’ for such “subjects who are hailed by more than one minority identity component” (11). According to Muñoz, while the process of identity formation takes place in a series of identification with proper social roles, it is always accompanied with counter-identification, or partial identification.⁴ Muñoz proposes that minoritized people strategically choose to disidentify as “a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” which “tries to transform a cultural logic from within” (11). When applied to the multiplicity within the theater space, this view helps us to understand plays that involve complex workings between the authors, the characters, and the audiences who are defined by multiple interlocking identity components such as gender, race, and nationality rather than one unified identity. For those whose identities are always formed at the intersection of gender, race, class, and nationality such as women of color, their detachment from and partial rejection of a more dominant, inclusive marker of identity cannot but be expressed in such small spaces within a larger mode of representation.

Melodrama and Empathy

One of the prominent ways in which American stage has mobilized empathy to negotiate cultural and racial differences was its adoption of melodrama, which is a

⁴ For example, queer of color (minoritized by race *and* sexuality) are constantly caught in a dilemma where they are asked to identify with a subject – often, desirable by heteronormative standard – but they can only partially identify with it. When he wants to identify with a white gay, his race prevents him from wholeheartedly accepting the experience that the latter represents. See Muñoz, *Disidentifications*

representative empathetic dramatic form. While tragedy, probably the most legitimate form of western theater, elicits strong emotional responses from the viewer, theater critics have differentiated the type of empathy produced by tragedy from that produced by melodrama. For instance, Bert States corrects our general assumption about tragedy, arguing that tragedy produces silence rather than tears (171-172).⁵ Peter Brooks has suggested that melodrama was an alternative mode that provided the public with a sense of moral rectitude in times of radical social upheaval and transition. As existing social mores lost its value, the characters and plots in melodrama embodied transcendent ethical standards that the audiences could still aspire to. Eric Bentley defends melodrama as “the quintessence of drama” and suggests its potential universality present in any form of theater *including* the more presumably emotionally alienated Epic Theater proposed by Bertolt Brecht. Echoing Aristotle, he asserts that “pity of the hero and fear of the villain” are two major emotional appeals of melodrama in which audiences identify with the hero (Bentley 200).⁶

Such assumptions about the moral legibility of melodrama have shaped racial representations on American stage and our perceptions of them in particularly ethical ways. Linda Williams finds recurrent tropes of (often gender-inflected) racial melodrama

⁵ According to States, tragedy creates a kind of an empathic experience, but this experience does not lead to creating a sense of connection among those who are in the same theater – rather, it isolates each member of the audience. What is interesting about States’ observation on tragedy is the audience’s involvement in the action of the drama – tragedy as a *noncollaborative* form. For States, the roughly same feeling each spectator might have is still ‘a private thing’ and tragedy provides us with ‘a surrogate audience of survivors on stage who act out the emotion occurring in the auditorium’ (171).

⁶ As Bentley puts it, “We are identified with those others who are threatened; the pity we feel for them is pity for ourselves; and by the same token we share their fears. We pity the hero of melodrama because he is in a fearsome situation; we share his fears; and, pitying ourselves, we pretend we pity him” (200). For further discussions of melodrama, see Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*; McConachie, *Melodramatic Formation: American Theater and Society, 1820-1870*; and Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, and Sensibility*.

have appeared in variable forms in American popular culture as a strategy to negotiate racial relations. The melodramatic representations of racial victims, for instance, are used to generate cross-racial empathy in white viewers, presumably facilitating social justice for the socially injured and disadvantaged minorities. Following a “tradition of black and white racial melodrama” but not only limited to the binary racial dynamics, Williams suggests, the race card “has been in play whenever racial abuse is invoked to cast one racially constituted group as the victim of another” (Race Card 5). The sense of moral righteousness evoked in the viewers, Williams argues, has often led to political actions outside theater as exemplified in the nineteenth century abolitionist movements mobilized by spectators of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Sympathetic portrayals of Otherness continue to appear, such as in the twentieth century Broadway musicals such as *South Pacific* or *The King and I*. These Asia-themed Rogers and Hammerstein musicals stressed imagined affective tie between Asians and Americans by portraying Asians as intimate and docile subjects.⁷

Such empathetic approaches to racial representations were interlaced with racist stereotypes. As a performance strategy to navigate complex racial dynamics, cross-racial performance included sympathetic representations as well as hyperbolic and comic portrayals of other races. There is a strong connection between melodrama and blackface minstrel stage: Eric Lott has suggested that stage adaptations of *Uncle Tom* blended melodrama and minstrelsy, producing a theatrical version of the sentimentalized representations of race in Stowe’s novel (213-229). Blackface minstrelsy both used comic stereotypes of blackness and the emotional appeal of melodrama: this combination

⁷ See Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*; and McChonachie, *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War*.

remained popular with audiences well into the twentieth century. Michael Rogin notes that later popular blackface entertainments in Hollywood such as *Jazz Singer* also belonged to a genre of urban melodrama. As these scholars suggest, for Jewish and Irish working classes, the nineteenth and early-twentieth century minstrel stage served as a space where white racial identities were constructed over imagined black bodies and reaffirmed through the performative disavowal of blackness. In particular, the oversexed images of black masculinity gratified homoerotic desires of primarily white male audiences, generating the imagined bond between imagined black males and white male viewers.

If the early minstrel stage is a masculinized performative space that negotiated white male desires for cross-racial identification, I approach women's sentimental culture as a feminized one where female desires were expressed and fashioned in particularly gendered ways. I focus on the feminist potential of performance that employs the strategies of melodrama to address the particularly gendered nature of interracial encounters and solidarity targeted at female audiences. For instance, melodramatic conventions often found in Hollywood movies enable (mostly female) audiences' multiple identifications with characters and diverse subject positions, producing "empathic, identifying female spectators" (Williams, "Mother" 17).⁸ As the subgenre of maternal melodrama well illustrates, femininity was defined exclusively as maternal in these films – experiences and emotions associated with mothering and motherhood that are presumably shared by women regardless of their social differences. Such "feminine"

⁸ Through her reading of feminist discourses on female sexuality within the psychoanalytic tradition, Williams further links the plurality of female desires with the female spectator's potentially multiple points of entry into the visual – phallic – economy. Ann Kaplan and Christine Gledhill provide similarly motivated reading of women's films.

virtues of caring, compassion, and sensitivity have potential to disrupt, if not subvert, the status quo governed by masculine traits such as violence and aggression.⁹

However, these discourses around women's sentimental culture primarily focus on the textual spaces such as domestic fiction and films through which female desires have been mediated without actual contact between women. Such disembodied reader-/spectator-ship might work as a metaphorical minstrel stage, where imagined representations of racial Otherness are desired and consumed among female readers. My analyses of contemporary plays by African American or Asian American women complicate the empathetic spectatorship by examining how such illusion of cross-racial affinity can be shattered by the presence of real bodies on stage.

Racial performances in contemporary theater carry similar or dissimilar political connotations and racial meanings as previous practices of racially motivated performances. While the plays I examine here raise suspicions and deconstruct such performative practices as a hypocritical, racist gestures (*Sally's Rape*), they also deploy the same practices to facilitate the audience's emotional attachments to the racialized characters and forge cross-racial affinities (*Twilight*). One also finds moments where cross-racial performance is strategically used to reveal the ways in which our racial/racist perception is ideologically constructed and can be transgressed (*Kimchee and Chitlins*). Importantly, these plays show that the relationship between the performers, the viewers, and the represented is a complicated one that vacillates from ridicule and exclusion to sympathy and inclusion, pledging allegiance with each other at different moments. Instead of proposing all-embracing transcendent vision of a community of spectators,

⁹ See Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*.

these plays admit the ephemerality of an empathetic community and bifurcations within the community.

Empathy as a Civic Discourse for a Multicultural Society

Discourses on empathy often incorporate other closely related words such as sympathy, pity, and compassion. For instance, the editors of *Empathy and its Limits* suggest that empathy should be differentiated from other related emotions, particularly due to the former's transformative possibility that pro-social feelings will elicit pro-social actions.¹⁰ Because the utility of empathy as a social feeling exceeds the emotional boundary, it is understood as “a complex mix of physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and ethnical capacities, which can be triggered in everyday situations, developed in social contexts, and explored and trained in the reception of art” (Assmann and Detmers 7). Carolyn Pedwell also approaches empathy as more than a category of emotion; it is rather “a social and political *relation* involving the imbrication of cognitive, perceptual and affective processes.”¹¹

Many agree that the term ‘empathy’ was developed in the fields of psychology and aesthetics in the late nineteenth century.¹² The term “empathy” was coined by

¹⁰ See Assmann and Detmers, *Empathy and its Limits*.

¹¹ See Pedwell, *Affective Relations*, Preface xi.

¹² For a comprehensive genealogy of empathy in the fields of psychology and philosophy, see Coplan and Goldie, *Empathy*, Introduction. The way in which David Hume and Adam Smith used the term sympathy is similar to our contemporary understanding of empathy in general sense. For Hume, sympathy was regarded as a principle of communication that is fundamental to human nature; for Smith, sympathy enables us to experience other's emotions through “imaginative perspective-taking.” In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith sets sympathy apart from pity and

Robert Vischer and further developed by Theodor Lipps.¹³ Empathetic capability has been regarded as an indispensable component of therapist-patient rapport in a pathological context. The process of empathic transference involves the analyst's temporary identification with the patient, where the analyst uses his/her own experiences similar to the patient's to make *emotional* contact and comes to a better understanding of the patient's position. The successful deployment of empathy, however, demands one's cognitive detachment as well as affective attachment: in other words, the analyst's position should oscillate between that of an observer and that of a participant and cognitive separation from as well as affective connection with the patient. In this sense, empathy is understood to be an intellectual activity rather than being a purely affective one, a way for us to access other minds intellectually.

Since empathy can supposedly bridge disparate selves – such as that of a therapist and a patient – cultivation of empathetic ability has become crucial in stabilizing conflicting interests and positions within a liberal, multicultural society. Nussbaum (1996) regards empathy to be a bridge between the individual and the community and advocates its utility in achieving social justice. Empathy provides knowledge of the other and therefore leads us to a better, more neutral judgment that is not blind to social inequities. Based on the Aristotelian notion of 'poetic justice' achieved through feelings of fear and pity, she proposes that compassion cultivates our ability to perceive the disadvantages of

compassion: the former denotes "our fellow-feeling with any passion whatsoever" whilst the latter "signify our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others." (15)

¹³ Scholarships on empathy in the field of psychology are numerous. See Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy*; Japhda, "Theodor Lipps and the shift from 'sympathy' to 'empathy'"; and Zahavi, "Empathy, Embodiment and Interpersonal Understanding: From Lipps to Schutz." The latest development of theories of empathy also includes the ethics of care and the fields of neuroscience. See Decety, *Empathy: from bench to bedside*; Kögler and Stueber, *Empathy and agency: the problem of understanding in the human sciences*; Cluff and Binstock, *The lost art of caring : a challenge to health professionals, families, communities, and society*

disenfranchised groups. As she puts it, “Compassion is not the entirety of justice; but it both contains a powerful, if partial, vision of just distribution and provides imperfect citizens with an essential bridge from self-interest to just conduct” (57).

This belief in promoting good citizenship through affective education has been shared by educators.¹⁴ Courses like multicultural literatures have been especially welcomed for its potential to cultivate people’s empathic ability to properly respond to otherness – racial, gender, ethnic, and class differences. However, such value of literary critics and educators maintain a more ambivalent position in response to the call for literary education as a tool to develop empathetic readership within so-called multicultural curriculum.¹⁵ Megan Boler argues that it is likely that empathy fosters passivity without radically transforming the reader’s viewpoints. As she argues, what Nussbaum calls compassion is in fact a passive form of empathy that the reader feels for fictional characters as “the very distant other” without feeling obliged to take an action to change the status quo (Boler, “Empathy” 257). What should be nurtured instead is ‘testimonial empathy’ through which one should ‘recognize oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront.’ Ann Jurecic shares this position where she considers the merits and problems of teaching literary texts that complicate as well as encourage empathetic readership.¹⁶ Through her reading of

¹⁴ For further discussion, see Dolby, *Rethinking multicultural education for the next generation: the new empathy and social justice*; White, *Aesthetics, empathy and education*; Cooper, *Empathy in Education: engagement, values and achievement* London; Roth, *Beyond the university: why liberal education matters*; and Davis, “White Book Clubs and African American Literature.” Among these, Davis’s article speaks to the role of literature to promote empathy for an enhanced cross-racial understanding.

¹⁵ See Boler, “The risks of empathy: interrogating multiculturalism’s gaze” and *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*; and Travis, “Beyond Empathy: Narrative Distancing and Ethics in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”

¹⁶ Jurecic, “Empathy and the Critic”

texts deliberately resistant to empathetic reading, she proposes the importance of recognizing the limitations of empathy as an all-embracing, all-knowing cultural ideology.

Building on Jurecic's cautionary conclusions, I find Laurent Berlant's critique to be particularly useful in questioning contemporary notions of interracial empathy in a specifically U.S. context. In her critique of the pervasive sentimentalism in American cultural narratives, Berlant suggests that politically motivated use of sentimental rhetoric creates an illusion that empathic identification can transcend structural problems such as racism and sexism. To borrow her words:

Sentimentality is not just the mawkish, nostalgic, and simpleminded mode with which it's conventionally associated, where people identify with wounds of saturated longing and suffering, and it's not just a synonym for a theatre of empathy: it is a mode of relationality in which people take emotions to express something authentic about themselves that they think the world should welcome and respect; a mode constituted by affective and emotional intelligibility and a kind of generosity, recognition, and solidarity among strangers.¹⁷

However, she cautions against using affective strategies for political purposes since it may postpone and hinder the actualization of social change since it purports to

¹⁷ See McCabe, "Depressive Realism: an Interview with Lauren Berlant"

tackle structural social problems through politically correct ‘feelings’ of fragmented individuals.

My approach to empathic spectatorship in contemporary theater is in this context of its potential and limits as affective pedagogies. As Broadway musicals during the Cold War era exemplify, theatre has provided Americans with a kind of “sentimental education” by teaching American public the virtues in the age of globalism. As Klein has suggested, a sentimental aesthetic around the U.S. relationship to the Pacific Asia has pervaded American cultural imagination during the Cold War. Various discourses actively produced by middlebrow artists and intellectuals emphasized affective exchanges between American audiences and Asians, which would forge a sense of affiliation between the two parties without actual encounters. Such cultural project contributed to forging a special bond between America and Asian countries in the American imaginary, creating a collective subject of “we.” In this respect, contemporary American theater showcases how the emotional mechanism in theater has actively reciprocated with the political realities outside, shaping and challenging the public perception of race and gender relations.

Empathy in Theater

While theatre provides liminal space for two disparate groups can interact through imagination, the embodied nature of such encounters inevitably complicate the otherwise easy process of identification. As many theorists concur, feelings are central to theatrical experience, and theatre’s cultural work is done through its “feeling-work” of displaying,

soliciting, and managing feelings (Hurley 9). The spectating act has long been associated with the viewer's emotional experience. In the ancient Greek theater, the aim of tragedy lied in arousing the feelings of fear and pity in the viewer through the scenes of suffering and falling of a noble man. Such emotions was not carried outside the theater; as Aristotle suggested, drama aimed at 'the proper purgation [catharsis] of these feelings' within a contained frame of drama.

Brecht contended that the conventional Aristotelian theater creates the illusions of reality and experience that spectators safely consume in a contained space of theater. In particular, he criticized the emotional manipulation to be the evil of "bourgeois theater" where the audiences' overly empathetic identification with characters blinded them to the social reality. Therefore, he suggested that the theater develop "a technique for submitting emotions to the spectator's criticism" so that viewers maintain emotional detachment and critical distance from the characters and inquire into the larger workings of a dominant ideology that influence characters' actions and choices (Brecht, "Street" 3).

However, Brecht's use of melodrama demonstrates to us the effectiveness of using emotions to raise the audiences' consciousness of social injustices even when the subject matter is of highly political nature. Scholars like Martin Esslin call attention to discrepancies in Brecht's theory and practices where he often incorporated melodramatic moments.¹⁸ Krasner and States also argue that Brecht strategically embedded emotional appeals in his plays.¹⁹ As they suggest, empathy in Brechtian theatre involves more than

¹⁸ See Esslin, *The Choice of Evils*.

¹⁹ States reassert the indispensability of empathy in theater ("But can art ever deliver itself from empathy? Isn't empathy the force that keeps us in our theater seats?"), suggesting that Brecht was

being sympathetic to a character or putting ourselves in her situation; it involves our acknowledgement of a paradox – the impulse to understand the character and the impulse to retreat from her. The balance between two such conflicting impulses – feelings – enables Brecht to avoid excesses of sentimentality. In “Empathy and Theater,” David Krasner defines empathy evoked in live theater as “audience experience in response to an action, emotion, feeling, or circumstance occurring onstage” (257). Compared to other forms of literature and art, as he argues, live theater has “the immediate power of a living being engaged in behavior, action, and expression” over the audiences, which can enhance the level of empathetic interaction (258). For States, empathy in theater pertains to the phenomenological aspect of live performance, through which audiences are sympathetically involved with the characters.²⁰ From this perspective, our encounter with live bodies on the stage always already accompanies a sense of empathetic bondage.

These views are shared by recent theater scholars who approach theatrical events as a phenomenological space. Informed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, recent theater scholarships take cognitive approaches to explain the stage-audience relationship as mutually constructive in subjectivity-formation. They highlight the *unmediated* nature of spectatorship in theater that is distinguished from film experience,²¹ where both subjects and objects are in the material presence of each other and asserts influence. In *Role-playing and Identity*, Wilshire suggests that the experience of theater is constitutive of the

in fact replacing an old “bourgeois” concept of empathy with another one “cleansed of class flattery” (103-106).

²⁰ See States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: on the Phenomenology of Theater*

²¹ For film scholarships that take phenomenological approaches to spectatorship, see: Laura Marks, *Skin of the Film and Touch*; Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*; Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*; and Mark Peterson, *The Senses of Touch*

process where we perceive our selfhood and identity. As both subject and object, the spectator both sees and is seen by the actor, who shares the same existential space with the spectator. Through this process of mutual perception, the spectator learns of his/her own embodied self. For Stanton Garner, stage is not just a “spectacle to be processed and consumed by the perceiving eye, objectified as field of vision” but also an “environmental space, ‘subjectified’ (and intersubjectified) by physical actors who *body forth* the space they inhabit” (3-4, emphasis added). Such duality of the actor’s body in a perceptual field of performance, Garner argues, enables a reciprocal gaze of the stage body, “the disruptive potential of the performer’s own gaze” at the authorizing power of the audience’s spectatorship (49). Bert States expands on Merleau-Ponty’s observation to underscore the affective corporeality of theatre and calls for “phenomenal renewal” of the medium where “all images. . . erupt delightfully and claim their presence as a site of disclosure” (12). He argues that theatre produces images, instead of *reproducing* signs, which audience understands intellectually and perceives *sensually* simultaneously.

Theater’s such emphasis on the living body makes dimensions of race palpable. Attending to a tendency among contemporary women artists to use their (often naked) bodies, feminist scholars including Jill Dolan, Rebecca Schneider, Cherise Smith Amelia Jones have noted that such feminist performance strategies subvert the male-centered system of representation and recover the agency of the female body that is often objectified by male spectators. Jeanie Forte cautiously suggests that strategizing female body such as female nudity in performance runs the risk of “reinscrib[ing] the body as object, as a source of voyeuristic pleasure” rather than subverting the male gaze (259-261). However, the female body in feminist performance may still reify *écriture feminine*,

a form of writing that expresses women's varied lived experiences. As a "speaking subject," the female body in performance assumes agency and expresses its desire and sexuality without intervention of authorship other than performer herself.

Although potentially liberating, these discourses largely neglect how race and ethnicity complicate the suggested model of spectatorship by assuming a homogenizing notion of the female body. Throughout this dissertation, therefore, I examine ways in which these issues of spectatorship are disrupted, discussed, and sometimes reinforced in contemporary theater when it navigates differences of race and ethnicity. Robbie McCauley's performance in *Sally's Rape*, for example, highlights how embodied space of live performance highlights the racial otherness of the body in display – that is, it makes visible racial differences that set performing bodies apart from the viewing bodies. Such embodied spectatorship has potential to transform our perceptual knowledge of race to an embodied and experiential knowledge, in Alice Rayner's words, through "both material specificity and the gaps that arise in the process of imitation and repetition (42).

The case of *Intimate Apparel*

In turning a more skeptical eye on the optimistic presumption that theatrical performance reflects and generates women's community, I find Lynn Nottage's 2003 play *Intimate Apparel* to be a good place to start. The play constantly pokes at assumptions that material boundaries of race and class may be overcome if we share each other's emotional lives. It invites the audience to participate in female characters' most personal confessions and to imagine themselves part of this intimate community: thus the theatrical event suggests that public viewing of these stage events is also a collectively

shared intimate experience. The continuity and fluidity between individual characters, between scenes, and between stage and audience are emphasized in the play to create a sense of interrelatedness and collective experience. The play overall has a largely dystopian vision that questions both this sense of intimacy and the ideals of nurturing femininity that it evokes. But at the same time, the play follows a pattern whereby such dreams give way to disillusionment only to be followed by continuing glimmers of hope in these connections.

Intimate Apparel is a play about dreams and disillusionment. Each character yearns for elsewhere, and the play shows how such utopian imaginings are collectively formed and shared. Set in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century, the play gives us a glimpse of a cosmopolitan city peopled with migrants from abroad as well as from the South. The play focuses on Esther, an African American woman who makes undergarments for other women, and her relationships with people from diverse racial, religious, and class backgrounds. Since moving from the South, Esther has lived in a boarding house, primarily occupied by young African American women, for 18 years. While her landlady is worried about the plain and not-so-young Esther's prospects for marriage, Esther holds romantic hopes for her future husband and secretly dreams of opening a beauty parlor for colored women like herself. Meanwhile, she is secretly attracted to a Jewish Merchant named Mr. Marks (and the attraction is a mutual one), but religious and racial differences hinder them from expressing their feelings to each other. Through one of her clients, a wealthy white woman Mrs. Van Buren, the illiterate Esther begins writing letters to George, a day laborer working on the Panama Canal; although George is a stranger, he professes love for Esther. Esther is at first hesitant about the

correspondence. But encouraged by Mrs. Van Buren, an upper-class lady for whom Esther designs corsets as well as her friend Mayme, an African American prostitute and entertainer, Esther continues this correspondence with George through a series of poetic love letters. George ultimately proposes to Esther and comes to the United States where they are married.

As the play progresses, it reveals how Esther's dream of a marriage that secures a conventional position in African American soon gives way to disillusionment. Furthermore each of her intimate relationships, with women as well as with men, falls apart. Esther feels content with her status as a married woman in her social circles, but her marriage to George is both physically and emotionally unfulfilling. George's expectations about new job opportunities in the US are frustrated by racial discrimination, and the resulting economic incompetency makes him cruel to Esther. He brazenly requests Esther's money, hardly maintaining a façade of a happily married couple in public. Esther's relationships with Mrs. Van Buren and Mayme also fall apart. Mrs. Van Buren, herself neglected by her husband for her infertility, declares her love to Esther, which Esther sees as hypocritical. Esther discovers that Mayme has an affair with George without knowing who he is. Finally, both Esther and George confess to not writing the letters; it turns out that George had hired a man to write the letters. Dejected, Esther lets go of her savings, which she hid in a quilted blanket, which George squanders in a gamble overnight. At the end of the play, we see Esther back in the girls' boarding house, beginning a new quilt and perhaps expecting a baby.

The play gives some optimism about the possibilities for women to form their own intimate communities, suggesting a certain kind of nurturing, even utopian collective

that is formed and shared among female characters surrounding Esther's love interests. The play reconstructs spaces for female intimacy as a possible way to transcend differences of race, religion, and class; in doing so, it ultimately suggests that such boundaries might be breached through the affective bonds forged among women who rarely share public spaces in real life. In successive scenes—each showing the women interacting through the intimate apparel that Esther makes—the physical and emotional intimacy of Esther, Mayme, and Mrs. Van Buren suggests how separate social spheres might indeed come together. But Nottage also makes us question this interrelatedness and these mutually shared “female” spaces in ways that grapple with the prevalent assumptions about intimacy and women's culture. The play suggests that the imagination might lead female characters to create a kind of fantasy of intimacy that momentarily leads them to forget the positions dictated by such parameters as racial and class hierarchies. But this imagined women's coalition is constantly regulated and mediated through the rhetoric of belonging and exclusion, limiting and defining what can be shared by women across racial and class boundaries.

We find in *Intimate Apparel* what might be called a women's intimate public through female characters who willingly share their innermost longings and strive for a sense of closeness with one another. The mode of ‘female complaint’ in the play enables women to come to view their commonality articulated in the language of suffering and elicits politically correct feelings. What bond the women together is their shared aloneness, a feeling that they are not understood by the rest of the world, as “affective experience[s] of being collectively, structurally unprivileged” among these women (*Female Complaint* ix). When the play opens, we see Esther living in a boarding house

with seven unmarried women who presumably similar racial and economic status. Mrs. Dickson, a widowed owner of the boarding house, serves as a constant reminder of Esther's social position and realistic choices available to women like her. Esther's dismissal of Mrs. Dickson's worldly advice about choosing a potential spouse shows us how she secretly disassociates herself with girls like Corinna Mae, whose fair skin got herself a slightly better luck in marriage. As "a rather plain" African American woman, Esther's very invisibility in a culture that privileges whiteness shapes and at the same time frustrates her fantasies and desires for a mode of life that lives up to the expectations of heteronormativity and images of normalized institutions of intimacy such as marriage.

It is through her letters to George that Esther can imagine herself as a woman who is loved by a man regardless of her plain appearance. The exoticism and remoteness that George's letter delivers is a way for Esther, who feels immobilized in women's boarding house, to imagine elsewhere and a romance that is impossible in reality. When Mrs. Dickerson learns that Esther has been writing to George, a man in Panama she has not even met, she reprimands Esther for her impracticality and hopeless romanticism. Esther is not unaware of her venture when she contests Mrs. Dickerson's accusation of her being naïve. Hearing Mrs. Dickson's doubt about the 'realness' of George ("His tone is very familiar. And I don't approve."), Esther protests "And yes, I'm writing letters to a man. And it may come to nothing. But I am his sweetheart twice a month, and I can fill that envelope with anything that I want." (28). The yearning for imaginary intimacy is so powerful that she temporarily renounces some of the high hopes she used to have for her future husband.

The gap between realistic choices that Mrs. Dickson suggests and the persisting high hopes (“Well, I ain’t giving up so easy”) seems to lead Esther to find another way to feel a sense of belonging, which will be defined by shared emotions of loneliness and capability (and willingness) to dream. Each female character is in a desolate emotional condition, but spaces exclusively marked by femininity “as an affective space of attachment and identification” that come laden with “a certain experience of belonging.” Mrs. Van Buren’s infertility makes her and her husband maintain only the façade of marriage, but she dreams to “be a bohemian, a bohemian needn’t a husband, she’s not bound by convention” (27). Mayme, although dependent on prostitution for her living, has not given up on a chance to become “a concert pianist playing recitals for audiences in Prague and I have my own means, not bad for a colored girl from Memphis” (20). Esther herself dreams to “own a quaint beauty parlor for colored ladies” (21). This imagined community faithfully adheres to the belief that they are present with each other in the mutual emotional sphere despite the fact that they do not share underprivileged racial or class positions in real life.

Therefore, Esther’s race and invisible labor, which prevent her from participating in hetero-normative forms of public life such as marriage, attain significance and mobility in imaginary spaces where women find a route to complain their emotional depravity and collectively imagine a gratifying vision of elsewhere. The intimate apparel that Esther makes mediates characters who are in separate realms because of geographical distance, racial boundaries, difference of class and religion, etc. They mediate the disparate lives of people both known and unknown to her, forming a kind of interpersonal and communal identity, which audience comes to perceive as somehow

connected. If a women's intimate public is mediated through commodities, as Berlant points out, Esther's intimate apparel serve that purpose throughout the play: the exchange of corsets symbolically shows these women's reciprocal desires. Mrs. Van Buren, who is trapped in a superficial, high society and her lonely boudoir, asks Esther to make the same corset as Mayme's, hoping to 'wear' a more liberated woman. In turn, Esther makes Mayme a corset of the same design for Mrs. Van Buren, one that ladies would prefer. As Esther aptly puts it, "what she got, you want, what you got, she want" (19). Unlike in reality, differences draw women together and attract each other, rather than separating them from each other. Since corsets are signifiers of each woman's social status, watching the same corset on different female bodies momentarily unsettles the way in which viewers associate certain female bodies with culturally coded commodities. These transactions between bodies and desires contribute to creating a homo-social sphere for women and the sense of community that crosses over race, sexuality, and class as a collective subject.

The sense of mutual belonging is epitomized in three women's shared interests in Esther's romance with George, which is symbolically illustrated in the act of co-authoring her letters to him and thus collectively experiencing her emotional life. Esther, being illiterate, asks Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren to read and write on her behalf to George. This love letter functions as a repository of conflicting and diverse desires of different women, which Esther regards as something that she can fill with anything that she wants (24). It forms an imagined collective subject, an intimate women's public to borrow Berlant's expression, unfixated and unfixable, which oscillates between the lady and the whore and across the boundaries of sexuality. This sense of mutual belonging

culminates in a scene which describes Esther's wedding night with George: "Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren enter, dressed in their twin corsets" and ask "Is he as *we* imagined?" (emphasis added). In this scene, the privacy and intimacy of consummation is shared among women who imagine themselves as a collective subject.

The problem with such women's inter-subjectivity in *Intimate Apparel* is that its ephemerality that inevitably sets the women apart. The play does not blind us to persisting structural problems that are still there outside the realm of hopeful feelings. Solidarity among women breaks down towards the end, culminating in George's affair with Mayme and Esther's refusal of Mrs. Van Buren's advancement. More importantly, the limitations of this community become visible as expressions of their intimate relationships are limited to private spaces and their public domains are still separated. When Van Buren confesses her affection towards Esther that exceeds friendship, Esther accuses her of being hypocritical: "Friends? How we friends? When I ain't never been through your front door. You love me? What of me do you love?" (59). While Esther is "the only one who's been in [her] boudoir in all these months" for Mrs. Van Buren, Esther's remarks poignantly reveal the real gap that exists between the two owing to the racial and class differences.

Nottage's play ultimately critiques the way in which women's multiracial community is promoted through romantic notions of intimacy. The play initially creates spaces where women's yearning for mutual belonging can thrive through emotional contact without interventions of social realities that set women apart. Esther and other women voluntarily believe in the notion that their lives are connected in some way as each woman's sufferings are somehow commonly shared and understood. However,

poignant revelation follows at the end of the play that such imagined intimacy does not suggest radical changes, or structural transformation of human relations. We see the characters' disillusionment about expectations about women's cultural space, which female characters romanticize, as the coalition among them inevitably disintegrates and the ruptures and differences among themselves become visible. What this play gets at, then, is how the prevalent rhetoric of physical as well as cultural spaces marked by femininity (or exclusively shared by women) fails to criticize or subvert the power dynamic rooted in racial hierarchy and social inequity.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One interrogates the ambivalent nature of spectatorship where cross-racial sympathy is inextricably intertwined with voyeuristic desire. I analyze two plays that restage the black female body as a performance strategy: Robbie McCauley's performance piece, *Sally's Rape*, and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*, a play on the notorious Hottentot Venus show from late nineteenth century Britain. Borrowing Eric Lott and using phenomenological approaches to spectatorship as 'embodied,' I show how these plays complicate reciprocity between racial spectacles and spectators. For instance, I read white liberal feminists' identification with black female characters not just as a kind of dutiful universalism, but to project onto them their own erotic desires. I argue that such white simulation of a black woman leads to a "double rape" of the female black body, as physical violation of the body and as cultural theft of identity. I show how McCauley and Parks restage and challenge the fetishizing spectatorship by implicating the audience in the theatrical event and highlighting the embodied nature of race experience.

Chapter Two analyzes ways in which transnational women are constructed as ‘sentimental subjects’ in contemporary theater as a way to claim their American citizenship. I argue that the sentimental representation of Japanese female immigrants in Velina Hasu Houston’s *Tea* and *Kokoro* reveal the ambivalences of women’s solidarity based upon affective commonalities. These plays use melodramatic spectacles of racial suffering to evoke and challenge the commonality of female feeling, which process complicates cross-racial identifications between Japanese women and presumably white female audiences. My analysis shows how each play challenges the coercive nature of universal feelings and gender and racial stereotypes, and the limits of sympathetic spectatorship.

Chapter Three moves beyond a binary frame of white versus non-white and considers some of the ambivalent ways cross-racial empathy works for racial minorities. It compares Anna Deavere Smith’s melodramatic portrayal of racial victims of the Los Angeles Riots in *Twilight* with Elizabeth Wong’s Brechtian approach to a similarly motivated interethnic conflict in urban multiracial communities in *Kimchee and Chitlins*. I argue that Smith’s empathic approach to racialized subjects creates highly selective forms of cross-racial affinities; this process reproduces ethnic stereotypes for mainstream audiences that obscure diverse processes of racialization in the American context. In comparison, Wong’s work exposes the precarious business of cross-racial identification when a model minority is faced with demands to pledge allegiance to multiple groups.

Chapter Four reconsiders interracial empathy in so-called “post-racial” and transnational settings. It delves into the affective dynamics among racial minorities and

transracial adoptees as examples that illustrate the ambivalence of racial categories and boundaries. While such plays as Sun Mee Chomet's *How to Be a Korean Woman* and Diana Son's *Satellites* navigate romanticized narratives around interracial families and adoption and fantasies of identity and origin, they evoke emotional identification and dis-identification among adoptee characters, other characters, and implied audiences on multiple levels. I suggest that these plays challenge the constructed image of a global intimacy and a celebratory rhetoric around multiracial family based on colorblind ideology and further engage audiences in a way that they form a new level of intimacy. This performer-audience relationship, despite its ephemerality, redefines the boundaries of kinship and anticipates an alternative sense of belonging. I propose that this new idea of kinship recognizes and renders visible the emotional lives of an adoptee, which has been objectified and circulated as a symbol of happiness, hope, and optimism in American cultural imagination.

Chapter 1. “Love and Theft”: Desiring Black Body in *Sally’s Rape* and *Venus*

At a climactic moment of Robbie McCauley’s *Sally’s Rape* (1989), a performance piece loosely based on a conversation between a black feminist (Robbie McCauley) and her white feminist friend (Jeannie Hutchins), McCauley stands stark naked on a block. In its present evocation of the past experience of the slave auction, this scene pointedly alienates viewers by highlighting the embodied differences of the two feminist performers. Up to this point in the play, Hutchins persists in her desire to identify with McCauley by finding points of convergence among their lived experiences as women, efforts which McCauley constantly rejects. Once McCauley stands on the box, Hutchins acts as an auction bidder and starts to instigate the audience to bid on McCauley’s black female body. When Hutchins refuses to follow McCauley in the act of standing naked on the auction block, she realizes that she cannot identify with her any more because of those histories mutually—and yet differently—inscribed on their black and white bodies.

When William Sonnega observed several performances and post-show discussions of *Sally’s Rape*, he found white audiences to be relatively silent both at the aforementioned climactic moment and the discussion compared to ardent responses of black audiences. Sonnega interprets white audience’s discomfort and uneasiness as an instance that shows their white liberal sense of guilt. Sonnega’s critique implies that white liberal spectating experience is to not to be immersed in the Otherness; rather, one realizes the impossibility of being in someone else’s shoes.²² This pivotal moment in *Sally’s Rape* produces negative feelings – a sense of guilt for white, liberal audiences –

²² See William Sonnega, “Beyond a Liberal Audience”

uneasy and equivocal feelings that are aroused around McCauley's deliberate bodily performance and the physical presence it asserts over audiences.

This chapter examines how embodied differences that emerge in live theatre reveal the complicated nature of cross-racial sympathy. The impasse in *Sally's Rape* as described above plays off the hope of cross-racial sympathy, which is purposefully thwarted so as to challenge fantasies about how female desire and identification might transcend differences of race. I suggest that this performance strategically anticipates racial divisions in its spectators, which are provoked by the scenes where each performer's bodies are differently racialized. The state of witnessing these scenes of racist spectacle makes it impossible for audience members to perceive themselves as ahistorical, de-racialized, and de-sexualized. The spectacular nature of *Venus* also complicates the viewers' empathetic gaze upon the body of a black woman that inevitably accompanies objectifying gaze. What complicates the restaging of a racially and gendered subjugated body in Parks' play is the ambiguity around the body's agency (i.e. its resistant gaze back at the audience), which McCauley explicitly has. While Parks' "slightly unconventional theatrical elements" effectively disrupt the objectifying gaze, which allows her self-representation of will and desire, such resistance seems to diminish as Parks' play incorporates racial melodrama along with a racially stigmatized body and draws sympathetic gaze of the viewers. This is a dilemma in the play that ironically evokes contemporary empathetic spectatorship towards the black female body by evoking familiar elements of racial melodrama through the fictionalized romantic relationship between Baartman and Baron Docteur.

By allowing the sensation of unmediated physical proximity between performers and audiences, *Sally's Rape* and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* directly confront the problem of empathetic spectatorship in live performance. Both plays make audiences aware of their own racializing gaze upon the characters/actors, and in so doing awaken doubts about whether cross-racial sympathy might be possible, or only objectification. McCauley and Parks both experiment with the experiential qualities of live performance, in which past interracial encounters are evoked in present one. Each play restages a historical scene where black women's sexuality was exploited for different purpose: *Sally's Rape* to challenge the ideal of cross-racial empathy and identification, *Venus* to arouse sympathy and scrutinize desire and objectification. What both plays show is how the presumed sympathy of the audience for suffering others – in these plays, bodies associated with histories of subjugation – is either illusory or intertwined with complicity and even pleasure in the scene of suffering.

Towards Embodied Spectatorship

How does the immediate physical presence of performers affect the viewer? Although interactions in theatre space depend largely on visual representation, theatrical space operates as a field of perception rather than a binary space between stage and audience. As Roger Pierce suggested as early as 1968, intimacy in theater space primarily “arises from the physical presence of audience and cast in the same architectural space” (147). The purpose of creating this physically intimate atmosphere was to enhance the level of communication with the audience. For this reason, many avant-garde theater practitioners preferred and experimented with open stage, which allowed more exposure

to and contact with the viewers. Thornton Wilder, for instance, compared two forms of stage, concluding that the proscenium stage “will lack intimacy because the visual aspect will be so predominant,” while the open stage “will be intimate enough because the audience will be concentrating on the action from (at least) three sides” (Pierce 150).

In the western tradition of Cartesian epistemology, ‘seeing’ has long been associated with the activities of mind, separate from what takes place in the rest of the body. The subject’s consciousness is positioned *outside* of the world it perceives and its experience of the world takes place on the intellectual plane without partaking in the materiality of the world, reducing the relation between the subject and the world to an abstract and *disembodied* one. Within this system, the subject’s gaze is also disembodied, disconnected from its own lived-body and the possibility of mutual perception from the object it interacts with. In the same way, the aesthetic experience has been regarded as purely intellectual, not physical, where spectator engages with art objects with eyes without engaging the whole body.

The model of realist spectatorship based on such Cartesian division between body and mind assumes a certain set boundary between stage and audience. The staged body resides in a separate realm from the spectator’s body, and the audience perspective assumes an absolute power. The invisible fourth wall associated with proscenium stage plays a role here, in which audience members might omnipotently observe the stage action from a dark and invisible place of power. But even on the proscenium stage, the theatre space is a reciprocal space where live bodies see and are seen simultaneously. Recent scholarship applying phenomenological approaches to cinematic and theatrical experiences highlight the embodied nature of spectatorship, which complicated the

straightforward power dynamics assumed in realistic staging. Even when the fourth wall is not broken, there is an interconnectedness between performing bodies and watching bodies that destabilizes objectification and power.

Theories about human perception reconsider the relationship between our eyes and our body as more interrelated and accordingly the interrelatedness between human senses as well. Phenomenology challenges the Cartesian epistemology that alienates the subject's lived-body from the world that materiality exists. Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that both the subject and the object are always already immersed in a mutual perceptual field that he calls "flesh," or primordial subjectivity. From phenomenological perspective, our perception takes place in a *reciprocal* relationship between object and spectator where they reach towards each other. In this frame, the act of seeing is always embodied spectatorship, a total bodily experience that involves muscular, visceral, as well as emotional activities of both spectator *and* object. The body becomes significant in imagining this mutual relation for the body mediates between the subject and the world.

Informed by such phenomenological understanding of perception as an interaction between subject and object, recent theater criticism approaches the interactions between *live* bodies in theater. A number of theater scholars try to explain the interpersonal nature of theatrical space.²³ What theater critics commonly highlight is the presence of performing bodies and how viewing bodies respond to their 'bodied' presence, where the immediate physical presence of performers and viewers creates a different kind of interaction from what happens in more indirect and mediated medium such as film, and

²³ For scholars who borrow from phenomenology to explore the perceptual aspect of performance field, see Stanton Garner, *Bodied Spaces*; Simon Shepherd, *Theater, body and Pleasure*; and Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity*.

the act of ‘seeing’ can be reconceptualized as *embodied* seeing. As Simon Shepard notes, “For a phenomenologist, seeing is always ‘bodied’ seeing, mediated and affected by the physical mechanisms with which it is done. . . . Within the theatre event there are two groups of people who might be seeing, speaking and hearing – the performers and the audience. Each group is a group of bodies” (7). What facilitates this intimacy created among differing bodies is the physical proximity, which modern and contemporary theater practitioners and scholars actively sought out to through experimental forms of theatre. The spectator receives perceptual impressions through sensual engagements with empirical objects in view, which renders the dynamics of theatrical watching more complex than cinematic spectatorship.

These discourses inform my reading of staged bodies in this chapter. These critical voices also remind us of the complex ways in which we perceive race affectively in physical proximity. While our so-called ‘post-racial’ consciousness encourages us to see race as a matter of pigmentation, the complexity of the matter emerges when we see the body in specific contexts. We are asked if race *can* be removed in our perception of bodies – actors’ and characters’ – and we can assume a gaze free from racial perception. Bodies are associated with certain feelings and memories, particularly when they are associated with collective histories such as racial and/or gendered oppressions. Therefore, feminist performance arts often radically deploy their own body by staging it in various political contexts. They restage gendered and racialized bodies to evoke the viewers’ affective memories or spectatorial desires associated with the body.

The interaction between staged bodies and perceiving bodies undermines our detached stance towards the body as we become implicated in the process of racialization

and sexualization portrayed or implied through staged body. McCauley in *Sally's Rape* unsettles the 'disinterested' viewership by making her body *explicit* in racialized and sexualized terms. McCauley puts the black female body in particular contexts of slavery to arouse certain feelings and memories around it, i.e. *affects* of staged bodies, which engage the audience in a way that generates visceral responses. This inter-subjective moment, when the viewers are agitated and viscerally engaged in what happened on stage – complicates the process of identification between color-blind audiences and performers. The interplay between the viewing subjects and the object in display is a more ambiguous one in Parks' play, but even the conventional forms of theatricality still make us feel the presence of a performing body that can 'gaze back' to us in the reciprocal space where live bodies see and are seen.

Bringing Down the Wall: Implicating the Audience in *Sally's Rape*

Throughout *Sally's Rape*, we hear various anecdotes told by Robbie McCauley and Jeannie Hutchins. The play opens with a conversation about "cups and saucers" and how different cultures teach women proper ways to use them (219). It also ends with the sequence titled "Talking About Different Schools, and How to Do" where Robbie talks about different schools for black children. While these anecdotes look random, one theme penetrates them – how race shapes their experiences differently despite the commonalities they might share as women. Jeannie's perspectives on her socialist feminism and history represent those of white liberal feminism; McCauley's rejections of such views suggest black feminists' accusation of the universalizing tendency of mainstream feminist thoughts that subsume differences. In many places, Jeannie's belief

in the shared experience between two performers as Woman reveals naïve idealism, while Robbie's criticism resonates Audre Lorde's critique of white women's ignorance of their racial privilege which inevitably differentiates their own experience with black women's (116). About McCauley's discontent, Jeannie responds: "Black women get bitter. Scared somebody gonna look at them run and search for the wind, look at them go to the bottom of the pain and sadness, looking for breezes. You know how black folks gets when they ain't doing good" (224).

While the two women's conversations seem to echo the oft-suggested racial tension within the feminist circle, I suggest that *Sally's Rape* interrogates the ambivalent nature of spectatorship where cross-racial sympathy is inextricably intertwined with voyeuristic desire. Using phenomenological approaches to spectatorship as 'embodied,' I show how McCauley's strategy to put a black female body in display complicates reciprocity between racial spectacles and spectators. Seen in this light, white liberal feminists' identification with black female characters can be read not just as a kind of dutiful universalism, but as a way to project onto them their own erotic desires. Such white simulation of a black woman leads to a "double rape" of the female black body, as physical violation of the body and as cultural theft of identity.

Robbie points out that both prejudice and idealism fails to acknowledge black women's reality. She gives us an example of an Ivy-League graduate and history major, who could not handle the truth of racist history where colored women were raped by white men on plantations. When Robbie said to her that interracial 'romance' was actually a "rape", the young girl's "eyes turned red. She choked on her sandwich and quit the job" (225). This anecdote illustrates how white women have been insulated from the

knowledge of racial history and did not have to face the systematic rape of black female slaves. Like this girl, Jeannie is eager to point out their shared idealism – in a form of socialism – while Robbie thinks “admitting the differences in their histories is more important” (227).

Throughout the play, Jeannie takes on a series of white female personae and expresses fascinations with black culture and black female sexuality, as seen in her secret desire to be a woman like Billie Holiday: “I wanted to go deeper, darker, never to remember the empty days. I wanted to be . . . Billie Holiday” (224). The image of Billie Holiday suggests the imagined suffering that characterizes her voice, which is aestheticized and made sublime so that a white woman could long for and desire as an object of love. A similar desire reappears when she becomes Harriet in the woods - a realm of sexual liberation and freedom - and again wants to “be . . . darker . . . deeper.” This further suggests how black female sexuality has been historically romanticized in white women’s imagination in American context. This impersonation illustrates another version of blackface through which repressed white female desire can be mediated. Mary F. Brewer views Jeannie’s denial of racial differences and insistence of commonality in the play as “adopting the mantle of liberal guilt”: it is a cover for the guilt that their female ancestors played a role in reproducing racist ideology in which black women were subjugated (114). Deborah Thompson similarly suggests that this act of blackface – a white woman simulating a black woman – leads to a “double rape” of the female black body, as physical violation of the body and as cultural theft of identity (229).

At the same time, such guise of sympathetic identification is extremely vulnerable as Hutchins anticipates that Robbie will “pull it out.” She confesses, “You’re going to

win anyway. What upsets me is there's an underlying implication that you're gonna unmask me. That you're gonna get underneath something and pull it out. That you can see it and I can't." (228). Discussing theater as 'phenomenon,' rather than spectacle, Bert States discusses the psychology of the viewers watching an actor's body on stage. When we see an actor playing a role in live performances in theater, we see him as both character and performer, which does not happen in cinematic spectatorship. According to States, viewers are aware of the duality of the actor's mode of being on stage, which inhabits the fictional world on stage while it also faces the viewer's world, sharing the same materiality of human body. In other words, when we watch a play, we see an actor as a person who "quotes" a character he performs regardless of his ability to achieve verisimilitude (24). As he suggests, the physical actuality of actor is always able to disrupt "the phenomenal floor of the theater illusion," making it felt that "*nodes of reality* extruding from illusion" (34). This de-familiarization allows us to perceive the world differently from what we used to know. He further suggests that this awareness – that the theatrical illusion being destroyed at any moment – births a new type of empathetic bond between the viewers and the characters, "our creatural bond with the actor, who stands before us in a vulnerable space" (119).

The relationship between a white feminist's talk/enactment of imagined blackness and the real black body in *Sally's Rape* might be understood in such phenomenological framework that States suggests. To highlight the rupture between reality and illusion, the play sets up the role-playing dynamic between the performers and the viewers and implicates the latter as a collective commentator. In an interview with Vivian Patraka, McCauley emphasizes the role of the audience in making her performance a form of

political theater and explains that she wants to perform *with* the audience, not *against* the audience (27). McCauley invites the audience to participate in their conversations and take sides with one of them throughout the performance: “And we can’t have a dialogue by ourselves. So you’re in it. . . . Well, it doesn’t matter what section you’re in, it just matters who you are and you can change your opinion as time goes on. (221-2)

Robbie initially tries to ‘talk through’ these differences. She points out different treatments white and black women receive after being raped. While white women get “a cup of tea” or “warm milk” in rape center, sexual violation of black female slaves was not even considered as rape (“You . . . let the cabs roll by . . . let shit roll off your back . . . stay . . . ain’t no rape center on the plantation.” 232-3). This shift from the present to the past – institution of slavery “the plantaion” evokes – is important – because it signals the impasse of interracial ‘talk’ among women unless it is grounded upon acknowledging the significance of history in construction of racialized and sexualized bodies. Therefore, as she re-educated the Ivy-League graduate in an earlier sequence, she has to lead Jeannie and the audience to go through a similar process of re-learning.

However, she realizes that she cannot win in white language: “Let me see if I can use the language to say what I feel about your idealism,” “What upsets me is language. I can’t win in your language.” 228). It is only after her ‘speaking through body’ that she can demystify Jeannie’s fantasy of black female sensuality and further reclaim the black body’s right to perform its historical reality. In the next sequence, the two women reenact a moment in history by impersonating historical figures of Mrs. J (representing Mrs. Jefferson, a white slave master’s wife) and Robbie’s great-great aunt (black mistress). After Mrs. J. “does the dance of the frail white lady”, Robbie as Sally takes off all her

clothes and stands up on “the Auction Block”. Jeannie chants “Bid’em in” urging the audience to participate in creating the “a moment of communion” while Robbie stands naked. Faced with Robbie naked on the auction block, the audience cannot but perceive that body as the same as the body of her great, great grandmother’s body. It is a body ‘marked’ by the racial history and the peculiar institution of slavery; the trace of rape is already there, which makes us recognize her body as a raped body. The trace emerges from invisibility through Robbie’s reenactment on her body. Therefore, McCauley uses the naked body as a site to materialize the effects of racist history which cannot be *talked about* in an abstract way. By putting an actual body of a real black person on display, this moment undermines the effects of what States suggests as an actor’s empathic “quotation” of character. In other words, this moment wrestles the audience out of its “phenomenological” contemplation of theatrical effects (that we always understand as artifice) and puts something “real” in front of us. That is, a white performer’s empathic identification with imagined blackness is complicated through staging of a real black body. Robbie’s invocation of this particular moment of history differentiates her body from that of Jeannie, who wants to empathize with the body of “other” but cannot do so. When asked to do the same, Jeannie refuses to do so and has nothing to say on the auction block. Her inability demonstrates how her body can perform “the frail white lady” while it cannot perform this role of Sally’s, which contrasts her earlier assumption that both women are exposed to the same male violence.

If the racial history of the US necessarily differentiates the black body from the white body, it is also the mutuality of that history that binds them together. The restaged black female body of Robbie/Sally highlights the physical presence of the after-effect of

the traumatic history, from which neither the victim nor the perpetrator can be liberated: “I wanted to do this – stand naked in public on the auction block. I thought somehow it could help free *us* from this. (Refers to her naked body) Any old socialist knows, one can’t be free till *all* are free” (231, my italics). Referring to this moment in the play where the audience is forced to participate in the auction, Katherine McKittrick explains how this play exposes the way in which we are implicated in the process of the production and consumption of a racially sexualized body. Therefore, the audience is asked to play a part in restaging the historical moment that epitomizes inhuman nature of slavery, where human subjects are turned into and circulated as inhuman, saleable commodities. As McKittrick says, “‘we,’ as audience, produce, and bid on, blackness in order to, as McCauley says while referring to her naked body, ‘help free us from this’” (89).

McCauley’s self-display resonates with feminist performance strategies where women actively – almost aggressively – use their own bodies to counteract the heteronormative gaze. Amelia Jones attends to feminist body art practices that deliberately eroticized women’s bodies as a way to promote the ‘inter-subjective engagement’ of the viewers (5). She suggests the potential of such body-oriented projects to achieve radically dislocating experience, when the body in display is marked by various forms of non-normativity and put in social and political contexts. Rebecca Schneider also explores the potential of women’s bodily performance as a way to resist the system of representation that often objectifies and commodifies women’s bodies. Examining feminist performers’ tendency to display their bodies in extreme forms – such as nudity and pornographic display – , she notices how such bodily performances ironically empower performing subjects by making the viewers see women’s bodies in a

new light. It generates reciprocal spectatorship in which the staged body asserts power by “looking back” or “speaking back” and viewers are reminded of their own bodily implication.²⁴

By evoking the collective racial memories of the black female body in *Sally's Rape* highlights how differences of women's bodies are historically constructed in the viewers' perception in the context of North American history. The viewers come to read McCauley's body in a particular way which s/he would not read a white female body (her white co-performer's body). More importantly, the reciprocal gaze of McCauley's African American body – which ‘looks back’ and ‘speaks back’ to the viewers’ gaze – racializes viewers' awareness of their own body, too. As Stanton Garner suggests, unlike a conventional frame of spectatorship where a spectacle is “processed and consumed by the perceiving eye, objectified as field of vision,” viewers come to see the stage as “environmental space, ‘subjectified’ (and intersubjectified) by the physical actors who body forth the space they inhabit” (3-4). In this space, an actor's body simultaneously inhabits the fictional stage space and perceives the audience in the same physical and temporal space. This doubled presence renders the actor's body irreducible to a spectatorial object. The ambiguity in a perceptual field of performance enables a reciprocal gaze of the staged body and presents “the disruptive potential of the performer's own gaze” at the authorizing power of the audience's spectatorship (47-9). According to Garner, the cinematic experience cannot create such “environmental space” because a character/actor's stare at the camera is “never in any genuine sense reciprocal”:

²⁴ See Schneider, *The Explicit Body*.

The performer/character's gaze, like the body's living presence that it asserts, exceeds the containing parameters of representational space and confronts the audience's gaze with an intersubjectivity that represents a potential or actual "catastrophe" in terms of spectatorial detachment. From the phenomenological point of view, the living body capable of returning the spectator's gaze presents a methodological dilemma for any theoretical model – like semiotics – that offers to describe performance in "objective" terms. Along among the elements that constitute the stage's semiotic field, the body becomes a sign that looks back. (49)

By juxtaposing stage action with the audience's participation as commentators throughout the performance, *Sally's Rape* preempts audiences' detachment from the stage event and ensures audiences' implication in the theatrical event. The above mentioned moment debunks the binary space of stage and audience and transgress the imaginary fourth wall, which work to remind the viewers of their own racial perception and their 'watching bodies.' The resistant gaze of the staged body in *Venus*, on the other hand, is ambivalent: the play heightens the complicity between the viewer's voyeuristic desire and the black protagonist's desire to be seen. What complicates such reciprocal dynamic is its uneven power structure, in which the objectified, racialized body cannot assume agency and power over her own representation.

“For the Love of Venus”

Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* (1996) focuses on the story of Saartjie Baartman, an African woman who has become widely known as Hottentot Venus in the late-nineteenth century. Originally from a group of Khoisan people in Southwestern Africa under the Dutch colonial rule, Baartman was sold into slavery by a Dutch trader. Baartman's unusually large posterior became a center of attention when she arrived in Europe. She was allegedly coerced to sign contracts with a series of exploiters from anatomists to zoologists, who exhibited her in public for entertainment as well as scientific purposes. Baartman's non-European bodily traits were used to confirm the racist view held by many people at the time that the African race was subhuman. Baartman died after a decade of inhumane treatment and exposure at the age of twenty-six. Parks' play shows how Venus's body becomes an object of curiosity, voyeuristic pleasure, and capitalistic and sexual exploitation in various circles of society. By restaging a once objectified racial spectacle, the play underscores spectators' own racializing and fetishizing desire – to mark the body with otherness – that persists in contemporary moments. By doing so, it interrogates the ambivalent nature of spectatorship where interracial sympathy is inextricably intertwined with voyeuristic desire.

Such a strategy has garnered differing responses from the critics as well as the viewers since the play's premiere, which include such accusations that the play reproduces a racial spectacle and propagates a racial stereotype rather than effectively challenging it. Mary F. Brewer, for instance, warns that the re-objectification of the black female body might end up producing cathartic pleasures for white viewers: as she puts it, "freeing any body from its history cannot be this simple or straightforward, if it is possible at all" (116). Jean Young also critiques Parks' representation of Venus that

unjustly positions Baartman as an accomplice in her own exploitation. Based on her historical research on the circumstances around Baartman's life, Young claimed that Baartman was a *victim* who had little possibility of resistance and appropriation of the system on her part. Therefore, Young argues that Parks' reconstruction of Venus as an accomplice in her own exploitation is a *misrepresentation* that ultimately re-objectifies and re-commodifies her.²⁵

On the other hand, Harvey Young advocates the idea that strategic restaging of the black body can be a way to reclaim history as a bodily text inscribed with narratives of history.²⁶ He further argues, "The black body, the accumulated and repeated similarities of the embodied experiences of black bodies, is a body that is made to be given to be seen. It is a body that is always on display, always on stage, and always in the process of *its own exhibition* (144, emphasis added)." In order for such claim as this strategic exhibition of one's own body to be constituted, the body must assert agency in its own exhibition.

My own reading of the play is more ambivalent, following how the play juxtaposes moments that encourage viewers' sympathetic identification with Venus and moments when the distance between the character and the viewers becomes more obvious. I argue that *Venus* complicates how one would respond to a racist spectacle when it simultaneously presents scenes of suffering and at the same time complicates our desires for sympathetic identification. On the one hand, the play uses a familiar narrative

²⁵ See Jean Young, "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*"

²⁶ See Harvey Young, "*Touching History: Suzan-Lori Parks, Robbie McCauley, and the Black Body.*"

of racial and gendered victimization with which audiences can easily identify. On the other hand, this sympathetic stance is constantly set side by side with spectacles of otherness that beckon viewers' curiosity and voyeurism.

According to Shawn-Marie Garrett, the collaboration between Parks and Richard Foreman brought significant changes in the ways in which the play was staged as well as the final draft. As Garrett suggests, Parks constantly emphasizes the theme of 'love' to be 'the principle dynamic' of the play. The subject of love collided with Foreman's high modernist sensibilities that shun conventional forms of theatricalities that promote dramatic empathy and audience accessibility (83). Working with Foreman and also with George C. Wolfe, a producer, Parks' drafts gained "more familiar, empathy-generating modes of dramatic storytelling and character construction" (84). The "collision" between Brechtian approaches – which Foreman would favor – and the play's empathetic focus on love shows how the play navigates scenes of identification and dis-identification for the audiences. It asks us to sympathize with the protagonist's suffering and her lack of choice; at the same time, it urges us to have a critical distance.

One of the ways in which the play creates distance between Venus and viewers is by showing that Bartman was implicated in the process of her own subjection, which ironically endows her with agency. The play presents a complex web of relationships in which Venus is implicated. Amidst this, although subtle, Venus is given access to self-representation of will and desire, which somehow makes us feel that the woman before our eyes is 'in control' of her body. We as audience see her desire, will, and ambition along with her suffering body, and the fact that she was not a complete victim makes it difficult for us to decide to what extent we will sympathize with her suffering. Baartman

is portrayed as a woman who is very much conscious of the way in which viewers objectify her body and accordingly recognizes her own body as a source of power: in her desire to ‘be seen’ and worshipped by society proper, one detects a level of complicity between spectacle and spectator (135). In one of her interviews, Parks overtly expresses that her fictionalization of Baartman was deliberate and described Baartman as a woman who is “vain, beautiful, intelligent, and, yes, complicit.”²⁷ This complicity is illustrated through the objects’ desire to *be seen*, which parallels viewers’ desire to see. Mother Showman of a freak show, who exploits Venus and other ‘freaks,’ arouses people’s desire to see the monstrous bodies:

See one for the price of a penny and a half
 Or all these 8 for a song!
 Step inside come on come see
 The ugliest creatures in creativity. Alive!
 Alive! And waiting for you just inside.
 Come on in in take a look
 See a living misfit with yr own eyes.
 Take a look at one for just a penny and a half
 You can gawk as long as you like.
 Waiting for yr gaze here inside
 Theyre all freaks and all alive. (31)

²⁷ Monte Williams. “Suzan-Lori Parks: From a Planet Closer to the Sun.”

Mother Showman's words emphasize not only audiences' desire to see: they also highlight the staged "creature's" own desire to be *seen* and, further, to be confirmed its 'realness'. This urge to be proven real goes beyond the realm of vision to the point of actual contact. These words are followed by Wonder #1's remarks to the audience, "Pull on my beard! Its real! Its real!" (32). This is a curious meta-theatrical moment in the play in that it evinces the anxiety that what is seen may not be 'real', and more proximity is required for the spectator to feel its presence. It invites the audience to transgress the boundary between stage and audience, encouraging the actual, physical contact between bodies on either side. The power dynamics is being reversed between a spectacle of subjugated body and the spectator here – at least, tentatively. Similarly, Venus (like Wonder #1) invites Baron Docteur to touch her to give her pleasure ("Touch me down here. / That feels good. Now touch me here." 104) and touch her belly to feel that she is pregnant ("Put yr hand here, Sweetheart." "Drink this first" "No. Feel me." "What am I feeling?" 127-8).

In various moments, the play complicates the relations between a spectacle of subjugated body and the spectator. By alternating Venus' status as a viewer and a spectacle on stage, the play underscores the reciprocity and instability inherent in watching and performing bodies. This mutual spectatorship creates spaces – although limited – throughout the play, where Venus assumes agency and power. In "For the Love of the Venus", a drama in 3 acts inserted throughout the play, Venus appears as a spectator who sees The Baron Docteur:

A play on a stage. The Baron Docteur is the only person in the audience. Perhaps he sits in a chair. It's almost as if he's watching TV. The Venus stands off to the side. She watches The Baron Docteur. (25)

As before, The Baron Docteur is its only audience, and The Venus watches him. (38)

Again, The Baron Docteur is the only audience. The Venus watches him. (48)

Venus' spectatorial position over The Baron Docteur undermines the authority and power that the latter asserts. Such reversal of power implied in gaze is also illustrated in The Baron Docteur's anxiety about being seen masturbating, an act of self-indulgence that should not be seen: "Don't look! Don't look at me. Look off Somewhere."(106).

By implying the consents on the part of the objects of gaze, Venus's dream to be a part of the system that capitalizes on her, these words ameliorate the violence implied in the spectatorial desires. While Venus can be her own master in her subjugation, her implication in the system of oppression leads her to her downfall in the end. Discussing the sexual relationship between the black female slave and the white master as 'the narrative of seduction,' Saidiya Hartman suggests that there are "the unavoidable linkages of desire and domination, and the dangers of seduction" that surround the agency in the captive body, which makes it hard to determine between coercion and consent on the part of the body in subjection. As "a weapon of the weak or a vehicle for

the articulation of needs and desires,” seduction could imply both agency *and* subjection (102-3). The line between coercion and consent on the part of the body in subjection is always precarious and arouses ambivalent responses in the viewer.

The play provokes and challenges audiences’ own implication in the scenes of subjection and empathy. Before we enter the theater, we cannot help but wonder how this particular production would successfully re-create the body of Venus. When we see the actress who plays Venus, we will wonder to what extent the body is her own and what part is fabricated. This simple curiosity leads to our frank desire to see the staged body closer and even touch if we are allowed to do so, which would not happen because it is deemed as inappropriate. The play creates theatrical space in which audience cannot but become a part of that voyeuristic culture, which provided opportunities to touch the object in view. This is best illustrated during the Intermission of this play, during which Scene 16 runs. While house lights are up for the audience to move around the theatre freely during this intermission, The Baron Docteur stands at a podium, speaking to this audience who is the very audience of Parks’ play (91). Since the lights are up, the boundary between stage and audience – that imaginary fourth wall – disappears, blurring temporalities that work in the audience’s mind. The theatre becomes the Anatomical Theatre of Tübingen, and we find ourselves to be the audience to his ‘medical’ findings of Venus:

Presenting here, in the interest of time,

Only those special points of interest.

You look, Distinguished Colleague, as if you need relief or sleep.

Please, Sir, indulge yourself. Go take uh break.

I've got strong lungs:

So please, if you need air, excuse yrself.

You'll hear me in the hallway. (95)

It is impossible for anyone within hearing range to avoid being a part of the fictional space theatre creates ("You'll hear me in the hallway"). It is important that we pay attention to the way in which the play reconstructs the audience as well as the staged body by raising awareness that we are inevitably implicated in the same politics of spectatorship as we enter this space. Richard Foreman's first production of the play seems to have maximized the very voyeurism imbedded in this mode of operation between stage and audience. In pushing the limit of voyeurism to the extreme, the production urged the audience to see the violence of the audiences' colonizing gaze. By implicating the contemporary audiences in the scenes of subjection as the audiences of the late-Victorian age, the scene highlights the continuing reproduction of the cultural consumption of racial/racist spectacles.

However, the play's strategy to highlight the audiences' objectifying desire is blurred as the play simultaneously mobilizes viewers' sympathy. Parks' play incorporates elements of melodrama through which Venus becomes a victim of love. The play initially highlights the reciprocity of desire and love as I have discussed earlier on Venus' desire to be seen. However, as the play progresses, the once mutual nature takes on a more violent form as uninvited, or forced spectatorship and physical contact come into play

between Venus and other characters. Venus complains about the “lascivious” men who are eager to “touch” her in various voyeuristic spaces including the Anatomical Theatre. If the kind of touch Wonder #1 naively invited assumes a contact between equally empowered bodies – one inviting and the other consenting to do so – the touch Parks falls victim to endows the spectator power to objectify and even intrude the space of the staged body without mutual consent. Touch, which was initially a means through which to affirm the realness of the staged body, becomes a way to threaten, harass, and violate the object.

This ironically evokes empathetic responses from the viewers, which replace the sense of guilt and self-awareness previously felt. In particular, the romantic relationship between Baartman and Baron Docteur serves as the locus of pathos that is aroused in the today’s audience. Venus’s hope is to be rescued by Baron Docteur, but her dream of true love being frustrated; her tragic death as an abandoned mistress constitute a familiar melodramatic plot. Therefore even if spectators initially fails to sympathize with “vain, beautiful, intelligent” and complicit woman, they may well ultimately be moved by the tableau of Venus dying “unloved” at the end of the play. It is when Venus is deprived of the power of looking that she refuses to be seen by her spectators. She refuses to be seen in her dying status: “Don’t look at me/ Don’t look . . .” (159). It is only when she perceives herself as a forlorn lover that she refuses to be *looked at* despite the fact that her body had been exposed to the public all along.

While the play primarily manipulates and challenges cross-racial identification between fictional characters and audiences, it also critiques the exploitative and problematic aspect of cross-racial performances. This is illustrated in a white couple in

the drama-within-play titled “For the Love of the Venus” inserted throughout *Venus*. It stages The Bride-To-Be, a white woman betrothed to The Young Man, a white man who becomes infatuated with the black female sexuality that Venus represents. As The Bride-To-Be bemoans that her lover is not interested in her any more, The Young Man’s mother comes up with a scheme: “I have uh plan. Get this: Our young man wants uh Hottentot tuh love. Uh Hottentot yr not, my dear. But with some skill you can pretend. ... We’ll get you up, make you look wild. Get you up like a Hottentot” (124-5). The Bride-To-Be appears in the guise of ‘uh Hottentot,’ and The Young Man is enchanted and professes his unchanging love. However, this drama ends by endorsing white femininity which can assume black sexuality. As The Bride-To-Be reveals her true identity, her fiancée is taken by surprise but realizes that he is still in love. The Young Man’s realization of the true face behind the veil at the ending of this episodic drama coincides with Baron Docteur’s return to his wife after his extramarital affair with Venus. Venus’s role in this social drama is a medium through which social cohesion is achieved.

This blackface segment in the play shows that the black body mediates white desires, in which process the presence of female black body is ultimately erased. It calls our attention to the ways in which the image of the black female body travels, both materially and metaphorically, mediated through white bodies, evoking feelings of compassion as well as fascination. Eric Lott suggest that the popularity of blackface minstrelsy in the 19th century shaped the homo-social atmosphere among white, working-class male. Minstrel shows, “by way of the “grotesque” (black) body,” enabled the white subject to “transform fantasies of racial assault and subversion into riotous pleasure, turn insurrection and intermixture into harmless fun – even through the outlines of the fun

disclose its troubled sources” (147). White men’s collective fear of and fascination with the black bodies, especially black sexuality, were mediated through imagined black bodies with exaggerated racial features, and black female images in such blackface performances only existed to serve as a medium through which male desires were exchanged.²⁸ In addition to the affective bond primarily made among white performers and audiences, imaginary representations of blacks also aroused sympathetic responses towards black people.

Parks stages once objectified racial spectacle in a way that reveals contemporary spectators’ own racializing and fetishizing desire. It makes us aware of how theater space operates on our expectation to see ‘otherness.’ *Venus* complicates how one would respond to a racist spectacle when it simultaneously presents scenes of suffering and complicates our desires for sympathetic identification. I argue that it interrogates the ambivalent nature of spectatorship where interracial sympathy is inextricably intertwined with voyeuristic desire. While the play uses a familiar narrative of racial and gendered victimization audiences can easily identify with, such sympathetic stance is constantly set side by side with spectacles of otherness that beckon viewers’ curiosity.

²⁸ See Thompson, “Blackface, Rape, and Beyond: Rehearsing Interracial Dialogue in ‘Sally’s Rape’”

Chapter 2. Affective Citizenship: Velina Hasu Houston's Sentimental Subjects

Near the end of Velina Hasu Houston's *Tea* (1981), Chizuye, one of the four Japanese women gathered to perform a ritual for their deceased friend Himiko, takes a moment to ask why Himiko's death has brought them together after so many years of indifference and separation. As she declares, "We're not here because we have to be. Japanese manners don't require us to pay homage to some loon of a woman, even if she was Japanese" (34). Rather than positing their shared national identity as a common ground for sympathy for Himiko, Chizuye suggests that what brings the women together is a sense of urgency that calls for a kind of emotional awakening:

No, we're here today because we hurt inside like we never have before. Because when the first of us goes so violently and it's all over the papers, it wakes us up. For the first time in our lives, we gather together all the pieces of our used-up hearts and come running here hoping we'll find some kind of miracle that will glue it all back together and send us into our old age with something to hold onto. (34)

Chizuye suggests that Himiko's tragedy aroused certain *feelings* that were dormant and buried in these women's hearts, which beg to be enlivened and reassembled. She urges others to recognize the potential that inheres in such remnants of feeling – that they should be restored as a survival strategy, as "something to hold onto." By making a statement that Himiko's tragedy has touched the hearts of Japanese women, the

fragmented individuals who have suffered from the absence of community, this scene illustrates how affective solidarity, like a miracle, can change reality and offer a better future. What intrigues me is how this newly found sense of community purports to transcend various markers of identities beyond their shared nationality. By invoking the commonality of these Japanese women's racialized victimhood, this moment in the play inaugurates an affective community for the characters and also asks us to relate to them and see them anew as feeling subjects.

This chapter focuses on empathic communities in Houston's *Tea* and *Kokoro* (1994) and investigates the political possibilities and limits of affective strategies that seek to transcend material barriers of race and nationality. These plays seem to employ theatrical empathy primarily in a familiar way, as a form of sentimental rhetoric to deliver women's universal experience. But they also present empathy as a subversive force to resist structural racism and reconcile cultural difference as they locate a utopian vision in an intimate affective community. In both plays, a Japanese woman is ostracized in the community because of idiosyncratic behaviors that are distinctively cultural in nature, part of what one character deems "*Japaneazy* Japanese" (10). These traits immediately evoke feelings of estrangement from the rest of the community and lead to the impasse of cross-cultural dialogues. Such an impasse is negotiated in each play as we view the characters through the lens of universal sentiments: in *Tea*, the suffering of Japanese women under racism and patriarchal oppression speaks to the audience's sympathy for other women; in *Kokoro*, maternal love traverses differences of culture and nationality. The sentimental rhetoric and conventions of melodrama in these plays articulate the basic hope that white spectators, through the process of witnessing

suffering, will shift their dynamic with Asian American characters from one of racist objectification to one of empathic reciprocity.

At the same time, both *Tea* and *Kokoro* complicate such a vision of sharing across racial lines, one that might seamlessly effect an unvetted formation of multi-racial community. I argue that the yearning for cross-racial identification grounded in shared feelings is interlaced with a sense of discontent. The plays evince anxieties about the wholesale acceptance of an all-embracing sentimentality that erases and subsumes differences. Houston's work makes us question what, exactly, might serve as a foundation for an intimate public of women. As one critic briefly observed, *Tea's* immediate success among mainstream audiences might illustrate what mainstream audiences expect about another Asian American play, about particular stories and racial stereotypes associated with Asian American women (Lee, *History* 150). In particular, the longevity of the Madame Butterfly stereotype attests to the popularity of spectacles of pitiful Japanese femininity, whose stories move white women to tears.²⁹ Such expectations evidence the already existing desires of the audiences to feel for Asian women; in other words, spectators enter the theater space with pre-conceived emotional attachments that function as a prerequisite for an intimate viewing public.

On one hand, Houston's plays do harbor an optimistic belief in the social power of sentiments that feminist scholars have increasingly scrutinized over the past few decades. Spectacles of subaltern suffering – whether by racial minorities or women – will mobilize the viewers' sympathy, and thus heightened empathy will presumably extend

²⁹ In her book *Embracing the East*, Mari Yoshihara examines the role of white women in popularizing and disseminating American orientalism by actively consuming and circulating Asian objects. Although major discourses of orientalism often make binary oppositions between the masculine West and the feminine East, Yoshihara attends to the overlooked dynamics between Asian women and white women.

beyond the realm of fiction. It will make us confront and challenge dominant social mores of the time and envision a community that transcends the racism or patriarchy dictated by social reality. On the other hand, sentimentality operates in more ambivalent and problematic ways. It may elicit politically correct feelings of fragmented individuals faced with the pain of the other, and the fantasized sense of belonging displaces the inequalities of political reality onto the realm of aesthetics.

Houston's plays allow us to consider how women's emotions might be consumed as private, voyeuristic, and pseudo-political desires within the economy of theatre. They grapple with the ambivalences inherent in the intimate public that women's theater generates and circulates, as her plays mobilize and disrupt cross-racial identifications between characters and audiences. While casting the sufferings of the "foreign" subjects in a familiar sentimental light, the plays present the subjects' "emotional lives" as relevant to a predominantly white, bourgeois, female viewing public. But, as I will show, these plays show a wariness about eliciting the sort of spectatorial identification and desire that might override difference and universalize emotional experiences. They do so by highlighting dimensions of the characters' lived experiences that are distinct and therefore irreducible to the "types" to which audiences may eagerly relate. This is best illustrated when spectacles of Asian women's suffering, which should be a driving force behind cross-racial empathy, exceed or even subvert the audiences' expectations. These "post-sentimental" moments, to borrow Berlant's term, underscore the nontransferable, embodied nature of the suffering, the acknowledgment of which might be the only way that one can approximate the pain of the other. An intimate public reveals its ambivalence when it yearns for a utopic place not only based on the imagined notion of affective

mutuality but also apathetic to culturally peculiar registers of feelings.

Tea

Set in 1968, *Tea* centers on five Japanese women who came to the United States as war brides and settle in Junction City, Kansas. As the story unfolds, we learn that these women had been indifferent to and alienated from each other since their arrival in the U.S. until Himiko's death brought them together. The play highlights the diverse life trajectories each individual has followed in Japan and in America, as well as the hardships of assimilation that these women reenact on stage, and it finally suggests that they come to rediscover their commonalities and regain a sense of community despite their differing views on the idea of family, nation, and community. Through the characters' physical and psychological immobility and segregation, Houston offers a transnational perspective on the post-WWII racial landscape in the heart of America and lays bare the material impacts of the containment culture that served as an ideology to manage racial and cultural others.

In the opening scene, four Japanese women visit Himiko's empty, abandoned house to perform the ritual of drinking tea in remembrance of their deceased friend. Himiko has recently committed suicide shortly after losing her biracial daughter in a tragic hate crime, two years after she killed her own husband in an act of self-defense. The physical condition of the house reflects Himiko's mindscape – deteriorated and therefore demanding recuperation. The play transforms Himiko's house, a once-idyllic space infiltrated with racism and violence, into a feminine sphere that can be salvaged and reclaimed through the women's collective efforts. The forlorn house has lost its

original condition (“It didn’t smell here before, Atsuko-san!” [7]), which corresponds to the image of Himiko herself, who appears on stage wearing “a white petticoat with shredded hems” and “a distorted kimono” (5). Himiko is present on stage as the spirit, invisible to the other characters but visible to the audience, and she provides comments to support or challenge other women throughout the play. She serves as a haunting presence that will ultimately make the women remember the commonalities of their lived experience. The testimonials of the women reconstruct the image of Himiko from that of a crazy murderer, who shot her husband and showed no remorse, into that of a victim of patriarchal and racist violence: once an innocent Japanese girl with few choices but to move to the U.S., Himiko became a woman whose lip was bitten off, confined in her own house, often starved, and completely isolated from her community.

While the play exposes the socio-political forces that shape personal tragedies like Himiko’s, it does not propose ways to change the status quo. Instead, it focuses on the power of *feeling* to help the women recognize each other’s pain. More intriguing about this call for affective awakening is that *being* Japanese is not enough; only *feeling* the pain of being Japanese – or something akin to it – can bring these women and us closer together. When the four first enter Himiko’s house, their immediate responses vary from sympathy to fear and curiosity. Himiko is remembered for her difference: for unconventional acts such as wearing wigs at her husband’s funeral or her alleged promiscuity.

Houston’s project lies in transforming these unsympathetic onlookers, which presumably includes members of the audiences with little in common with the characters, into empathic subjects through sentimental education and a process of reconciliation. The

play strives to create an empathic community of women as *feeling subjects* who show differing degrees of empathic capacity, by evoking a commonality that might transcend markers of nationality or ethnicity. One of the women, Atsuko, is initially repulsed by Himiko's idiosyncrasies and abhors being associated with her in any way ("Just because I'm Japanese doesn't mean I have anything to do with her life" [9]). Although she accepts an invitation to drink tea at Himiko's house and joins the healing ritual, the purpose of her visit lies in her curiosity about one crazy woman's unknown story than a communal desire to appease her disturbed soul. She constantly differentiates herself from Himiko and other Japanese women, claiming that she alone is capable of leaving the contained space of Kansas (32). Atsuko's penchant for individualism is conspicuous to the rest of the women, which causes conflict among them.

Atsuko's conversion moves our attention beyond the boundaries of material differences, such as ethnicity and race, to the realm of affect. *Tea* neither bluntly accuses her as a non-conformer to a sympathetic community nor forces her to be part of the community. Rather, it stresses that Atsuko's conversion to an empathic subject is voluntary and spontaneous – features crucial for sustaining the affective community. Only when non-sympathizers like Atsuko – a surrogate audience member – get a proper sentimental education can the marginalized be incorporated with the heartfelt consent of the community. When the confrontation between Atsuko and the other women is at its height, the spirit of Himiko intervenes and appeals, "Atsuko-san, stay. If you leave now, *no one* will rest" (*Tea* 35; emphasis added). Atsuko, guided by the unseen presence of Himiko, "fights with herself" and is finally reconciled with the other women and, thus, with Himiko. By ultimately demonstrating her will to stay and mourn for Himiko, Atsuko

proves her membership in this affective community.

While *Tea* endorses the potential power of an empathic community, it simultaneously betrays anxieties about its penchant for universalization. This is manifested in an anti-climactic moment of the play, which comes right after Atsuko's conversion. We see the biracial daughters of the Japanese women at a slumber party – played by the same actresses who play the mothers – complaining about their mothers' cultural idiosyncrasies, with which they dis-identify. For the girls, their mothers' incorrigible Japanese accents, submission to their husbands, and obsession with a Japanese diet are objects of mockery and markers of foreignness. They reiterate negative stereotypes as they either derisively mimic accents or exaggerate bodily gestures (35-6). In a way, the lack of inter-generational identification in this scene reinforces the significance of empathy. The daughters fail to understand their mothers despite their cultural and ethnic ties; in contrast, audiences better understand their mothers by this point. More importantly, this scene challenges our own empathic imagination and suggests its limits by presenting the illegibility of the pains of the other. It is significant, too, that when Himiko's daughter Mieko is introduced into the play, she is played by the same actress as Himiko. But Houston's stage directions and speech prefixes toggle between the two names destabilize the distinction between one character and another. Doubling, in other words, may reveal the fluidity of the Asian female body and highlight the diversity of roles that the body can assume, but the doubling of Himiko and Mieko also generates an uncanny effect. Unlike the other "daughters" who act differently from their "mothers," Mieko's eerie displays (and her tragic death) reinforce Himiko's own image. In contrast to the girls' playfulness about their mothers, Mieko's response is filled

with cynicism and wryness, “*without feeling, no sense of bitterness, with an eerie smile*” (36). When asked about her mother, she enigmatically answers, “I hate the world.” She then continues:

It isn't about dating guys. It's about being fucked by guys. (*Their laughter is cut short by Himiko's remark. Their motions grind to a halt. They are shocked at this language and eye one another uncomfortably. Mieko seems to enjoy this power.*) By everybody: your mother, your father – and even yourself. (*A pause as she looks away from the girls and then she hits the table with the palm of her hand, frightening the other girls.*) Don't ask me about my mother. Because then you're asking me about myself ... and I don't know who the hell I am. (36; emphasis added)

Houston leaves Mieko's words unexplained – we only hear from Himiko's spirit that her daughter went missing and was found brutally raped and killed. This lack of resolution leaves a sense of frustration and unease rather than reconciliation. Even as the play wrestles with articulating the racial and cultural dimensions of pain and suffering to the audiences, this particular moment pushes us to reassess if our emphatic desire will ever let us comprehend the other's suffering. Himiko-as-Mieko's refusal to explain herself might suggest that the pain Himiko bears – that is, the material impact of the racism-imbued perceptions of the Japanese women and their biracial offspring – cannot be known through a spectator's gaze, however sympathetic.

After this scene, the play hurries to its final scene where it presents Himiko

“dressed in resplendent kimono” and “look[ing] happier” (38). Compared to her initial appearance as a fragmented self in shattered garments “torn between two worlds,” Himiko now embodies the recovery of an individual and the community of which she is part. Relieved of tensions and negative feelings, Chizuye confesses, “I am glad I came here today. Somehow, I feel at home with you women, you Japanese women. (*Smiles.*) Today” (38). Chizuye’s remark further reaffirms the transformation they have undergone in becoming a feeling community. Despite the feat of sentimental education the play celebrates, however, it is not entirely certain how these women’s newly awakened sense of community will manifest in their lives outside those confining and insulated spaces, where interracial and intercultural exchanges of feelings and resulting conflicts persist. The stage direction also states that these women disperse “in different directions,” not as a community but as fragmented individuals (39). Such dissipation echoes the audience’s own sense of departure from this “fantasized” space of imagined solidarity into the “real” world, where no radical social changes might actually have taken place. The disparity between subversive performance and unchanging reality critically illustrates how politically correct feelings might be displayed, shared, and purged in such pseudo-political spaces as theatre.

The collective emotional purging that *Tea* offers ends up as a female complaint, I suggest, is consumed among sympathetic female voyeurs. It generates “a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging” and implicitly redirects our blame toward *unfeeling* individuals and communities, from which we are exempted for our active participation in the affective scenes of identification (Berlant, *Complaint* 8). The ambivalences about the potential of

women's empathic community are further pursued in *Kokoro*, where the political dimensions of collectively imagined sentimentality gain more prominence. The power of sentimentality *Kokoro* mobilizes is a more complex one, since it calls for political changes and brings about an individual's initiation into American citizenship.

Kokoro

If transnational experiences offer a common emotive language for Japanese women in *Tea*, motherhood mediates racial and cultural differences in *Kokoro*, which Houston wrote in 1994. Yasako Yamashita is a young Japanese woman who migrated to California after she married a Japanese husband, Hiro. Yasako is a traditional Japanese wife in that she mostly spends her time at home with her daughter, Kuniko. One day, she discovers Hiro's extramarital affair with a Japanese American waitress, Shizuko, who reveals her own pregnancy by Hiro. Dejected, Yasako attempts *oyako shinju*, or a parent-child suicide, assuming that her daughter would suffer if left behind. But her attempt fails. She alone survives, convicted of first-degree murder. Based on a real-life chain of events in Santa Monica in 1985, *Kokoro* is Houston's effort to do Yasako justice. Act 1 presents the emotional circumstances that shape her actions. Act 2 then invites us to reconsider the legitimacy of her actions through the lens of our feelings for her, which may bridge two seemingly opposing cultural values, Japanese and American.

Kokoro encourages us to see Yasako as a victim of failed cultural assimilation and her seemingly heinous crime as an emotionally relatable one. At the same time, it poignantly suggests that the dominant culture imposes the ethics of emotions on culturally marginalized or alienated members of a community. As Houston describes in

the author's note:

The amalgam of heart and mind brings a different dimension to that ethereal, inexplicable entity that we call love. It is one of discernment that transcends the veneer of language and the hasty fulfillment of love via institution and material objects. When culture – in the sense of behaviors and beliefs inherent to ethnicity, transmitted to succeeding generations – is brought to this kind of love, ethnic idiosyncrasies can have a shattering effect. (47)

While endorsing maternal love as a universal language for women characters, the play shows that “ethnic idiosyncrasies” – markers of differing cultures – have “shattering effects” when they take unexpected modes of expression. By illustrating how even maternal love takes on a strange form, the play questions the notion that we can negotiate cultural specificities through empathy.

In her insightful study of the correlation between affect and happiness, Sara Ahmed has argued that shared feelings among people lead to a stronger social bond. But feelings associated with and promoted for the good of a community are essentially exclusive and come with normative demands. They necessarily leave out some members of the community, whose affect, marked with cultural and historical differences, does not conform. Accordingly, these members may be coerced to “feel in the right way” to prove that they belong. Therefore, the notion of happiness grounded in shared feeling often “redescribe[s] social norms as social goods” and serves to justify oppression of the

marginalized (Ahmed 2). For example, for an immigrant to achieve a better, happier life, she should learn to put behind her attachments to the old values/world and embrace the new ones. This phenomenon suggests that individuals should desire a better version of happiness for the entire community, not just for themselves.

This process of affective assimilation is prominent in the character of Yasako, who may be read as an unhappy immigrant made into a happy national subject by adopting new ways to “feel right and therefore be happy.” Yasako’s ideal love for her child is closely tied to their mutual happiness, which is framed within a Japanese understanding of maternal love. At the end of the play, Yasako has to unlearn the Japanese way of interacting with the world and embrace the American way. An empathic community of women plays a key role in this process of affective education. Women – regardless of their racial identity – feel for Yasako’s misery and are willing to assist her to find her own source of happiness. Interestingly, Yasako’s problem is dealt with as a problem for the whole community of women and immigrants, which suggests that her reconciliation is connected to the welfare of an entire American society, one which putatively upholds the ideal of multiculturalism. This “reconciliation” then involves separating her self from that of her child and disconnecting her identity from its formerly governing frame of cultural reference.

As the play moves toward Yasako’s reconciliation with American society and a new community, it evinces ambivalence about the affective values endorsed as necessary to membership. Resistance to these demands to conform is most palpable through the interactions between Yasako and her mother’s ghost, Fuyo. Fuyo is a constant reminder of Japanese values; she validates Yasako’s un-American feelings and thus-derived

decisions. The play initially highlights the strong bond between Fuyo and Yasako to show where Yasako's emotional attachment lies. I argue that Yasako's ultimate disavowal of affective ties with Fuyo suggests that she should renounce the affective culture that their bond represents to be successfully incorporated into another affective community marked by Americanness.

The play conceives of the theatre as an intimate public space where women can express and exchange their emotions, especially emotions incompatible with society's dominant perceptions and values, such as Yasako's. Alison Jaggar uses the term "outlaw emotions" to describe feelings experienced by subordinated individuals who are "unable to experience the conventionally prescribed emotion" owing to their de-privileged social situations. These feelings "bring to consciousness our 'gut-level' awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice, or danger" (Jaggar 161). While such emotions are powerless and inarticulate when felt by isolated individuals, they gain subversive potential when they motivate a critical search for alternative modes of perception. *Kokoro* offers subversive possibilities by laying bare feelings in a way that moves us to question, contest, and validate them through collective acts of witnessing. We come to share the privately held, inarticulate outlaw emotions of a Japanese woman. The initial repulsion and feeling of alienation an audience may have towards Yasako's culturally motivated action demonstrate the material gap that exists between them. But these emotional estrangements provide opportunities to enhance and reaffirm an empathic ability that can overcome social barriers.

Throughout *Kokoro*, motherhood is constantly evoked as an affective currency that female characters can exchange in order to overcome cultural differences. Houston's

maternal melodrama explains and legitimates its female protagonist's motivations and actions through a mother's innocent love for her daughter – a love that any mother would feel. As a resilient aesthetic frame that can accommodate conflicting ideas and attitudes, melodrama presents various perspectives and produces “empathic, identifying female spectators” who will identify with characters on multiple levels (Williams, “Something” 322). Through female characters of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds – from a white female lawyer of Italian descent, to Yasako's biracial and bicultural neighbor, Evelyn, to a woman like Yasako – the play displays a wide spectrum of emotional responses. As the play progresses, women constitute an intimate public of sympathetic listeners who validate Yasako's feelings in the name of the Mother.

The play initially presents Yasako's isolation and the absence of an empathic community, which derive from a seemingly irreconcilable culture-inflected emotional gap. Yasako is presented as a conventional Japanese woman who resists Americanization by alienating herself from reality. She is a woman who “still wears kimono, went to women's college, married down, refused to be naturalized, never leave the house” (62). Far too assimilated to share his wife's attachment to Japan, Hiro ridicules Yasako's desire to celebrate Japanese culture and criticizes her overprotective attitude toward Kuniko. Dismissed as idiosyncrasies by her husband, Yasako's beliefs in ancestral spirits and Japanese rituals suggest how her emotional world and human relationships are shaped by Japanese cosmology. She is contrasted with the character of Shizuko, a modern Japanese woman who has successfully assimilated, “naturalized, married to an American before” (62). Shizuko resents and mocks Yasako's submission to Hiro as a sign of quaint cultural habits, and she boasts how she cast away the role of “Madame Butterfly” (62). That they

are rivals in a love triangle explains only part of the irreconcilable gap between the two women, in other words, a gap that results from their differing degrees of assimilation. Yasako manages to reach out to Evelyn, her half-Japanese neighbor, only to retreat to her isolated state, not trusting that other women would understand her (75).

It is the ghost of Fuyo that serves as an imaginary sympathizer for Yasako as “the one person who can understand” in the absence of a community (75). Yasako’s tie to her dead mother had been temporarily severed when she married Hiro and moved to America: as the play opens, we watch Yasako bid her mother’s spirit farewell and Fuyo resisting a parting with her daughter. But the spirit revisits Yasako as she prepares to celebrate the O-bon Festival, and then it reappears at crucial moments to validate Yasako’s critical decisions as those of a “perfect” Japanese wife and mother. For example, Fuyo legitimates Yasako’s suicide (75). In her stage direction, Houston suggests that the understanding gazes between mother (a silent figure on stage) and daughter represent an emotional language, unspoken yet mutual. As in *Tea*, the fact that the audience can see the ghost of Fuyo suggests that we participate in Yasako’s imagined emotional world. These shared moments create a sense of empathic bond between the audience and Yasako and facilitate our identification with her.

The play ultimately suggests that Yasako’s strong emotional tie with her mother should be replaced by more desirable cross-racial and cross-national alliances forged in her evolving relationships with other women, such as Angela Rossetti, Yasako’s Italian-American attorney, who had been raised as a Catholic. We see how Angela is converted from an unsympathetic, detached mediator to an empathizer: motherhood provides a common language to transcend the women’s differences. Their mutual recognition as

mothers rebuilds a sense of affiliation whenever cross-cultural dialogue reaches an impasse. In their first meeting, Angela warns Yasako that the jury will hold a grudge against her because of unforgotten memories of World War II. The language she uses (“rice-eating” and “people killing children”) is seeped in racism and intolerance towards cultural otherness, the lens through which it is assumed that the conservative white jury will see Yasako (77). But seeing Yasako stunned by this harsh, judgmental remark, Angela apologizes for her unprofessional attitude where she reacted “like a mother first” (78). Yasako immediately says she “knows” how Angela must feel, and the bond between the two is instantly forged. Yasako explains to Angela that, in Japanese cosmology, the tie between mother and child is indissoluble, like a tree and a branch, which had led her to *oyako shinju* (81). Angela refutes this view and argues that mother and child are two separate, independent entities, which Yasako in return adamantly rejects. The tension rises between the women and silence ensues:

(The women stare at each other over a compounding impasse)

Yasako: What is your daughter’s name?

Angela: . . . Samantha

Yasako: That is a nice name.

Angela: Thank you. [Beat] I’ll bring you some good tea next time.

(82)

This scene highlights the commonality – motherhood – that Yasako and Angela share rather than their cultural differences and thus recuperates the emotional tie between

the two women. The dialogue implicates anyone capable of understanding such maternal love as ideal listeners in this affective scene of identification, regardless of their knowledge of and access to the cultural specificity of the given crime.

A similar empathic turn takes place in Shizuko, too. Her own pregnancy and imminent motherhood awaken her understanding of maternal love and convert her into an empathic subject. This melodramatic turn not only shows the conversion of a wicked woman but also produces another scene of motherly suffering, as Shizuko becomes a single mother after Hiro drifts away from her after his daughter's death. Indeed, Shizuko decides to leave the couple alone instead of revealing her pregnancy to Hiro – a decision which makes Yasako the sole witness to Shizuko's own suffering after she asks Yasako to keep her pregnancy a secret between them. Rivalry between the two Japanese women wanes; motherhood serves as a medium through which Yasako and Shizuko can communicate. This transformation is exhibited through Shizuko's identification with Yasako on a bodily level (83-4). The outspokenness of Shizuko, initially championed as a marker of a contemporary Japanese American woman, changes to discreet and modest speech. She bows all the way to the floor to express gratitude in a traditionally Japanese way. "Mrs. Yamashita" becomes "Yasako-san," and her revised diction contrasts strongly with the straightforward style of speech – almost a rant – she has previously fired at Yasako. Now her words are constantly interrupted by Hiro's public speech, in an echo of how Hiro interrupted Yasako in Act 1. Shizuko's withdrawal from the world recalls Yasako's initial isolation. Her drastically feminized speech and bodily gestures recall Yasako's own, visually uniting and equating the two women as the gestural tea-drinking had in Houston's earlier play. This overlap generates audience sympathy for Shizuko,

who may now perceive both women as victims of patriarchy.

The play drags Yasako out of an isolated space into the sphere of collective intimacy among women. On the surface level, this community is indifferent to discrimination based on biological and cultural differences because it only asks its members to show a willingness to feel for each other. But it ultimately prioritizes one affective culture over the other and demands, in subtle ways, the latter's assimilation into the former. Yasako must let go of emotional values peculiar to Japanese culture and conceive new forms of intimacy and happiness that are strictly defined by the American value of individualism. The individualism that Yasako embraces is not another form of isolation or a sense of emotional detachment, such as Atsuko showed in *Tea*. As a synonym for a sense of freedom, it now serves as the precondition for Yasako to make transition from the past into the future, where true happiness lies. As Ahmed writes, to “identify with the nation as the bearer of the promise of happiness,” one has to first “acquire the body of an individual” to move forward, free from family and tradition (137). At the climatic moment of the play, Yasako is surrounded by multiple voices of women that point out Yasako's duties to herself – “to love yourself, be yourself apart from husband and child” (93). This orchestra of women's voices culminates in the imagined voice of Kuniko, which urges Yasako to “contemplate life over death” (93). Yasako should learn to let go of her own daughter and find her own happiness, and, accordingly, she finally shows her will to live by singing along with an English song Kuniko taught her. By the same logic, the play suggests that the imaginary affective community that Yasako forms with Fuyo is a confined and undemocratic one unless it allows room for individuality. As Yasako decides to embrace a new life as an

independent American woman and sever her tie from the Japanese past, Fuyo, the sole sharer of Yasako's emotional life, "exits in defeat" (94). The "defeat," however, does not lead to a triumphant or celebratory image of a new coalition of women. At the play's end, Yasako is left alone on stage to receive the verdict as a solitary and even derelict figure.

By demanding from Yasako a radical reworking of her sense of herself and sense of belonging, the play ironically highlights the status of Japanese women as "minoritized publics" who not only resist but also "are denied universalist collective intimacy expectations" (Berlant, "Intimacy" 284). As a whole, the play bridges the gap between differing affective registers through motherhood, but Yasako's unwavering resistance to sympathy also emits a sense of frustration about a level of "affective assimilation" of Japanese women. Erin Hurley has described affect as an "immediate, uncontrollable, skin-level registration of a change to our environment," which does not always translate into the same emotional language for every culture (13-18). Therefore, when certain affective experiences are transmitted from one culture to the other, they often do not fit into the pre-existing, conventional terms of expression in a new environment. Houston takes pains to convey to the audience feelings of Japanese characters in such in-between spaces beyond verbal expression. For instance, Yasako's opening monologue reels off abstract lyricism laden with culturally specific references, and the audience may not be able to capture the meaning immediately. To balance the lack of semantic clarity, Houston creates a queer ambience through dramatic lighting and sound effect and juxtaposes the image of Yasako billowing a silky American flag with Fuyo's ghastly appearance in a shredded kimono with "snowy white face" (49). Coded with inarticulate, complex feelings, these moments bring out our "affective" reactions to the environment

regardless of cultural differences and leave powerful and lingering resonances (Hurley 14). Fuyo's exaggerated facial expressions and gestures also encapsulate feelings that cannot find an equivalent emotional language; nonetheless, they serve as more direct forms of affective expression. As the play progresses, however, these scenes dwindle and disappear, being subsumed into a more dominant, recognizable form of feelings that a larger intimate public can share. Therefore, the play grapples with the optimism signaled by Yasako's revived will to live, which will be supported by an affective community of women that goes beyond an exclusive bond between mother and daughter, and a sense of frustration at the ambivalent and even exclusionary nature of such a community.

Affective readings of *Tea* and *Kokoro* can illustrate ways in which contemporary theater fosters the imagination of a female cultural space where affiliation and coalition exist across cultural and geographical spaces through shared emotion, desire, and identification. This is powerful counterpart to the idea of a masculine political space where the legal status of immigration and globalization is negotiated primarily through rational means. The onstage process through which women share intimate stories and emotions with each other also allows the audience to recognize themselves as a "temporary public" and to indulge in other women's embodied stories. Thus understood, performance, despite its ephemerality, creates a utopian illusion of transcending differences such as nationality; it contends for the idea of homogenous spectatorship. As Jill Dolan would suggest, performance creates moments "in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public" through affectively sharing the vision of a better world (1).

However, even while proposing the potential of empathy to bring people together,

Tea and *Kokoro* constantly raise suspicions about the lasting power of such a coalition. Through subverting the dominant perception of Asian women and their suffering, these two plays both evoke and challenge our belief in empathetic identification, the authenticity of sympathetic gaze, and the possibilities of resistance to such a gaze. Through such a sentimentalizing process, they attempt to reclaim the “affective citizenship” of transnational subjects by negotiating cultural differences through evoking “proper” feelings. For the audiences, the Japanese women characters’ ability to empathize with each other brings them closer to the ideal of intimacy, based on “true” feelings, that transcends notions of race and nationality. Furthermore, the characters’ victimhood awakens and reaffirms the audience’s own desire to feel for the suffering of Japanese women and thus participate in the collective sentimental imagination. Houston seems to suggest that we should be aware of the limits of such an empathic project. In fact, the cultural specificity and heterogeneity of Japanese women’s experiences often seem to betray anxieties about identificatory desires of an indiscriminate nature. Houston carefully portrays the lived experiences of Japanese women as emotionally legible to the audiences without undercutting the authenticity of such experiences. By doing so, she proposes that cross-cultural identification has a value of its own when one assumes a position of an engaged listener to the racial/cultural other’s lived experience while being still alert to differences.

Chapter 3. When Your Shoes Do Not Fit Mine: Conundrums of Cross-racial Performance

Anna Deavere Smith's critically acclaimed performance piece titled *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* includes a climactic vignette in which she impersonates a Korean woman, Mrs. Young Soon Han, whose liquor store has been destroyed during the uprising. During one performance, though, her version of the tearful Mrs. Han calling for justice provoked a group of elementary students in the audience to burst into laughter (Smith 185). Smith's impersonation of Mrs. Han's accent, intended to increase the ethnic authenticity of her representation, inspired an unexpected audience response that made Smith furious.

Given Smith's frustration and anger at her audience's insensitivity towards the suffering of the portrayed victims, her good intentions and desire to convey the pain of Mrs. Han is unmistakable. Mrs. Han's halting and broken English reflects her frustrated self-representation and her inability to make her immigrant voice heard. Her lack of words conveys an excess of emotion that suggests inarticulate but more basic shared feelings. At the same time, this anecdote shows how the inarticulateness of Korean Americans is more likely to inspire ridicule and entertainment rather than make them objects of sympathy. For instance, Cherise Smith interprets this anecdote as indicative of Smith's probably exaggerated or comical impersonation of a Korean female, which might reinforce racial stereotype under the guise of empathy (20-21).

While my discussion of Houston's plays used a binary frame of Asian American suffering and white spectatorship, this chapter examines how theater reframes ethnic conflicts and reimagines possibilities of reconciliation through scenes of emotional identification and/or dis-identification. It looks at how cross-racial empathy and

identification becomes more complicated in a multiracial community such as urban neighborhood.

Mainstream media as well as more sustained journalistic coverage structured particular events that crystalized the long-held tensions between Korean American and African Americans. Korean immigrants were constantly depicted by news reports as mercenary, aggressive defenders of their property, and this added to the pervading sense of Black-Korean rivalry and highlighted sensational aspects of their confrontations.³⁰ This was often attributed to Korean Americans' inability to articulate well in English and insurmountable cultural differences between the two groups. Such biased reportages constructed the images of Korean Americans in ways that reiterated cultural stereotypes of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners and cultural strangers only in search of economic success. Even their suffering and pain were often explained in monetary terms – the loss of their property and financial means during the uprising and the boycott – which overshadowed affective aspects of their loss and precluded the general public's sympathy for them. This contrasts with the frequently re-played image of Rodney King's beating, which aroused feelings of rage, horror, and sympathy.

Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight* (1994) and Elizabeth Wong's *Kimchee and Chitlins* revisit what was widely publicized as Black-Korean conflict in urban neighborhoods in the early 1990s. Racial tensions in multiracial urban communities have revealed an intricate web of historically constructed relations, cultural misunderstandings, economic inequalities, and emotional investments. I read their works to reveal ways in which empathy works in complex ways when racial categories are multiple and

³⁰ See Cheung, "(Mis)interpretations and (In)justice: The 1992 Los Angeles "Riots" and "Black-Korean Conflict"": Lie and Abelman, *Blue Dreams*: and Song, *Strange Future*

triangulated. The multiplicity and fluidity of racial identities undermine empathy as a strategy to build coalition as they reveal the instability of empathy when it can be constructed and easily manipulated. I argue that such moments of disillusionment in cross-racial allegiance highlight the limits of empathically imagined affinities as well as recognition of the incommensurable racial suffering of the other.

Twilight and *Kimchee and Chitlins* create affinities between Blacks and Koreans, who are perpetually cast by media as irreconcilable and opposites, by highlighting the particularity of each racial group's history and also suggesting how their separate histories of racial oppression might intersect and speak to each other. In both plays, characters and audiences alike go through reversals of identification and dis-identification with diverse racial groups portrayed. While both pieces suggest ways to bring together voices of dissent and negotiate differences, they suggest the dangers and inevitable failures inherent in such attempt. Rather than focusing solely on the pessimism or disillusionment associated with these "failures," I seek how these plays open up new possibilities and questions for us to grapple with. What do these plays suggest about identification – what are the dangers and potentials? What do the audience take away from the moments of identification?

Interethnic Solidarity in the Age of (Post-)Multiculturalism

In exploring how empathy is imagined as part of the navigation of US racial relations, this chapter pays particular attention to the prevalent rhetoric of interethnic solidarity and disintegration. I will focus particular ways in which interracial relations between African Americans and Asian Americans are re-imagined in affective terms,

looking at the stage representations of what was prominently referred to as Afro-Korean conflicts in the 1990s. It was widely believed that the central issue of these conflicts was rooted in irreconcilable cultural differences. These plays directly contest this notion, engaging multiple racial groups and different urban locales, and challenging the triangulated race relationships where particular minority groups are pitted against each other under white supremacy.

Recent scholarships on Afro-Asian affiliations (Bill Mullen, Fred Ho, and Vijay Prashad among many) highlight the mutually constructive nature of racial formation of African Americans and Asian Americans in U.S. and global contexts,³¹ focusing on political, literary, and cultural interactions that have been taken place across the Pacific throughout the twentieth century. For instance, these scholars highlight political and cultural expressions of Afro-Asia coalition in the 1960s and 1970s when both ethnic groups identified their own oppression as a shared predicament under white supremacy. Young Asian Americans rejected their assimilationist image of “model minority” and instead built their racial identity on the rhetoric intrinsic in the construction of Black identity.³² The phenomenal popularity of Kung Fu in the 1970s across the color line is one example of such cultural expression of interethnic solidarity.³³

³¹ See Ho and Mullen, *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans*; Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity*; Onish, *Transpacific Antiracism: Afro-Asian Solidarity in 20th-century Black America, Japan, and Okinawa*; Julia H. Lee, *Interracial Encounters*; and Jun, *Race for Citizenship*. While a lot of literatures on Afro-Asian interaction incorporate historical, literary, and legal texts as objects of analysis. Julia Lee’s book specifically looks at the literary representations.

³² See Maeda, “Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen: Constructing Asian American Identity through Performing Blackness, 1969-1972”; and Lee, *Urban Triage*, especially chapter 3.

³³ See Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*.

The idea of interethnic solidarity has radically changed since the 1980s and it became inevitable for Asian Americans to acknowledge a larger process that racializes Asian Americans and African Americans differently. Claire Jean Kim suggests that Asian Americans' racial status in the US has been determined in relation to the power of whites to manage a black population, which has marked the racialization process of both groups since the 1850s. Such "racial triangulation" generated a range of demeaning racial stereotypes that stigmatized each group by valorizing Asian American success based on their Asian virtue of diligence and attributing the stagnant social destitution of African Americans to their lack of the same quality for success. Ranked between blacks and whites on an axis of superiority and inferiority, Asian Americans seem to fare a little better than blacks; however, they have been typecast as "foreigners" in contrast to blacks' unchanging "insider" position from a mainstream perspective. Kim specifically refers to the Black-Korean conflict in the 1990s as a flagrant manifestation of "racial triangulation," where white-controlled media managed the racial hierarchy by contrasting the images of hardworking model citizens with incorrigible, law-breaking dissenters (126).³⁴ Although these interethnic conflicts are popularly cited as Black-Korean conflict, scholars see it as a symptom of larger structural problems of white supremacy that affect all ethnic minorities. Inter-minority conflicts in urban areas showcase the ongoing pervasiveness of "white dominance over Asian Americans and Blacks alike" (Kim 118).

This resurgence of racial tension after the previous era of solidarity shapes a profound pessimism that has permeated American society since the dawning of the 1990s.

³⁴ Lie and Abelmann also note the insufficiency of the "Black-Korean conflict" frame, which has been a dominant lens through which mass media and the general public viewed the uprising, because it "explains diverse phenomena under the same rubric while homogenizing ethnic groups" (76).

Scholars urge us to reconsider the optimistic (if not native) vision of inter-minority affiliations under the rubric of multiculturalism and radically re-envision racial relations. As Min Hyoung Song suggests, while neoliberalism had promised social possibilities and upward mobility based on individual freedom and choice in and through assimilation, in reality, disenfranchised people – blacks and new immigrants alike – are often excluded from the myth of individual uplift. James Kyung-Jin Lee also critiques the “fantasy” of multiculturalism, a belief that crossing the color line will solve race problems (xiv). He proposes that we have to question a rosy picture of interracial solidarity and racial identification once we recognize that differing material conditions of groups of color impede easy identifications and coalitions.

I look at how this disillusionment of post-racial era based on the tenets of multiculturalism is expressed in dramatic works as they problematize dramatic conventions that promote cross-racial empathy. As I suggested earlier, the minstrel stage allowed white working class performers and audiences to reaffirm their racial identity and alliances over hyperbolic representations of blackness. It was in a similar fashion that racially marginalized groups attempted to build imagined alliances with a dominant group by excluding the other marginalized group. For this reason, performers of color highlighted the grotesqueness of racial roles they assumed to reiterate their own normalcy, aiming for a racial uplift by seeking a privilege of performing other races just like white performers.³⁵ African Americans in yellowface highlighted the foreignness of Asian

³⁵ For African Americans’ performance of Asianness, or Yellowface, see Lee, *Japan of Pure Invention*; Lee, *Orientalism*, especially chapter 1; Moon *Yellowface: Making of Chinese in American Popular Culture and Performance*; Kwan, “Performing a Geography of Asian America: The Chop Suey Circuit”; and Lee, *Interracial Encounters*, especially chapter 2.

bodies in a hope of reasserting intimacy and commonality between black performers and white audiences.³⁶

However, the dynamic of cross-racial performances of racial minorities was complex and multilayered and resulted in uneasy racial identifications, sometimes reinforcing the existing system of racial hierarchy. While boundary-crossing performances as a strategy provides space to imagine collective identity - black-white identifications in this case – provisionally, it was ironically in the same imagined space that differences become noticeable and become hyper-visible. For white audiences, real black bodies and imagined yellow bodies were more or less interchangeable and in the viewer’s mind the authentic blackness of the performer’s body was only differently raced than Asians and not comparable to the “neutral” white body. For Asian Americans, performing blackness before white audiences was regarded as a cultural ascent into whiteness. Frank Chin reminisces his own uncle in blackface and observes how Chinese Americans – even American-born ones with American citizenship – were implicitly coerced to perform as blackface minstrels as a marker of their ‘acculturation’ into the mainstream American culture (148-9). Performing blackness situated Asian Americans in a complex and contradictory relationship to the mainstream American culture, through which new immigrants from Asia learned the normative ideology of race and gender (Jun 75).

I focus on how racial performances in Smith’s and Wong’s works create moments of identification across racial lines and how these strategies envision possibilities of

³⁶ For instance, Josephine Lee points out African Americans actively participated in the production of orientalist discourses through yellowface, which had been previously monopolized by whites.

communities. If such strategies as cross-racial performances inevitably risk false representations and/or over-identification, what alternative ways to build coalition do these plays suggest?

Twilight

Twilight focuses on the clash between Korean Americans and African Americans during the Los Angeles Uprising. This racial unrest broke out in April 1992 in an area heavily populated with African American residents and stores largely run by Korean Americans shortly – thirteen days – after Rodney King was beaten by four white LAPD officers. The tension was also triggered by a court ruling regarding an incident that happened in the previous year. In a local grocery store when Latasha Harlins, an African American teenager was shot by Soon Ja Du, a Korean American owner of the store.³⁷ Du was originally found guilty of voluntary manslaughter in a court trial while her actual sentence was later mitigated to five years of probation, a requirement of community service, and a small fine. The court ruling infuriated many African Americans already discontented and wounded by the King incident and instantly antagonized them. Among their targets were a number of Korean Americans. Beginning on April 29, unprecedented chaotic looting and burning of countless Korean stores by largely African

³⁷ There are controversies regarding how to term what happened in April 1992 as one of the interviewees in Smith's play uses various terms such as uprising, revolution, civil disturbance, etc. Despite its presumably negative connotation for African Americans – especially those who took part in the various acts of protest for racial justice – I chose to use the term 'uprising' in present discussion for consistency and to convey popular sentiments.

American mobs began in southern part of the city and quickly spread north, and as a result most Korean businesses were destroyed in less than a week's time.³⁸

For *Twilight*, Smith interviewed more than 200 people from a wide spectrum of racial, gender, and class backgrounds who were either directly or indirectly involved in these acts. Such a multi-perspectival approach is supposed to bring together a heterogeneous set of voices, and allow audiences to imagine cross-racial identification and a heightening of empathic capacity. Smith delivers her interviewees' words verbatim and, though she stylizes their words and gestures, attempts a kind of impersonation. Although her light complexion helps to facilitate performing across multiple races, she does not absolutely erase her blackness nor female identity. The viewer is aware of her presence behind each mask she wears, which is even more palpable in theater when we see her entire body.³⁹

Smith's project has been constantly acclaimed for proposing possibilities of transcendence across the color line and compromising conflicting ideologies and political views held by different groups. Smith's role as a mediator is considered as forming a kind of community that embraces heterogeneous voices, and her boundary-crossing act embodies efforts to become and empathize with the suffering of the (racial) other. By putting herself and the audience in the shoes of the other, her performances heighten our ability to understand and sympathize with different positions and feelings from ours. In particular, she makes visible the interrelatedness of different racial groups and its

³⁸ A considerable amount of research has been done in the field of sociology. For details of events related to the Black-Korean confrontations in the 1990s, see Kim, *Koreans in the Hood*; Song, *Strange Future*; Lee, *Urban Triage*; and Abelman and Lie, *Blue Dreams*.

³⁹ In this regard, I disagree with a horde of criticism that praises Smith for mediating different characters as a transparent vehicle such as Tania Modleski's claim in "Doing Justice to the Subjects: Mimetic Art in a Multicultural Society."

complex manifestations in contemporary American society that cannot be explained in a black and white or Asian and black binary paradigm or racial hierarchy.

At the same time, her work raises important questions about the complexities of performing across racial boundaries in the embodied space of live theater. On the one hand, Smith opens up the political potentialities for Afro-Korean coalition, two groups that have historically pitted against each other among many other groups, by evoking mutual histories of racial oppression. On the other hand, the above-mentioned melodramatic yet earnestly intended performance of Korean women's suffering seems to reveal the complex ways empathy works when racial categories are multiple (and "triangulated").

Smith's performance attempts to go beyond the abstract realm of imagining a cross-racial understanding that transcends differences by generating critical distance between performer and character, which would disrupt the viewer's identification with the characters. Smith has often expressed dissatisfaction with more realistic, psychological approaches to acting, better known as Stanislavski, or method acting.⁴⁰ The principles of method acting demand the actor's interpretation of the character's speech and gesture, only to achieve the deeper substance of the character. Within this frame of acting, the actor's own subjectivity becomes the only medium through which the character's subjectivity can be grasped, as what propels the actor's access to the inner core of the character is his own psychic exploration and imagination.⁴¹ The 'truthful' performance of a character thus based on the actor's arbitrary assumption of the

⁴⁰ One of such instances is Smith's interview with Carol Martin, where Smith recalls the troubles she had with Stanislavski techniques.

⁴¹ See Lyons and Lyons, "Anna Deavere Smith: Perspectives on her Performance within the Context of Critical Theory," 47-48.

character's subjectivity is problematic, as it might fall short of taking into consideration the material realities that shape the characters' actions. By rendering her own racial and gender positionality visible, Smith leaves the representational gap open and ever present to the audiences. If performing otherness inevitably risks objectification and commodification of the portrayed, exposing and evoking the embodied differences between the performing body and the represented body can be a tactic to preclude the performer's own cultural appropriation of the Other.

Such conscious approach to racial representations resonates with major principles of Brecht's political theater, to whom Smith's acting techniques are often compared. Smith explains how her dissatisfaction with more realistic, psychological approach to acting – i.e. Stanislavskian system of acting representative of the Western acting style – led her to creating a new acting style (Martin 51). Her critique resonates with Brecht's critique of this approach, which emphasizes an actor's exhaustively repetitive empathic identification with a character (Brecht 93).⁴² Brecht suggests that in epic theater, in opposition to acting in Aristotelian theater, instead of making believe that actor is a character, actor should 'quote' the character and make visible the division between actor and character. By doing so, it can prevent the viewer from being immersed in the illusion of reality created by theatrical endeavors. The actor's job is that of a witness to an accident, who should describe how the accident happened from *his* perspective and ask listeners to decide for themselves. The actor imitates the actions of people involved in the accident without being deeply engaged with their emotions. Instead of striving to be

⁴² "Stanislavsky puts forward a series of means – a complete system – by which what he calls 'creative mood' can repeatedly manufactured afresh at every performance. For the actor cannot usually manage to feel for very long on end that he really is the other person; he soon gets exhausted and begins just to copy various superficialities of the other person's speech and hearing, whereupon the effect on the public drops off alarmingly" (Brecht 93)

authentic, his imitation should be *imperfect* so that the viewer won't be impressed by his skills of impersonation and be distracted by the virtuosity of acting from the accident itself. The viewer should understand what socio-political forces shape a character's action/choice instead of trying to step in the character's psyche and treating it as that of universal 'Man.'

Smith's impersonation of many interviewees illustrates the same alienating technique to prompt the viewer's critical interpretation of the character in focus. In many instances, her verbal delivery is accompanied with visually exaggerated gestures and actions of the person, most vividly in such characters as Charlton Heston who expresses his pro-gun sentiment, or a real estate agent in Beverly Hills who rambles on and on about her suffering from failed plastic surgery. Elaine Young, described as "a victim of silicon" in Smith's stage direction, laments her agony over a failed plastic surgery which cost her an ensuing series of surgery. After going through immense physical and mental suffering, Young became an ambassador of anti-plastic surgery. This story of suffering and survival of a woman could have been a moving story. However, Smith constantly interrupts our engagement in this story of 'victimhood' and empathic identification through various distractions. Smith-as-Young constantly looks at the mirror while talking; camera zooms out to show Smith sitting in a stage set. These devices are deliberate reminders that what we are watching is Smith-as-Young, not Young herself, sitting in a stage set, not in a hotel where the interview took place.

However, such proposed intention of critical acting is counterbalanced with more sentimental portrayals of certain characters, which evinces the performer's sincere efforts to approximate the character's inner feelings. If sentimentality poses "danger" by

trumping the audience's desire to act *outside* theater, as Brecht vehemently criticized, melodramatic moments could undermine the basic principle of political theater by manipulating viewers' sentiments and creating biased stances based on emotions. While racial melodrama can work towards eliciting action for social justice, as Linda Williams suggested, the recurring tropes of racial melodrama can also reinforce our previous perceptions of racial dynamics between particular groups. *Twilight* navigates this tension between an authentic portrayal and a critical mimicry, or repetition with difference.

Smith turns a collective nightmare into a story of suffering and survival by reversing the dynamics between perpetrator and victim and ultimately evoking the images of reconciliation and forgiveness. The dominant narrative of African American suffering that recurring images of Rodney King represent is constantly challenged and reversed by interceding voices of other innocent victims such as Elvira Evers, a woman who was shot during the uprising and miraculously survived because her unborn baby caught a bullet in her elbow. Throughout the play, victims of the event and racial hatred are not limited to racial minorities and more inclusive, varying from Young Soon Han, a Korean female liquor storeowner, a white juror wrongly associated with white supremacy, to a white truck driver assaulted by African Americans.

These moments elicit the audience's emotional attachment to the characters by portraying them as victims who deserve our sympathy. As Linda Williams suggested, while racialized suffering has disadvantages in real life, the victimized position gains a sign of moral superiority and becomes ground on which to claim one's right and therefore is ironically turned into advantage. Williams draws our attention to the political potential of sentimentality in theater and explains that audience's sympathy aroused by the

spectacles of suffering blacks in stage versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* crystalized into public opinion in favor of abolitionism.⁴³ As seen in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, melodramatic representation of racial suffering and its gender-inflected versions in popular culture have been actively deployed to render “moral legibility” to race (Williams, *Race Card* 5). The value of racial melodrama lies in a racially disadvantaged group can claim their right in the face of racial subjugation through making their moral superiority legible through racial suffering. For this reason, diverse racial groups have played this race card at different historical moments, where each racial group claimed their moral superiority over the other by emphasizing their innocent victimhood and casting the other as villain.

Reginald Denny most vividly illustrates this reversal of racial melodrama, a white truck driver who became a target of random racist assaults by African American looters. Smith emphasizes Denny's political naiveté and lack of resentment towards the black gang who knocked him unconscious, which elicits even more feelings of pity and compassion from the viewer (Song 106-7). The public condolences and supports from Black religious and political leaders that showered Denny bring out a celebratory image of black-white reconciliation. Denny emphasizes the immediate bond he could forge with the four people of color who came to his rescue: he says, “Meeting them was not like meeting a stranger, but it was like meeting a buddy. There was a weird common thread in our lives” (*Twilight* 108). Denny's words stress that the actions of the rescuers derive from their sense of justice based on sympathy, which was provoked by live broadcasting of the beating of Denny. Denny's interpretation of their motive behind such heroic act – the sense that “enough is enough” – suggests how the suffering of an innocent victim –

⁴³ Such view as Williams's is not unchallenged. There are skeptical voices, too. For example, Saidiya Hartmann points out the voyeuristic pleasure inherent in the subject's identification with suffering objects.

regardless of its race – can become a driving force for action and reconciliation. In the filmed version of *Twilight*, this reconciliatory ambience is further emphasized as we see people exhilarating over a guilty verdict on one of the white police officers who had beaten Rodney King.

After this, Smith reenacts one of the jurors, Maria, who urges other jurors to remove all the feelings associated with racial sentiments. Maria's words suggest that one could reach a 'just' verdict by suppressing personal feelings that are intertwined with one's racial identity and lived experience and by rationalizing situations without leaning towards a particular group. These suggestions have less resonance and bears less relevance to the audience at this point, however, because of the reservoir of emotions Smith's performances have been accumulating so far. The audience is aware of how supposedly objective and impersonal judgments are inevitably influenced by the affect-inflected opinions of the people – that is, the outcome of playing the race card by both African American and white groups to find a happy medium. The whole ebbs and flows of emotions – angers, frustrations, and enmity followed by reconciliation – signals the play's manipulation of the viewers' emotions and ways in which they identify with and alienate themselves from portrayed characters – especially, characters in suffering.

While *Twilight* seems to celebrate the provisional reconciliation between blacks and whites as it progresses, the place of Korean Americans complicates the role of cross-racial identification in bringing inter-ethnic understanding. Because of limited space Korean characters occupy throughout the piece, Smith's editing choice has more resounding impact on racial representation of this group. For instance, Nancy Cho questions, "In a country where Korean American voices are rarely heard in the public

sphere, what does it mean for Anna Deavere Smith to choose which voices to represent and then to embody these stories on the stage?”(Cho 72) The paucity of Korean American representations certainly raises this question of ‘representational justice’ when one has no tool for self-representation in such works as this.⁴⁴ In her preparation for *Twilight*, Smith conducted many interviews with Korean male proprietors like Jay Woong Yahng, who is the first Korean that appears in the televised version of the play (Kondo 319). Yahng’s interview is marked by antagonism against Black Americans, who he views as his ‘enemy.’ His appearance is shortly followed by the mass media images of armed Korean men on the rooftop. These images emphasize a state of war, Korean men shooting randomly at the looters, their ‘enemies’ who are outside the camera frame.

Instead of portraying more hostility-laden male interviewees, Smith chooses helpless women and their appeal for the viewer’s empathic identification and call for justice. Such an emotional turn from anger to sadness elicits empathy, which ameliorates the militant milieu and embedded tension between two ethnic communities. This point is first illustrated in June Park, whose husband is hospitalized after getting shot. All teary-eyed, Smith-as-Mrs. Park explodes her anger at the police and the community at not having protected her husband, who has been so generous and cooperative. Smith repeats what Mrs. Park says (“Then why, why he has to get shot! You know, I don’t know why.”) and urges us to think hard on her question by repeating her question “why” over and over again. It generates an image of an innocent man who is morally upright – contributing to the community and doing no harm to anyone. In the face of a wronged woman directly and adamantly asking for justice, the audience cannot but feel that

⁴⁴ Smith has sometimes made changes to her selection of characters, but in most cases the number of characters were around 40, and less than 5 among them were Korean characters.

something must be done immediately. Such portrayal of Mrs. Park, however, bewildered Kondo who expresses concerns about the political consequences of Asian American female representation while working with Smith on *Twilight*. For her, it seemed to reproduce the stereotypical image of “submissive and devoted” Asian women regardless of the authenticity of Smith’s representation of the real Mrs. Park (Kondo 329-330). By reproducing the image of Korean Americans that are “permanently foreign and unassimilable” linguistically nor culturally, this erases the diversity and division within Korean American community in LA, which Korean American scholars like John Lie attempts to illuminate.

It is most palpable at the climatic moment of the play when she performs Young Soon Han, our opening example. This segment of the show is characterized by the immensity of emotions. In the PBS version, Smith maximizes the audience’s focus on the character with close-ups, which renders the gap between Smith and Mrs. Han almost invisible by allowing little distraction such as props, sounds, and so on. Stillness dominates the scene and we cannot but focus on what Mrs. Han says, and Smith as interlocutor becomes almost transparent and her empathic identification is felt:

They [African Americans] finally found that justice exists in this society. Then where is the victims’ rights? They got their rights. By destroying innocent Korean merchants. . . . They have a lot of respect, as I do, for Dr. Martin King? He is the only model for Black community. I don’t care Jesse Jackson. But he was the model of nonviolence. Nonviolence? They like to have hiseh [sic] spirits. What about last year? They destroyed

innocent people. (five-second pause) And I wonder if that is really justice to get their rights in this way. (*Twilight* 247)

Smith's performance of Han, which follows the scenes of elated and victorious African American people after the verdict, questions the exclusive nature of the justice, which is gained through the victimization of another racial group. If justice seemed to have been redressed for African Americans, Han's laments show that no such equivalent justice was done for Korean Americans' loss. The aftermath of the uprising only made her acutely aware of their incomplete citizenship. They have witnessed how police protected the Beverly Hills area, populated mostly with white people, while Korean American owned shops were being looted.

While Mrs. Han directly puts blame on black people for destroying Korean American lives and properties for their fight for justice against white people, what is telling about Han's voice is not the anger she expresses, but how it turns more into a lament or complaint that has no real power to change the reality—and accordingly, no real threat. By evoking Martin Luther King Jr., Han criticizes the absence of moral principles in black American community. She questions the ethical legitimacy of African American violence of Korean Americans and accuses such violence of neglecting their moral principle and heritage of the past. If black Americans' call for justice after Rodney King incident was manifested through the physical violence manifest in the form of uprising and the equivalent violence of language Smith reiterates, Mrs. Han's call for justice is devoid of such violence.

The image of non-violence overlaps with Mrs. Han's own position as a helpless, female supplicant, and Smith-as-Mrs. Han embodies black ideal of political justice based on the principle of non-violence. Her tone gradually changes from accusatory to imploring as she expresses her acknowledgement of black struggle for freedom and social justice for all other minority groups and her desire to "be part of their 'joyment'" after the guilty verdict of the two white officers who assaulted Rodney King. Her anger, which could generate destructive, physical violence like that of Korean male shop owners, is turned into tears that invite the audience to join in their suffering and seek their understanding. Reenacted through Smith's pleading hand gestures and her upper body leaning towards the camera is a Korean American woman trying to reach towards a black woman listening and bridge the gap between the two: the present pain of Korean immigrants and the past pain of black people merge in the black female body.

While the televised version could evoke the transcendent image of coalescing bodies in such scenes as this, what happens in the embodied spaces of live performances disrupt this empathetic spectatorship, as my opening example illustrated. Several interviews with Koreans were originally conducted in Korean with help of a translator, which Smith transcribed Korean sounds phonetically and reproduced them verbatim for the original production. Many reviewers and critics who saw the original stage performance confessed that it created such visceral feelings.⁴⁵ Kondo noted the visceral and uncanny effects of Smith's rendering of Korean Americans in Korean at the opening scene at one of Smith's New York previews of *Twilight*, when Smith impersonated Chung Lee, head of the Korean American Victims Association: "In deep tones she begins speaking in Korean. Yes, this is familiar. . . . As he speaks solemnly, then passionately,

⁴⁵ See C. Smith, *Enacting Others*, 184.

we see the translation flashing above us” (Kondo 313).⁴⁶ Kondo senses the ‘feel’ of the Korean sounds, the passion and solemnness of the content with which she is familiar, so even before she ‘reads’ the translation, Smith-as-Lee’s voice resonates as familiar to Kondo. Smith’s performance can be read as an effort to portray Korean American experience as authentically as possible through linguistic verisimilitude.

While the effect of Smith’s boundary-crossing performance might have been even more enhanced, this also became a point of controversies among critics and reviewers due to the accuracy issue. For instance, Nancy Cho criticizes how Smith’s reenactment of Chung Lee in Korean made visible to the audience the emotional distance between Smith and her performed subject insofar that her linguistic performance seems to evoke a sense of foreignness (71). For her, the gap between her visibly black body and her awkward rendering of Korean language is an uncomfortable one that is left unclosed, and it might jeopardize the potential Black-Korean alliance that boundary-crossing performances initially aimed to create. When Smith made some of these ‘foreign’ characters more familiar to American public by translating their original languages into accented forms of English, her intention to evoke cross-racial sympathy became significantly compromised.

In *Indian Accents*, Shilpa Davé has suggested that accent is a marker of foreignness, and highlighting immigrants’ accent is a means of “othering” within community, through which the speaker’s uncertain relationship to citizenship is exposed. Registered as a marker of marginality and abnormality, the accent denotes the national origin of the speaker, which complicates her full incorporation into a racialized American context. Therefore, the added accent in Smith’s portrayal of Korean Americans might

⁴⁶ Chung Lee does not appear in the PBS version, but he appears in the published version.

serve as an indelible marker of those characters' foreignness and "not fully American" status. As she switched from Korean to what is recognized as Korean English, a major shift takes place in the viewer's perception of the characters, which becomes problematic and disrupts the audience's sympathetic identification with the portrayed character in a fundamental way. While the televised version could have a better control over viewers' emotional distances than live performances, her performance risks possible miscommunications between stage and audience, which turns presumably authentic portrayal into potentially ethnic entertainment. Criticizing Smith's flat and almost caricatured portrayal of Mrs. Han despite its immensely moving performance, Cho argues that "given the awkwardness of Smith's accent work and her pronunciation of certain lines in Korean, the audience is taken perilously close to the edge of racial caricature" (72). Smith's portrayals of Korean suffering illustrate both potentials and limits what one might call "affective translation." On one level, her linguistic translation of Korean English might heighten the image of 'foreignness' attached to the racial other, which can jeopardize or complicate the process of cross-racial identification. On yet another level, attempts to access the other's suffering through imagined empathy can elide different material conditions and histories of racialization between the two groups – African American and Korean Americans.

Smith evokes intersection between Korean suffering and Black suffering through overlapping images of racial subjugation. It creates scenes of racial abjection that seems to transcend the historical and political specificities of each group, rendering each other's suffering emotionally relatable and morally legible. Nevertheless, this runs the risk of oversimplifying the contested terrain of Black-Korean relationship – how they have been

differently racialized throughout American history and at the same time how racial attitudes towards each group have been determined in relation to each other. It is only through Black terms and stereotyped ethnic markers that the audience is invited to empathize with imagined Korean American suffering. The haunting image of Rodney King being beaten by white police officers in the televised version serves as a constant reminder for the mainstream viewers of the collective memory of black-and-white racial history. Such an invocation is premised on the audience's prior knowledge about African American subjugation.⁴⁷ The purpose of this recurring image is clear: the horrendous sight evokes the viewer's collective memory of lynching, a nightmare in American history that keeps returning. Compared to this image of racism that permeates the entire play, there is an absence or invisibility of Korean American history. This unequal representation of racial history might make it difficult for the viewers to draw a parallel between the 'justice' sought by both Blacks and that by Koreans in Smith's play, or misconstrue the similarities of each group's racial history.

As Nancy Cho clearly states, Smith's performances "paint an extremely moving but fairly one-dimensional image of Koreans as victims, one that does little to reflect competing historical realities concerning the relations of Koreans with Blacks and Latinos in Los Angeles" (Cho 71). Such critique resonates with the local artists' discontents when the Mark Taper Forum chose Smith as an artist who is presumably an outsider to the community to create a theater piece about the LA uprising. While her outsider's position might have brought an objective and unbiased perspective into a situation where no one can claim to have the right perspective, the very neutrality comes

⁴⁷ While this image might not have been shown in stage performances, characters' constant references to Rodney King would produce similar effects on stage.

with its limits in grappling with historical and political ramifications through empathic imagination. One might further consider how the contingencies of interethnic empathy can be imagined from Asian American perspective as seen in a play like Elizabeth Wong's *Kimchee and Chitlins*. When one shares the same history of racial triangulation as Asian Americans, is it easier to empathize with and justly represent the other's suffering? What happens when the diversity and division within a community is taken into consideration?

The Model Minority's Dilemma: Racial Triangulation in *Kimchee and Chitlins*

Kimchee and Chitlins is based on the African American boycott of a Korean grocery store in the New York City often referred to as the "Red Apple boycott." A Haitian woman named Giselaine Fetissainte was allegedly assaulted in a Korean-American family-owned grocery store, The Family Red Apple Korean grocer in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn on January 18, 1990. The accused Koreans in the store denied attacking Fetissainte, but a local African American community flared up, followed by a nine-month boycott led by a local activist. The incident brought to the surface inter-ethnic enmities long held among ethnic groups, and other people of Asian descent became victims of African American attacks motivated by revenge.⁴⁸

The play fictionalizes the interethnic conflict by taking the perspective of a Chinese American reporter whose position embodies the racial triangulation of black,

⁴⁸ For details of events related to the Black-Korean confrontations in the 1990s, see Kim, *Koreans in the Hood*; Song, *Strange Future*; Lee, *Urban Triage*; and Abelman and Lie, *Blue Dreams*.

white, and Asian American described by Claire Jean Kim, and the dilemma of Asian American subject position positioned as the model minority. It questions the inevitably biased and politicized nature of racial representation by revealing ways in which particular images are coopted by white-regulated mass media. The overtly Brechtian approaches that the play takes draws attention to the parallel between the politics of media representation and that of theatrical representation, both being modes that encourage neutral perspectives and judgments for the reviewers removed from emotions. The play reveals the fundamentally flawed nature of the kind of neutrality assumed by media representations of race relations, especially when such representations lean towards stereotyped depictions of blacks and Koreans and racial histories that are carefully co-opted under white supremacy. It attempts to fill the gaps in such media representation by restoring erased histories and giving flesh to the abstract representations of racialized bodies that are at the center of conflict.

As in *Twilight*, *Kimchee* and *Chitlins* stages similar moments of cross-racial performances where the two opposing groups would step into each other's shoes. Rather than provoking empathetic identification, I argue that these performances reveal the way in which racialized perceptions are constructed and highlight the embodied differences. By restaging the interracial conflict as scenes of both identification and disidentification, the play initially brings out the indelible differences between the actors, which relationship would transfer to the social realm outside the theatrical space. I suggest that it also enables us to see the structural problems that determine and shape individuals' attitude toward other races and ultimately leads to enhance empathy that acknowledges the conundrums of cross-racial identification. While the play reveals the limits and

dangers of such performance strategies as cross-racial impersonations to seek reconciliation, I suggest two other moments where feelings of affinity are evoked through shared affective memories grounded in different yet intersecting histories of racialization and colonization.

Wong's stage directions specify that one should use a symbolic stage setting, acting style, and choruses who will provide with critical commentaries: "The world of the play must be symbolic and not literal. It must reflect the humor of the play, or be humorous in some way" (Wong 396). These devices intend to prevent the audience from being too deeply immersed in particular characters and their positions – to prevent our empathetic identification. As the play unfolds, such intentions are disrupted by identificatory moments that raise the question of ethnic identification – whether and how someone identifies with a particular racial minority, as well as cross-racially as a person of color. While Smith's play minimizes, if not erases or makes invisible, the positionality of a mediator – i.e. the black female performer – Wong's play accentuates rather than downplays the differences of these social positions. By deliberately creating emotional distances as well as closeness between characters and audiences, the play suggests how detached, critical spectatorship is almost always complicated and disrupted by identificatory desires that we have towards people of other races as well as one's own when similar, yet not mutual histories of racial subjugation are evoked.

Wong's protagonist Suzie Seeto is an ambitious Asian female reporter aiming at an anchor seat. Suzie presents herself as a mediator who has embraced the racial other since her childhood. She boasts that she was never scared of African Americans and could instantly smile at and touch them without hesitating: "The first time I ever saw an

African American, it was no big deal” (398). While the Black Chorus endorse her, the Korean Chorus vehemently protest: “Not! She screamed. She quaked. She squished down, down, down deep in that late-model Dodge. “Make the boogeyman go away,” you said. “Make the boogeyman, go away”” (398).

The neutrality of Suzie’s job as a reporter is marked by her emotional distance from her own ethnic identity. As an ethnic reporter, Suzie is dispatched to cover the boycott against a Korean grocery store in a predominantly black neighborhood, “the New Way Grocery Store, fresh from being hopelessly *lost* in the bowels of Brooklyn” (399). When the primary victim, a Haitian woman named Duvet, is nowhere to find, Suzie interviews both Koreans and African Americans involved in the incident and the boycott. Each group claims the harms done to them by the other party – both physical and psychological – to claim their right for justice. As a firm believer in the notion of truth that “emerges amidst collected facts,” Suzie sets out to investigate the boycott without being emotionally attached to both ethnic groups. As Suzie’s reportage continues, she faces demands from both black community and Korean community for sympathy. Her effort to keep impartiality amidst racially triangulated conflict between white-dominated mass media, African Americans, and Asian Americans gets frustrated as the play progresses. Her belief in impartiality is constantly compromised by the interests of various racial groups, and with the progression of events, Suzie’s positionality is challenged and questioned by each ethnic group.

Suzie’s status in the white-controlled broadcasting station is a metaphor for how an Asian female body is exploited in the system of representation. That the broadcasting station needs Suzie to present a non-threatening image of ethnic minority to the

mainstream viewers is a telling example of model minority being exploited under white supremacy. By letting Suzie cover the conflict between African Americans and Korean Americans, the station can claim objectivity and authenticity/authroity that Suzie's Asian face can vouchsafe. As Suzie says, "Face it, Mark. It's the only kind of story you ever send me out on. If it's got Asians, Latinos, blacks, Jews, women . . . and/or cute fluffy animals, I'm your man. Why is that, Mark?" (400)

Suzie's initial identification with whiteness – in the guise of objectivity – gradually turns into affective identifications with other racial groups including her own. Suzie initially shows little emotional affiliation with Asian Americans and rather resists any racial affiliation based on biological essentialism and dismisses it partiality. Her strong desire to sit in the anchor's seat, an emblem of white power that white-controlled mass media represents throughout the play, evinces how she subconsciously pledges alliance with whites. Suzie erases whatever ethnic markers she is associated with – for instance, by using forks, not chopsticks. She complains that her Asian American identity works against her because only ethnically specific assignments are assigned to her: "I hate covering minority issues" (416).

The play deploys moments of cross-racial impersonations in order to highlight how racial representations play off prevalent racial stereotypes, which have been constructed in the viewer's mind. If boundary-crossing performances in *Twilight* strive for cross-racial understanding, similar moments in *Kimchee and Chitlins* deliberately offer more problematic aspects of such dramatic strategies. They disassociate viewers from the re-enacted characters and scenes by creating a critical distance between them so that everyday perceptions of each racial group will be re-enacted and re-examined. For

Suzie, The Korean Chorus and the Black Chorus reconstruct what happened in the grocery store when Duvet allegedly did not pay for an apple and was assaulted. African American characters re-enact the event for Suzie from their own perspectives, playing the roles of Korean Americans – and vice versa. After each group presents their own version of the event, the other group challenges what have just been staged. In black version of what happened in the store, Nurse Ruth Betty plays two young Koreans, Soomi and Willie. While both Koreans speak relatively good English – Soomi being an American-born – black impersonation emphasizes their broken English. For instance, Betty-as-Soomi says, “Saaaay, dat woman. She rook bery suspic’us” (414). The same thing happens when Koreans reconstruct the incident from their own perspective. In their account of the day Matilda Duvet was in the store, two young black gang members appear and threatened Willie and Soomi, showing their gun: “Check this.” [Opens coat.] “Got myself a .38. Yeah, I’m not gonna go down, that’s for sure. I’m gonna make it to my sixteenth birthday. Yeah. Brothers killing brothers, that’s bullshit.” (419) The black gangs do not play any role in better understanding what really happened in the store; rather, they show Korean perceptions of African Americans in the community – a gun-carrying young blacks that are ready to explode. It also suggests that Koreans are always exposed to such violence.

Borrowing Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, Ju Yon Kim notes how racial prejudices between blacks and Koreans against each other have been accumulated over time through everyday behaviors and interactions such as exchanges of coins or greetings that come from cultural differences, which led to such full-blown interethnic conflicts as

the Los Angeles uprising and the Apple Boycott.⁴⁹ Kim reads Wong's play focusing on its re-presentations of such quotidian encounters constructed through sociohistorical forces as well as problematic and yet transformative possibilities of such reenactments. As she suggests, reenacting racial and cultural differences in mundane forms as a performance strategy for interracial understanding and reconciliation "grapple[s] with the dangers of such reenactments even as they demonstrate that traversing racial boundaries and mixing theatrical and journalistic conventions can expose the multiple, unremarked exchanges that trigger and exacerbate antagonistic encounter" (Kim 126). Kim draws upon how Brecht used the term "gest" to refer to actors' stylized re-enactment of characters' social behaviors and attitudes reveal the social relations and historical circumstances that shape them in real life. Brecht suggested that "physical attitude, tone of voice and facial expression are all determined by a social gest," which included one's own private actions as well as interactions between people. Therefore, gest works as "a technique for submitting emotions to the spectator's criticism" through which viewers inquire into the larger workings of a dominant ideology that influence characters' actions and choices (Brecht, *On Theatre* 104-5, 198-199).⁵⁰ In this light, cross-racial performances in the above scene de-naturalize Korean Americans' (or African Americans') social gest found in their daily interactions with African Americans (or Korean Americans). It highlights the gap between the performing body and its speech and gesture, allowing the viewer to "reconfigure the habits of perception and behaviour at the centre of the conflict" (Kim, "Difference" 534-535).

⁴⁹ See Kim, *The Racial Mundane*, 123-171

⁵⁰ On Brecht's notion of social gest, also see Pavis.

At the same time, this scene also offers a brief moment where a character and a performer merge and become inseparable: it allows an actor to inhabit the body of the other and also temporarily feel the threat and the danger of *living* that body. The enactment scene is initially intended to criticize each other and therefore speeches and gestures begin as hyperbolic and inauthentic. However, actors get so immersed in their roles and reach a point where they cannot get out of the given roles. Reverend Carter, who plays Grocer Mak, is wrapped up in emotions and almost hits Barber Brown who plays Matilda Duvet (415). This brief moment shows the penchant for identification that is ever present in cross-racial performances despite critical distance it aims to create. This scene of identification arouses the sense of fear and danger in the viewer, a theatrical illusion that has to be interrupted and broken (by Suzie), rather than a reconciliatory gesture. If we interpret a Korean grocer's anger towards Matilda as a social gest, as Brecht suggests, Reverend Carter's assumption of the gest makes him *become* Grocer Mak. This process of *becoming* complicates the *doing* of race and reveals the performative construction of racial identity, where the boundary between racial identity and racial performance is tenuous and fluid. I argue that this brief moment evinces anxieties about cross-racial identification as well as its possibilities when it would entail erasure of differences among disparate selves into the merging of a character and an actor.

Despite its problematic side, cross-racial performances in this scene ironically render Korean Americans' frustration and anger visible through the bodies of African Americans, the former having relatively limited access to media representation and linguistic ability to express themselves. Throughout the play, Wong contrasts African American excess and Korean American paucity in terms of the expression of racial

suffering. For instance, Reverend Carter's "outbursts and grandstanding" as "a publicity stunt" exude familiar images of leaders of Civil Rights movement that called for racial justice for black suffering. While his language works to move the public sympathy through mass media, Korean Americans speak with broken English and emotionless, aggressive attitude. Therefore, while the initially intended to blame Korean racial bigotry, black bodies ironically lend corporeal and emotional expressions to Korean suffering.

African American re-appropriation of Duvet's victimhood evinces the fundamentally political and strategic nature of ethnic alliances. Throughout the course of the events, Duvet is publicized as a martyr of racial hatred for African American boycotters including Reverend Carter, who emphasizes solidarity and fraternity between African immigrants and African Americans in the community: "Are we going to forget what those Korean bloodsuckers did to our sister Matilda Duvet? I ask you, what are we going to do about it?" (403) As Suzie traces Duvet's whereabouts, however, she finds no record of hospitalization and senses the hyperbolic nature of her victimhood.

Suzie's encounter with Matilda is staged through an actress's simultaneous impersonation of the two. While the overlap between Suzie and Matilda might operate in the mind of the viewer, this brief moment does not promise Suzie's alliance with Matilda nor the former's empathetic identification with the latter and vice versa. The fractured nature of identificatory performance is further evidenced by the content of the interview, where Matilda fails to provide what Suzie expected to hear, "the truth" she has been longing to find, which would solve all the problems. Matilda shows little interest in the Afro-Korean race war that she has caused and is more worried about her own people's problem, the political oppression in Haiti that ton-ton macoutes symbolically represent:

[As SUZIE.] But Matilda, if we could just go over the events at the New Way Store, I'm sure we could clear up a lot of misunderstanding. [As MATILDA.] "Miss, you understand nothing. You go on about your own business. I'll go about mine. So much fuss." (440)

Wong seems to suggest that coalitions based on skin color might reveal limitations when they do not make genuine efforts to seek mutual understanding on a deeper level. It cautions against the easy assumption of solidarity based on shared ethnicity when there are differing interests and positions within such strategically formed coalition as the Haitian-Afro solidarity.

Wong's play suggests other possibilities of interethnic affiliations by creating affective spaces of identification through individuals who share collective cultural memories on interpersonal levels. If such full-blown interethnic conflicts began from cultural misunderstandings regarding everyday gestures, the play suggests that reinscribing the site of cross-racial encounters with intimate gestures should reverse the course of larger political contentions. The friendship between Barber Brown and Grocer Mak illustrates such possibilities of intimate encounters. When Nurse Betty accuses Barber Brown of liking Koreans, he answers, "People are people." The scene immediately shifts to a flashback, when the two men are engaged in a friendly chat while Barber Brown cuts Mak's hair (410). Brown talks about the unfamiliar, unbearable smell of kimchee he had received from Mak, but Brown says that he found that kimchee goes

surprisingly well with chitlins: “it tasted good, AND it cleared up my sinuses. So, I got to thinking, I mean, you could sell the stuff in your store. In the food-to-go section or in your pharmaceutical department. Kimchee and Chitlins. The wonder food or the wonder drug” (411). This brief flashback shows the private and intimate spaces that these two men carve out of cultural interactions. As represented by Kimchee and Chitlins, the cultural coalition replaces political tensions in the public space. What is simultaneously emphasized is the feeling of loss both men suffer from (“That was the last time Makie was in my chair. Almost two months ago, I think it was. Now, I toss and turn. Can’t sleep at all since this thing started”). At another moment, Barber Brown confesses to the audience the soothing memories related to his Korean aunt Natalie, who married his GI uncle and came to the U.S.:

At first, the family said, “What is this Korean girl doing in Harlem?” My uncle said Aunt Natalie was his first real girlfriend. They met at the Fighting Tiger Bar in Pusan. Uncle Joe says it was love at first sight. I stopped crying. I cut her hair just like she told me. Her long black hairs tickled my bare feet as they fell to the floor. (423)

In turn, Mak tells us the colonial experience Koreans have made him understand African Americans’ slave history and the spirit of jazz music (438-9). I read these small, interpersonal encounters and affective scenes of identification as a site of collaboration that perform different political roles than other collective actions. These inserted

narratives create affective scenes of identification between audiences, Barber Brown, and the Korean woman mediated through Brown's affective memories, which seemingly disrupt the Brechtian mode of representation that prevails. Unlike previous scenes where racial differences are embodied with exaggerated racial features, these moments in the play suggest the transformative potentials of everyday encounters (food, movies, small pleasures) and friends and kinship that can gradually elicit changes in our perceptions of racial/cultural otherness.

Suzie's transformed sense of belonging, which follows the realization that despite the neutral position she tried to uphold, she is not free from her lived experience as Asian American and the pressing demand that she acknowledge the reality. Suzie accidentally witnesses and manages to record the scene of a hate crime caused by the Afro-Korean conflict, where a group of African American boys beat a Vietnamese boy (446). The scene shows that the assaulters' motif originates from their antagonism against Korean Americans ("Filthy Korean dog bastard....Go back to Korea"), which affects people who share Asian American looks. The act of witnessing this scene, where one is victimized due to one's racial identity, creates visceral effect for Suzie and newly awakens her lost connection to Asian American-ness. After showing the recording to Mark, who had criticized Suzie's feigned neutrality ("I think you have consistently bent over backwards to accommodate the African American, nigger-loving point of view. What color do you think you are, anyway?" 446), Suzie confesses to him how this incident reminded her of her own experience of dreading to be associated with a Taiwanese girl with a thick accent (and yet being mistake for her by a substitute teacher), which memory of dis-identification affected her present alienation from Asian American suffering:

That was the feeling I had that day. Standing there, watching those boys and that kid. I wasn't hating them. No, no . . . I was too busy, too preoccupied with disassociating myself from that squirming, weak, yellow boy on the ground. Coolly, I hid behind my profession, thoroughly brainwashed by my complete-and-utter certainty that I could not and would not be hurt . . . because I was NOT like that kid. Those black boys with their baseball bat shattered my beautiful delusion once and forever. For if I wasn't yellow, then what color did I think I was? (448)

Since Suzie does not at first “feel” Asian American, the resemblance of suffering between the Vietnamese man’s suffering and her own provokes her to identify with Asian Americans. She realizes that her Asian physique renders her as vulnerable as other Asians – Koreans, Vietnamese, and Taiwanese. At this moment, Chorus chime in, chanting “The boogeymen is here. Inside you. Inside me. The boogeyman takes little girls and little boys. Make the boogeyman go away” (448). Throughout the play, she is haunted by her childhood memories of the boogeyman, a figure that evokes a sense of guilt and fear (399). The symbolism becomes clear when Suzie confronts a scene that evokes the memory of her own racial victimization, even in a mild form.

Both *Twilight* and *Kimchee and Chitlins* share the sense of impasse as well as the desire for reconciliation. At the same time, the imagined affinities between Asian American and African American in these two plays illustrate the enduring power of racial suffering as a potent rhetoric. Despite its precarious and unstable nature, the common,

universal language of shared suffering seems to bind such disparate racial histories and cultures as we see in Asian American and African American. These plays further illustrate how affective approaches to interracial relationships have evolved into more complex discussions in so-called “post-racial” and transnational settings, when such racial binaries as black and white or white and Asian American lost validity. Despite liminal spaces for transformation and optimism that are present in the two plays, it might suggest lingering skepticism about the collective move towards post-raciality.

Chapter 4. At Home with Strangers: Post-racial Kinship in *Satellites* and *How to Be a Korean Woman*

In July of 2015, I attended an experimental piece by a Minnesota-based punk music artist Mayda. The work-in-progress, *DeMayda 'd*, juxtaposed the singer's songs and her personal stories of growing up as an adoptee in a white-dominant community and family.⁵¹ Her recollections of the past were characterized by emotionally jarring comments and music: her accounts seemed disconnected and charged with dark humor that puzzled some audiences to laugh with the performer. Far from presenting a narrative that seeks the audiences' understanding, it seemed to give such discomfort to the audiences, who might have come for entertainment (which 'music' in the advertisement has promised) or for waves of emotions (which an adoptee's sentimental journey would provide), even to the point that her show seems to throw such expectations back at their faces. After the performance, a middle-aged, white male audience sitting next to me, who was very excited before the show, uttered "it was an interesting experience" with unsure, if not baffled, look on his face. Meanwhile, an acquaintance of mine, who grew up as an adoptee, found the show as "so honest."

The rawness of the show, the range of unfiltered emotions that it staged regardless of the audiences' active emotional participation, made me think about this interesting contradiction. It is not surprising that sharing the same lived experience leads one to become a more sympathetic viewer. I had seen other plays that deal with transracial

⁵¹ Debates exist regarding the issue of what are political correct/appropriate terms to refer to Koreans adopted overseas. In this chapter, my decisions to use adoptee and birth mother are in accordance with performers' use of the terms. My usage is also in agreement with Kim Park Nelson, who acknowledges these terms as common parlance within the adoption communities while avoiding any political implications against any activist group.

adoption, but I couldn't recall moments when I noticed such a gap in audiences' responses. Obviously, this particular show did not provide something that had a unifying effect on the audiences, which some other plays did – successfully.

If the nature of an adoptee's emotional life is not so legible to the audiences such as the person sitting next to me, how can we envision intimacy in the namely post-racial era, where transnationality and multiracilaity mark familial formation? In the previous chapters, my discussion of plays suggested that empathic imagination tends to work between and over differences based on racial identity and how the precarious nature of cross-racial empathy both reinforces and contests such racial boundaries and the notion of sameness/universality. If empathy works efficaciously only when certain level of similarities are assumed, race-based or gender-based group identity provides a vouchsafed and firm grounds for the feelings of relatedness. For instance, Houston's female characters work on the assumption that they have shared feelings of motherly love; Smith's Korean performance appeals to the audiences because it evokes the history of racial oppression shared by racial minorities.

The plays discussed in this chapter complicate the ways in which we think about common grounds on which one imagines empathic identification such as a sense of belonging based on 'kinship' grounded in shared biological connection such as shared race/ethnicity and birth family. Diana Son's *Satellites* and Sun Mee Chomet's *How to Be a Korean Woman* navigate a wide spectrum of interracial families and communities such as an interracial couple between a Korean American and an African American man adopted into a white family and an adult Korean adoptee reunited with her female relatives. I argue that these plays contest the prevalent way in which we approach

empathic feelings around kinship and family and question the fundamental empathic bond between human beings. Beyond biological connections, each play highlights the cultural dimensions of kinship around which intimacy operates. While wrestling with shifting notions of race and nation that are reproduced and contested in normative familial relations, both challenge our racial perceptions and attachments fed by assumptions and fantasies around family as the most intimate institution. Through the process of demystification and questioning of multiple forms of kinship that operates on affective ties and promises akin to a family (such as imagined communities of race and nation), these plays ultimately ask us: What makes us feel aligned with each other when we do not share the skin color and racial and national belonging?

If grounds upon which any empathic community across race stands are always precarious, as I have argued so far, what possibilities can a family, the most fundamental human relations based on unquestioned expectations for intimacy and emotional reciprocity, offer to resolve skepticism? I am concerned with what differing modes of human relations these emotions create in the performance space, which might be similar to or different from those as imagined by the middlebrow optimists. What alternative meanings of kinship do these plays grapple with, in a context of cultural narratives around affective dimensions of a community that is becoming ever so diverse and transnational?

Rethinking Kinship in the Post-Racial Era

In her book *Cold War Orientalism*, Christina Klein examines the sentimental aesthetic that pervaded the American cultural imagination as influenced by U.S. foreign policy in the Pacific Asia during the 1950s and 1960s. Popular writers and intellectuals imagined affiliation between Americans and Asians as demonstrated in affective exchanges between American audiences and fictionalized Asian characters. American culture also presented a sentimental vision of the family that supported the image of America through languages of maternal love and global connection. By adopting Asian children on both real and metaphorical planes, Americans were to participate in America's efforts bring all the nations together.

Such a happy narrative has been challenged in literatures on adoption that have proliferated in recent years as adoptees of the earlier generation came of age and began to explore and express various aspects of their identity struggles and lived experiences. For example, the psychic life of a transracial adoptee portrayed in such works as Deann Borshay Liem's documentary *First Person Plural* (2000) and Jane Jeong Trenka's memoir *A Language of Blood* (2003) is far from that of a happy and content child seamlessly merged into an American familial system. They disrupt the narrative of happiness by highlighting the affective displacement of the adult adoptee. These works shed a new light on the prevalent narrative of the birth of a global, multiracial family based on imagined emotional ties, a story that has been retold from the perspective of parents imagined as benevolent. The emotional boundaries of a family are primarily defined by love and intimacy and demand one to feel that way. By suggesting that familial intimacy is 'natural,' this narrative glosses over the fact that this particular kind of kinship is a racialized one.

The implicit expectations/demands for positive and happy affects in these plays are akin to the emotional structure of a multiracial family that the presence of an adoptee completes: the bond between adoptee characters/performers and mostly white, liberal audiences resembles that of kinship. On one level, these plays question and consolidate the fictive kinship in a form of multiracial family. David Eng suggests that the subject formation of an adoptee through racial melancholia, through which the hetero-normative values of a white liberal familial structure is consolidated. Unlike more visible forms of affective labor performed by the third world women such as sexual labor and care work in forms of domestic labor, Eng suggests, transnational adoptees' almost pathological emotional struggles prove their affective labor that serves the purpose of maintaining the façade of a heteronormative family.⁵²

Mark Jerng observes how the heightened visibility of transracial adoptees in recent decades has unduly been perceived as a token of subverting “the ideology of consanguinity and the essentialisms of biology and race, and as the promise of a new social order, one that is multiracial, integrated, and based on affiliation” (xxxvi). This discourse idealizes the unities of family, race, and nation, which implicitly neutralizes the personhood of an adoptee through the logic of color-blindness (219). He suggests that we can read transracial adoption stories “for the ways in which they manifest the practices of making family in ways that at times reinstitute norms and at other times deidealize the unities of family, race, and nation that undergird them.” (219)

I use these discourses to explore the disillusionment about popular sentiments constructed around family *and* express unwavering optimism about participating in an

⁵² See Eng, *Feelings of Kinship*; “Roundtable: Third World Women”

intimate community akin to a family. According to Michael Warner, counterpublic presents a possibility of imagining stranger sociability that is distinguished from a community or group. As he suggests, “Like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers” (120-121). In the sense that it is a term laden with intimate affect but fundamentally targeted at strangers, one might think about how counterpublic might be imagined in the world marked by postraciality and transnationality. The heterogeneous nature of the audience group for adoptee performances reaffirms this global counterpublic, a cultural space theater space extends through affective imagination. For instance, Eleana Kim suggests:

The counterpublic framework helps me to highlight the fact that the adoptee social imaginary exists in diacritical relation to dominant publics... or an increasingly transnational public sphere... the adoptee counterpublic also exists within a broader field of transnational adoption, ... It is “counter” in that it has remapped the boundary between public and private by brining intimate narratives and expressions of adoptee subjectivity into multiple national transnational public spheres, with different effects in different locations. (*Adopted Territory* 14-15)

Chomet’s play situates the figure of an adoptee in relation to other characters and audiences and implicates them (and us) in the formation and reproduction of an emotional structure of an imagined kinship. I argue that the performer-audience

relationship redefines the boundaries of kinship and alternative sense of belonging. In other words, the failure in one affective community leads to the emergence of another affective community. This new idea of kinship is significant as it recognizes and renders visible the emotional lives of those who are objectified and circulated as symbols of happiness and optimism. Instead of institutionalized forms of intimacy in the privatized domains, they suggest the possibility for a new mode of intimacy and kinship based on one's awareness of limitations of intimacy, ironically speaking. They create a sense of intimate community akin to a kin that shares familial feelings of solidarity in the process of producing and spectating a production. I suggest that even when faced with the rejection and denial of one's affective loss, one senses unrelenting yearning for and optimism about recognition and *approval* of displaced affects by audiences, who are strangers that are capable of sharing such affects. On the one hand, they present the affective alienation of transnational adoptees, whose "losses remain unaffirmed and unacknowledged by those closest to her, by her own family, by those most affectively immediate to her" (Eng, *Kinship* 121). On the other hand, these stories maintain the hope that such alienation and the rupture in the affective surface of their stories may be sutured in the formation of a newly empathic bond between live performers and audiences.

Reconnecting Empathically to the Community in Diana Son's *Satellites*

Diana Son's 2006 play *Satellites* grapples with the complicated terrain of interracial solidarity based on prevalent assumptions about how we identify or disidentify as we navigate differing racial and cultural positions. Set in some time in the twenty-first

century, *Satellites* centers on an interracial couple that moves into Brooklyn. Nina is a Korean American woman raised by an assimilationist mother, and Miles, her husband, is an African American adopted and raised in a white family. At a glance, this initial set up of the play gives out an image of a happy, multiracial family: a young interracial couple with their new born baby who has “chocolate skin, almond eyes” that represent “the best of both of us” as Nina describes. Brooklyn in transition from a predominantly black neighborhood to a place teeming with racial and class diversity. This setting of the play sends out a lot of post-racial signals – a racially integrated family and neighborhood – and depicts an ideal vision for American diversity. The gentrification of the place seemingly suggests the image of post-racial society where differences peacefully co-exist, or fuse into something more perfect as Hannah’s perfect blend of the best from Nina and Miles represents.

However, the vision of a harmonious community based on racial multiplicity Son suggests is more complicated than it looks. The play demystifies the expectations about building a community based on shared racial/cultural identities, expectations that are shown in characters’ initial desire to imagine an emotional tie with other people of the same skin color. Son’s play reveals that identification works in complicated and multidirectional ways since it often involves false ideals and expectations about sameness. I read this play as an inquiry into the challenges as well as possibilities of forming a sense of community among individuals of differing racial and cultural backgrounds. What does it mean to have a shared history? What happens when people share the same biological race but do not share the same history of racial struggle?

In Son's play, one detects the mutual recognition of, or expectations for, racial belonging that characters imagine affinities as African American (Miles and Reggie) or Korean American (Nina and Mrs. Chae). At the same time, it also dawns on us that such coalition is not enough to envision a future. This ambivalence is further complicated as Son exposes to us how our perceptions are too saturated with racial assumptions/feelings to see past racial differences embodied on stage. If the ideology of colorblindness renders the markers of race and ethnicity invisible in private realms such as family and friends, *Satellites* debunks the myth of colorblindness cast bodily differences into relief, redefined, and newly perceived; it highlights our race-inflected perception of certain bodies that we would refuse to read as racialized.

The celebration of cultural and racial hybridity, encapsulated in Hannah's multiracial features that combine "the best of" races, is in fact a product of postmodern, post-identity consumerist culture that a transnational capitalist economy has created (Santa Ana 19). Jeffrey Santa Ana criticizes how this culture commercializes ethnic images for global consumption, a process that involves "the elision of U.S. race relations and the erasure of material forces and histories that are intrinsic to shaping domestic race relations" (20). One such example is the ubiquitous images of computer-generated mixed-race persons that are presented as the ideal future of post-racial America. The process of ethnic commodification also involves commodification, or sanitization, of ethnic feelings, where ethnic minorities are expected to evoke desirable, expendable feelings to gratify popular consumer-oriented demands. Santa Ana argues that this process of affective assimilation erases and suppresses "a plurality of historically mediated feelings, including critical emotions that articulate resistance to consumer

capitalism” (20). Ethnic minorities have to negotiate their “affect-identity” by mediating two opposing affective demands – one to conform to the above-mentioned consumerist feelings, and the other to form empathic bonds with community that have historically been central to ethnic identity formations (22).

Through overblown racial signifiers, *Satellites* shows how racial feelings shape how we act around people, which range from prescribed racial perception based on racial stereotypes and expectations for intimacy based on familial and ethnic bonding. As the multiracial family and the gentrified neighborhood of Brooklyn replicates the image of post-ethnic nation, the play is a critique of the celebratory tenor of prevalent discourses around postraciality, or multiraciality. Son seems to emphasize restoring the collective memories of history steeped in anti-racist struggles, which have been elided in the process of rebuilding the image of U.S. as a nation that has overcome race issues. The play raises these questions: on what grounds can we possibly imagine new forms of community while acknowledging the impasse of “post-race”? The play strives for interethnic coalition that acknowledges differing positionalities within such as race, nationality, and class. The play asks: when it seems that ties to the past have lost their validity and the present is filled with uncertainties and anxieties, how can we envision new ways to feel connected and form a community? To this question, *Satellites* illustrates that empathy serves as an affective strategy to recover and reclaim one’s ethnic identity, which should be constructed in relation to one’s collective identity, not in the ahistorical space of postmodernity.

Underlying the play is a global economy in which individuals are already immersed: throughout the play, money controls individuals’ choices and pervades every

aspect of human relationships, including flows of transnational labor and currency in multifarious forms. For instance, Eric, Mile's white adoptive brother, has just come back from his three-month trip to "a tropical Asian paradise" (Son 17). He establishes himself as an international entrepreneur, who "sold hot dog carts to street vendors in Kuala Lumpur" and accumulated a capital to start his business in the US. This American male labor in Asia is counterbalanced with Mrs. Chae's Asian female labor in America. While Eric's entrepreneurship is characterized by reproduction and circulation of material products, an Asian female immigrant's labor takes on different exchange values and meanings. The latter corresponds to affective demands of Nina as a mother and a model minority, which involves emotional investment in the forms of maternal care and cultural education by teaching Korean language to Hannah and cooking authentic Korean food. Mrs. Chae's labor illustrates how affect in ideal forms of care and love is commodified and circulated as a commodity for transnational consumption.⁵³ In this sense, Mrs. Chae befits the description of "the model employee for a global economy of service-sector labor" whose "smile both insinuates and advertises that she's someone who'd be happy with her work... servile and efficient." (Santa Ana 27)

As the play progresses, however, the boundary between business transactions and affective relationships becomes blurred. The employer-employee relationship between Nina and Mrs. Chae and that between Miles and Reggie take on the dynamic between mother and daughter and that between brothers, respectively. The play does not endorse these possibilities of affective relations as entirely transformative or revolutionary but shows the limits and dangers of such romantic expectations. Nevertheless, blurred

⁵³ For detailed discussion on the management and commodification of affect in the age of global capitalist economy, see Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

boundaries suggest the possibilities of resisting the capitalist economy that fragmentizes and disconnects people from their origin and the empathic bonds.

If Nina and Miles exhibit the disenfranchisement of individual racial minorities from their collective racial and cultural identities in the postmodern society, such disconnection affects how this couple imagines their intimacy to each other and the web of diverse race relationships that surrounds them. As model minorities, they are expected to successfully manage feelings of fragmented identity and detachment from community. As a Columbia graduate and overachiever, Nina struggles to successfully navigate the affective demands on a model minority – as an ideal mother who is always there for her baby, a wife who gratifies her husband’s sexual drive, and a competent employee and colleague.⁵⁴ These different demands lead her to a state of anxiety in which her failure to manage feelings threatens a nervous breakdown.

From the outset, one can sense the couple’s emotional anxieties underlying a cheerful façade of multiraciality, including Nina’s increasing frustration with the house and the people around her and Miles’ nervousness about his apathy towards his own daughter. In the same scene where the couple extols their daughter’s face as a fruit of their blissful interracial union, we see them mildly alarmed by potential failures of successful parenting: Miles shows more hesitance than eagerness to tend Hannah; Nina is engrossed with how to create perfect material and cultural environments in which to raise Hannah. The opening scene emanates optimism tinged with possible catastrophe, as the eerie line from a lullaby Nina sings to her daughter: “The baby falls, Miles, the baby falls and the cradle falls on top of it. What kind of lullaby is that?” (Son 9)

⁵⁴ Ibid.

The way in which Miles' relationship to Reggie evolves throughout the play embodies how the former is reintegrated into the material history of racialization and becomes capable of reclaiming a collective history he can partake. Adopted into a white family, Miles outperforms Eric, his white brother, and meets his adoptive parents' expectation. If Nina is an Asian version of model minority, Miles is the black equivalent. Nina's discontent with Miles comes not only from his being jobless, but more from the lack of emotional support and trust that he shows. Miles' trouble with intimacy is illustrated in his hesitation to reach out to his own baby, which evinces his fear of not being loved in return (7-8).

Miles' initial reaction to Reggie, an African American timer in the neighborhood, is a poignant example that evinces Miles' whitewashed racial perception while interrogating audiences' own. Reggie is born and raised in Brooklyn and has seen all the changes that the neighborhood has gone through, how it has been transformed – 'gentrified' – by various 'other' groups than African Americans who Reggie considers originally 'owned' the space: he says, "We got all kinds of people up in here now, building new condos and renovatin' these old brownstones ... You see that house over there? Two homosexuals bought that, fixed it up to historical accuracy, and all that" (14). That he immediately welcomes Miles as a "bro" shows his assumption of solidarity based on the shared skin color. In contrast, Miles's distrust of Reggie illustrates the violence of management of affect for African American otherness through whitewashing and effacing of his difference (Eng 117). While Miles displays uncomfortable reaction to such intimate terms of address, Reggie's immediate attachment to Miles obviously shows

his presumed solidarity with Miles as colored men. He keeps repeating, “I’m glad you came to the neighborhood, man” (Son 15).

While his imagined tie with Miles comes from the mark of race that they share, Reggie’s notion of blackness is not just a matter of skin color but rooted in the history of collective racial struggle, a historical space that the two men actually do not co-inhabit. One can sense this through Reggie’s sentimental view of the brownstone that Miles and Nina bought and the specific racial memories associated with it. While the house has always been someone else’s property, Reggie claims his place in the building because he witnessed and inhabited the history, of which the house was a crucial part. He recalls:

You know, I been in your house before. Yeah, I been in here before. Had some good times up in here, man. The night of the blackout, 1977, city was coal-black. People were running around crazy, smashing store windows, grabbing up anything they could get – bananas, turntables, diapers ... Me and my friends climbed through that window, lay down on our backs, and looked straight up, man, saw stars we never get to see – the constellations. Aquila the eagle; Cygnus the swan; Hercules the warrior – he took on the labors, man. He brought down the lion, the hydra, Cerberus, himself. After the riots is when the monsters took over this neighborhood – drug dealers, gangs, robbers. Hercules should’ve stuck around, we coulda used him. But when the power came back on, all the stars fade away. (22)

Reggie is referring to the 1977 New York City blackout, a night that led to unprecedented social unrest and chaos throughout the city, when thousands of stores were broken into and more than three thousand people were arrested over night. While this event has stigmatized the City of New York with the image of urban crisis and racial disparities, Reggie's nostalgic accounts of the night seem to celebrate the vigor of the night. The metaphors of stars and mythical figures such as Hercules reconstruct the neighborhood of that particular night as a center of the universe. Reggie points out how this place that used to be something akin to Olympus, a glorious place filled with able men, has fallen into the den of 'monsters' in the aftermaths of the blackout. It is in this historical context that we might read Reggie's affinity with Miles as a gesture to rebuild the community by "taking the labors" as Hercules did.

Nina's emotional attachment to Mrs. Chae and her cultural tie to Korean-ness resonates with a similar desire to reconnect to the past. Nina initially hires Mrs. Chae believing that a Korean nanny will infuse her daughter with authentic Korean culture, which he herself was deprived of. As the play progresses, we see that it is Nina who wants to compensate the lack of Korean motherhood. Nina's eagerness to hand down the Korean language to her daughter and her attachment to Mrs. Chae evinces her desire to recover a sense of belonging that her upbringing did not provide her with. According to Nina, her mother never allowed her to eat Korean food or speak Korean language. Such perfect assimilationist upbringing, coupled with absence of linguistic and cultural exposure to her origin and community, leaves Nina with desire to reconnect to a larger cultural history of which she feels a part.

The bond between Nina and Mrs. Chae is possible because of the resemblance of the emotional stakes each puts in this relationship. Mrs. Chae reciprocates such need and desire by performing motherly roles as she feeds Nina like a baby or talks to her in Korean. As a surrogate mother, Mrs. Chae takes care of Nina physically and emotionally. As we learn later, Mrs. Chae's own daughter did not appreciate Mrs. Chae's motherly care and love. The reciprocity of emotions between Nina and Mrs. Chae and their expectations about each other illustrates the emotional labor performed by transnational subjects such as Mrs. Chae. Here, Mrs. Chae's maternal affection falls into the category of desirable, expendable feelings for global consumers like Nina who is culturally uprooted. As an ideal employee, Mrs. Chae has to mask such undesirable affects as racism or her own lack of familial intimacy.

Nina's relationship to Mrs. Chae underscores the differing material realities that define generational and other differences within Asian American communities. The play reveals the differing material and historical structures of racist exploitation beneath the common ethnic identifier such as "Korean American." Nina – and the viewers, too, in this regard – comes to an understanding that there are material realities that determine how Asian immigrants such as Mrs. Chae might think differently from a young second-generation Asian American (49-50). Having more limited linguistic and cultural access to American mainstream, Mrs. Chae is subject to a different form of ethnic labor from that of her own daughter and Nina. As an earlier generation of immigrants, she had to endure more severe racial discrimination. While Miles is more perceptible to such material gap and defends Mrs. Chae's politically incorrect gesture towards Hannah's biraciality, Nina interprets it as racist remarks (50). At a glance, Nina's attachment to Mrs. Chae

resembles an adoptee's unconscious desire to repair her connection to Korea – both as a mother and motherland – that has been damaged. If racial melancholia is a psychic condition characterized by “registers of loss and depression attendant to the conflicts and struggles associated with immigration, assimilation, and racialization for Asian Americans” as Eng describes, one can liken Nina's longing for an empathic community based on ethnic and cultural commonalities to an adoptee's attempt to work through her racial melancholia (115). However, the realization that there is an insurmountable gap between the two women's perception of the racial reality in the U.S. shows us otherwise. Nina's gradual alienation from Mrs. Chae illustrates how racial feelings in this play are intricately triangulated, which inevitably come into contact and conflict. We can read the subsequent disenchantment of her romanticized vision of such a kinship as a process of mourning over her imagined mother/land (Eng 139).

The play thus highlights the viewers' own racial perception, as a way to unpack ways in which we perceive race on empirical and phenomenological planes. By doing so, it challenges our various assumptions of colorblindness as a racial ideology that upholds the advent of post racial era. As Omi and Winant suggested, colorblindness has become a hegemonic concept in the 21st century US as the racial common sense. While overt forms of racial discrimination are a thing of the past – an indication of the nation's successful transition to a “post-racial” society – any hints of race consciousness are tainted by racism from a colorblind perspective (257). However, the on-going presence of racism and racial inequality betokens the impossibility of accepting colorblindness as an effective anti-racist practice.

In this context, the play's over-the-top multiraciality provokes viewers' own racial consciousness and questions if we are indeed capable of colorblindness when we cannot but notice race. On the day Mrs. Chae is interviewed for the position of nanny, Miles proposes to take a picture of her and Nina with the baby:

Miles: (Nina stands next to Mrs. Chae, not quite committed. Mrs. Chae holds Hannah closer and smiles into the camera.)

That's great. (checking picture on camera.)

You guys look great together! (Nina opens the door to let Mrs. Chae out, sees Reggie.) (21)

Immediately after this dialogue, Reggie comes in on stage and stands with Miles. This scene visually evokes the image of two sets of people that are not biologically related and yet evoke the sense of resemblance and connection; it further makes us become aware of the prevalent view we ourselves might have in the same situation. By suggesting that one cannot but perceive each body as raced when embodied differences are put into specific contexts, such moments as this questions if viewers are entirely free from the same desire to make associations among certain bodies, just like Reggie or Nina.

The play highlights the viewers' persisting racial perception by revealing our as well as characters' penchant for assuming a sense of belonging, or affinity, based on shared racial markers by visually aligning physical resemblances and evoking the sense

of sameness. It questions if recognition of shared racial/ethnic markers would simply be dismissed as mere biological essentialism when as we still hold onto the expectations for race-based affinity, since these expectations bind people together even when their racial conceptions are so differently constructed. As the shattering sound of a broken window at the end of the play suggests, the play suggests that we should perhaps deconstruct an old frame to think about race relations and try to re-inscribe the space haunted by the past with something new. Only in that way, we can find a way to communicate with the world outside that is rapidly changing and mend the shattered vision that was once shared. The mending of the window at the end of the play might signal the formation of such newly imagined intimate spaces that we might occupy against the changing demands of a racial landscape.

Son does not offer a concrete answer to this question: it is not certain how the broken window will be repaired – by Reggie, by Miles *and* Reggie, or by neither of them. However, the play ends on a hopeful note – through the protagonists’ emotional recovery to reach out to the family and the community. Miles’ initial inability to partake in this collective memory asks us if such attempt to restore the lost sense of community based on racial history is an outdated notion in a society that has presumably passed race. If so, Miles’ gravitation towards Reggie shows how the lost connection between ethnic individuals and a larger history particular to that ethnicity might be restored so that we could envision a new version of community-based coalition. Furthermore, his recuperation of empathic ability for Hannah is emblematic of his recovery of collective racial consciousness.

A Sentimental Journey with Aunties: Translating Empathy in Chomet's *How to Be a Korean Woman*

In 2012, a Twin Cities-based performer Sun Mee Chomet staged a one-woman show titled *How to Be a Korean Woman*. Originally performed as a collaboration piece with Katie Leo, *Memoirs in performance: the Origin(s) Project*, Chomet's show is based on her own personal narrative of searching for her Korean birthmother and reuniting with her female relatives in Korea. As a solo performance, she presented a series of impersonations of Korean women she encountered and interacted with in Korea, mostly her blood relatives. Chomet mixed an essentially moving narrative of a reunion story with comic reliefs such as portrayals of cultural idiosyncrasies. The show was an immediate success, drawing diverse groups of audience that vary from Korean adoptees to middle-aged or older, white Mid-westerners, a lot of whom might be parents, relatives, or friends of adoptees. A year later, Chomet's piece was remounted at the Guthrie, a regional theater whose subscribers are predominantly white, middle-class audience and whose repertoire have until recently featured mainly plays by European and American men. This fact further illustrates how its potential audience is imagined as not limited to Asian American audiences.

To great extent, this show is defined by a kind of overtly sentimental excess, centered around Chomet's dramatic reunion with her birth mother. The play thus anticipates audiences who expect to see their feelings and desires for intimate community validated. Though the plot features an unhappy adoptee in search of love and familial intimacy who ultimately fails in her quest, , it also reassures audiences by a certain kind of involvement in both character's and performer's affective experiences, suggesting that

they serve as particular witnesses of this particular emotional roller-coaster and thus are linked to her emotionally. One of the central themes in Chomet's play is what is referred to as 'body memory,' or blood memory, which facilitates one's identification with a person, or a culture, based seeming physical similarities. Instead of a wholesale rejection of romanticized notions around body memory, Chomet's play boldly delves into the ambiguities, ambivalence, and anxieties of such 'natural' categories of belonging and demands for intimate feelings of kinship. In particular, due to the memoir quality of *How to Be a Korean Woman*, a more private relationship may be forged between performer and audience who would share stories of most intimate nature. I propose that the spectatorship in this kind of performance allows us to imagine the viewing public in terms of a kind of kinship even while the content of the play is about the disillusionment about kinship, biological and adoptive. In this case, kinship is a more expansive frame with ambiguous boundaries and hails the empathetic listeners in the audience into the space of performance.

The show retells the familiar stories of transnational adoptees' homecoming, a "familiar narrative formula of negotiating cultural identity emphasizes the struggle to reconcile two or more cultures, nationalities, or races; it foregrounds the dynamics of cultural belonging and national identification as occurring between two discrete categories of identity" (Jerng xxxvii). With its promises of communal feeling that theatrical experiences generate between adoptee figures (characters, authors, and performers) and white liberal audiences, this stage-audience relationship might be read as a cultural equivalent to a multiracial family formed through transnational adoption. Through sympathy for the suffering of an adoptee figure and contentment about her

homecoming, the play's emotional work gratifies the white liberal viewers' empathetic desires as a family, race, and nation who embraced an adoptee as a kin. The show deftly veers away from arousing discomfort or a sense of betrayal on the part of audience members.

The success indicates that it can cater to mainstream audiences precisely because of the ambivalent positioning of Korean adoptee's ethnic body whose identification/allegiance is ever tentative. Chomet's performance complicates her allegiance, not fully committing to either the assumed identity of audience or that of characters she impersonates. Throughout the play, the adoptee figure on stage seeks to form affective communities on two levels: an affective community of a performer and audiences and an affective community of Korean women and American audiences. She strives to reclaim her inseparable connection and kinship to her country of origin and biological family. The show retains and enhances the emotional effects by dramatizing her encounter with blood relatives – her grandmother and aunts – and the past events that led to her abandonment as a child. At the same time, such melodramatic elements keep the audience engaged and connected with the performer even when she enacts her allegiance with the imagined cultural/racial other. This also facilitates audiences' own affiliation with the Korean women they have never met. In this regard, the implied audience here reproduces a similar kind of imagined trans-Pacific affiliation that Christina Klein has suggested.

I suggest that a Korean adoptee's attempt to re-connect to her mother/land underscores possible ways in which empathy is mis/translated in the process of forming and navigating affective relations in the transnational context. Chomet's imagined

intimacy with biological relatives is largely premised on her expectations based on body/blood memory. These expectations, however, are constantly met with disappointments that derive from misinterpretations on the adoptee's part. While bodily intimacy seems to affirm the ultimate tie between mother and daughter that an adoptee could yearn for, Chomet constantly poses a question at her own mystification of her body/blood memory – if it will transcend the cultural differences between an adoptee and her motherland, mother tongue, and mother figures. The slippage in affective translation resembles and reproduces what Eng describes as “racial melancholia,” which “registers of loss and depression attendant to the conflicts and struggles associated with immigration, assimilation, and racialization for Asian Americans,” which the figure of a transnational/transracial adoptee most prominently illustrates (*Kinship* 115). In this sense, one could read Chomet's narrative of homecoming and reunion as her failed attempts to uncover/recover the attachments an adoptee has left behind and recuperate her racial melancholia.

While an adoptee negotiates differing levels of empathic identification, neither of them fulfills her yearning for a community where she is “unconditionally” loved. Ultimately, the affective alienation she feels in this community leads her to seek understanding from her adoptive community and culture, with which she shares the language of intimacy. The performer's body remains the only way for Chomet to mourn the affective loss and approximate the affect of her female relatives. She reproduces her intimacy through bodily interaction with Korean women in different places throughout the show, unaccompanied with any verbal explanation. In this regard, her body serves as a potential site “that generates possibilities for activating alternative empathies – forms of

emotional resonance and relationality that might refigure neocolonial and neoliberal logics to create new modes of transnational solidarity” (Pedwell 4).

Chomet narrates two visits she made to Korea find her birth parents. This narrative is constructed around a series of her impersonation of Korean women she encountered in those trips including her female in-laws (her mother, grandmother, and two aunts) and social workers at such institutions as Holt, GOAL, and KBS, who helped her search for a birth family. Chomet’s impersonation of Korean women throughout *How to Be a Korean Woman* shifts from a series of hyperbolic performances of ethnic stereotypes to more realistic, more ‘authentic’ reenactment of the same women characters. They are initially characterized by extreme submissiveness, eagerness to please the others, and obsession with physical beauty. For instance, while Ms. Seol at Holt is portrayed as a rude, unhelpful, and pretentious bureaucrat, Ji Yeong at GOAL is presented as an understanding, ever-smiling, and almost submissive woman who is willing to help. Possessing no knowledge about Korean women and their culture, audience can still sense that Chomet’s representation is at times hyperbolic and caricatured.

As her narrative progresses, however, exaggerated portrayal of Korean women gradually diminish and are replaced with more serious portrayals of women, especially her blood relatives, which corresponds to her (and implied audiences’) increasing affective bond with the women. On one level, it indicates Chomet’s increased insider knowledge and deeper understanding of her mother’s and female relatives multidimensional life stories – what sociocultural forces have shaped their femininity. At this point, she possesses both views to realize how Korean women strive for the Korean society’s approval of their legitimacy as citizen and national subject, which process is

through attaining, practicing, and *performing* specifically gendered cultural markers. Chomet comically presents these efforts made by Korean women – from meticulous care of their skin and outward appearance to diligently conforming to the Korean society’s standard of women’s success such as marriage at certain age. On another level, Chomet makes the unknown Korean women and their family histories closer and emotionally relatable to American audiences. Audience’s initial excitement to see an emotional reunion of an adoptee spiced up with comical sketches of a different culture gradually moves on to more serious, empathetic investments in individual women’s stories which Chomet faithfully delivers. This shift in the audience’s racial perception takes place as Chomet’s emotional attachment, as well as the audience’s own, to her female relatives grows.

What complicates and also facilitates this two-fold task for the performer is the racial ambiguity that seems to mark a Korean adoptee’s body on stage. While Chomet’s Asian body renders Korean women ever so credible and legible to American audiences through her cultural and linguistic translation, her speech patterns and bodily gestures are unmistakably targeted at American audiences. Chomet’s performance of Korean women creates a sense of connection between the adoptee and the audience. On the one hand, her impersonation showcases her virtuosity and versatility as an actress who can play multiple roles.

On the other hand, it underscores the viewers’ fluctuating perceptions of her body as simultaneously Asian and not Asian enough (and therefore American). Her body is interchangeable with other “authentically” Korean female bodies to the viewers throughout a series of impersonations. At the same time, the colorblind racial ideology

might render Chomet's body racially neutral in the mind of liberal audiences, since it evokes symptomatically indicate the interrelated nature of post-racial colorblind ideology of neoliberalism and global market economy, upon which transnational/transracial adoption are predicated.⁵⁵ For instance, Eng suggests that the transnational adoptees represent the politics of colorblindness in the age of neoliberalism, where the members of a community – in this case, a family – actively refuse to recognize racial differences in the name of collective happiness. Racial differences of transnational adoptees are effaced in this process so that the idea of a 'family' is emphasized. Eng sees this as “a new logic of passing that marks the coming together of the prior history of Asian model minority with a neoliberal multiculturalism under which race only ever appears as disappearing, a racial politics that acknowledges difference only to dismiss its importance” (117).

This double racial perception facilitates an adoptee's negotiation of her affective ties with Korean female relatives within the narrative structure *and* with white liberal audiences in the physical performative space. On the one hand, the authenticity of Chomet's representation of Korean women is initially established through her biologically determined Asian identity (legitimated through the DNA test and her connection to birth-mom) and her physical resemblance to female relatives (facial features and the texture of the skin). On the other hand, various cultural references to Chomet's upbringing in a white family make the viewers see her as culturally white/American. At one point, Chomet evokes cultural references recognizable to American audiences by comparing her Korean aunts to American first ladies. Using

⁵⁵ For critiques of recent discourses surrounding postraciality and colorblindness, see Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*; Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, and Quiroz, *Adoption in a Color-blind Society*.

particular images of womanhood that American audiences would relate to without actually meeting the women, this scene renders the unknown women on the other side of the world culturally familiar:

My older aunt is slim, strong-willed and sharp. She speaks English because she has worked in a fancy hotel in Seoul for years. She dresses very conservatively, think Nancy Reagan. My youngest aunt, is only eight years older than me. She is boisterous and outspoken, with dancing eyes. Think Hillary Clinton. My umma? Think Laura Bush. (15)⁵⁶

As the title of the show suggests, what complicates the fluidity of an adoptee's body is an adoptee's convoluted relationship with her Asian body – more specifically, cultural performances of femininity, which an adoptee's Asian body cannot fully inhabit. Deeming Chomet's physical appearance as not feminine enough, Chomet's mother and aunts try to transform her into a perfect Korean woman. Chomet initially embraces Korean femininity, which manifests itself through one's unstoppable desire to be adorned, decorated, and pampered. Chomet indulges herself in this shower of womanliness. Chomet reclaims her Asian-ness dormant in her body, suggesting the failure of white liberal construction of American subjectivity and feminist ideals to erase her 'cultural genes' inscribed in her blood. She claims to have repressed this desire for a long time due

⁵⁶ Unpublished playscript.

to the white feminist values with which she grew up with, planted by her adoptive mother's upbringing (17).

Chomet's inability to perform Korean femininity is where her emotional allegiance with Korean women falters. Standing awkwardly on a pair of heels she is not used to wearing, Chomet begins to put on a scarf, a pair of sunglasses, a wide-brimmed hat, and a large handbag to carry even on a hot summer's day. Her failure to meet her blood relatives' demand to assimilate into Korean womanhood reinforces her sense of belonging to women who would understand her frustration and perplexity, and dismiss such masquerade as cultural idiosyncrasies. Here, Chomet's Asian-ness seems to ultimately serve as 'abject' in relation to her Americanness, which is once reclaimed only to play a role to consolidate 'what she is not.' As Karen Shimakawa points out, "Asian Americanness functions as abject in relation to Americanness" (*Abjection* 3).

This failure illustrates how affective relations are constructed through collectively understood and shared performances of womanhood. Furthermore, it shows that even the fundamentally empathic relation such as bloodline kinship might suffer misrecognition when culturally translated. Chomet suggests that becoming a Korea woman inevitably involves superficiality (adorning oneself) and collectivity (shopping spree). In fact, the two qualities are in fact intertwined: a sense of relatedness and kinship for Chomet's blood relatives seems to manifest in a collective ritual, or a social performance of femininity. When Chomet first sees her grandmother, she read her gaze and gesture as those of love and sympathy, the scene being accompanied by melodramatic background music:

My halmoni hugs me. My grandmother is speaking in Korean. I don't know what she is saying. But there is so much love in her face, she must be saying (breathe), "Look at you. I've been looking for you for so long, Sun Mee. Look at your beautiful skin and healthy body. [...] I want to never let you go. I am sorry. We are sorry for not finding you." I am sure this is what she must be saying. (14)

Later she learns from her aunt that her grandmother was lamenting her hair and skin, which need transformation to become a 'proper' Korean woman. From Chomet's perspective, the discrepancy between Chomet's initial interpretation of the intimate bodily gesture and her grandmother's actual words seem to produce comical effects while evincing the insurmountable gap between cultural translations of intimacy. Chomet is both right and wrong: her grandmother's bodily gesture does not correspond to what she says; however, Chomet also misses the point that her grandmother's words as well as her mother's parting words need cultural translation, not literal one. The gap between the speech and the content should be filled with emotions, which are cultivated and acculturated. The impasse in reading and sharing emotions through shared language of body and intimacy is constantly disrupted and disappointing.

The in-between/ambiguous position of an adoptee's racial identity and her indeterminate/wavering sense of belonging leave us with more questions about the workings of empathy in the transnational context beyond affirmation or happiness. If

transnationality “alludes to the transversal, the transactional, the translational and the transgressive aspects of contemporary behavior and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics and states and capitalism” as Aiwha Ong suggests, transnational adoption as a practice exemplifies a mode of transnationality in the age of global capitalism that involves not only transactions of bodies but also affects attached to them (4). As a transnational subject, Chomet is a fluid moderator that can navigate bodies and cultures. What is unsettling about such performance of transnationality, however, is the slippage between the expressed (and thus presentable) emotions to the audience and the Korean affect misunderstood or lost in translation, or gone “awry” as Carolyn Pedwell would suggest.

However, despite the racial ambiguity it conveys, the performer’s body remains the only way to convey what is lost in the translation. The affect that Chomet’s body registers is manifested in the choreographed movement that accompanies the larger travel narrative. Her body in these segments, rather than marking itself as either Asian or American, is a medium to articulate her affective experiences that can express only through choreographed movements. It seems that these moments temporarily allow us into the emotional lives of Chomet and her female relatives. At first, the movement is enigmatic, unintelligible to the audience but still grabs their attention and leaves them wonder what it means. It takes on a clearer meaning later when she meets her female relatives, when she moves in the same way while describing how female relatives pulled her body in different directions to touch and feel her body. The audience sees Sunmee’s body parts being pulled by invisible hands of her grandmother and mother into multiple directions:

MOVEMENT while speaking: My birth family's body language is foreign to me. My adopted family wasn't very affectionate and suddenly, I am being held and cuddled by my blood family. My mother holds both of my hands to her chest, holds onto my thighs as we sit. My grandmother pours her body into mine, refusing to let go of my arm. Somehow my muscle memory remembers this feeling and has been crawling back towards it all of my life. (15)

The same movement is repeated at different points during the performance, which seems to signify her efforts to remember this 'foreign' body language. "My muscle memory remembers this feeling searching for a feeling of being Korean try to explain the feeling, the hollowness ..." (21) Her body is a way in which she could claim to know what her Korean female relatives were feeling, those unspoken feelings are also delivered to the viewers. In this way, the performer's body becomes an affective medium through which a chain of imagined kinesthetic empathy is made. In this sense, an adoptee's body is a repository of 'muscle memories,' a language of intimacy that transcends the barriers of language and culture.

These moments seem to temporarily lift her up over the emotional impasse that resides between her and her biological kin. This moment might suggest potential connection between Chomet and the Korean women as well as the performer and the viewers through the viewer's inner mimicry that takes place in the musculature. Scholars

explore the relationship between kinesthesia and its potential to elicit the empathic bond between performing bodies and watching bodies.⁵⁷ These researches suggest that our musculature registers and imitates the dancers' moves at the spectacle of dancing bodies on stage. However, Susan Leigh Foster points out that kinesthetic empathy is essentially influenced by the social and cultural mores at a given times and communities, unlike the general impression that dances are often in the realm of pure aesthetics and therefore removed from political implications.⁵⁸ If emotions are socio-culturally bound and communicated within the circle of people who understand the expressions, as such scholars as Brian Massumi delineated, Chomet's movements are merely acts devoid of social meanings and therefore limited.⁵⁹ However, one might read them as reproducing the affect before its entry to any particular culture she is expected to belong to. It does not dictate how she or we should feel, but it *moves* us in visceral ways.

Chomet ends her play with a scene subtitled as 'epilogue' in her script, where she yearns for "unconditional boundary-less love ... that feels like careening over a waterfall, knowing the pool below will envelop me every time." Her birthmother's intimate gestures fail to translate into the language of 'unconditional boundary-less love.' She confesses she finally felt belonged in the quasi-American space constructed within Seoul, hearing an American popular song and the American cultural ambience it suggests:

⁵⁷ See Forster, *Choreographing Empathy*; Reynolds and Reason, *Choreographing Empathy; Kinesthetic Empathy in Cultural and Creative Practices*; and Brandstetter, *Touching and Being Touched: Kinesthesia and Empathy in Dance and Movement*.

⁵⁸ See Forster, "Choreographing Empathy."

⁵⁹ Discussions related to affect and emotion, see Gregg and Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader*.

She sings American songs. Koreans love everything American. And I'm trying to enjoy the moment, in this smoky room, among beer bottles and friends...*all of us searching for a feeling of being Korean.* [...] I wade through the people, head downstairs and go outside sobbing. My boyfriend follows me out. *I try to explain the feeling*, the hollowness of all of this not knowing...of the what ifs and whys and secrecy and living make-believe lives. *But I cannot speak.* (21, emphasis added)

Chomet emphasizes the impact of the song on her (“the song tears into me”) and how she was inarticulate, faced with the immensity of the emotional experience. The feeling, which was beyond verbal expression, is enacted through Chomet’s choreographed movement. Chomet chooses to reproduce this moment on stage through a live performance of a local singer instead of narrating the incident to a taped recording. Such a staging choice evinces Chomet’s desire to communicate her feelings, which neither her then boyfriend nor her Korean birth mother could share, with the audience in the present moment.

The play depicts the limits, if not disillusionment, of imagined intimacy between an adoptee and her birth-country/mother, it seeks to form affective relations with a third community. At the end, it is in the listeners of her story - the American audience who are watching her show - she finds a hope for a feeling community. Through her performance of these women figures, Chomet generates a narrative of kinship in which audiences also participate. While this play promises to be a Korean adoptee’s search for her ‘real’ family,

the notion of 'kinship' and its boundaries become ambiguous and disillusioned in this play. While listening to Chomet's innermost feelings of discomfort with her birth family and her American family and thus empathizing with her emotional alienation from these families, audiences willingly participate in the imaginative act of becoming her extended family beyond the ties of blood. Despite moments of disillusionment, which, nevertheless, brings her to a new sense of identity and belonging. This seems confirmed and validated through the final images that the show creates through the photos of Chomet and her Korean mother and aunts. The cascade of images reinforces the feeling of happiness and reconciliation. It also verifies the truth of the narrative with real life evidences.

Epilogue: Finding Hope Again in Theater

In the last scene of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), women characters gather together to perform the ritual of collective healing after delivering their personal stories throughout the show. It is right after the heart-rending story told by lady in red, who lost her two children to the madness-driven husband beau willie, himself a victim of the racist society. Lady in red says that, one night after the tragic incident when she was drawn to the idea of killing herself, she was lifted above the numbness and hopelessness as the dawn approached:

til the only tree i cd see
 took me up in her branches
 held me in the breeze
 made me dawn dew
 that chill at daybreak
 the sun wrapped me up swingin rose light everywhere
 the sky laid over me like a million men
 i was cold/ i was burning up/ a child
 & endlessly weaving garments for the moon
 wit my tears

i found god in myself
 & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely (63)

Lady in red's last words of self-discovery and affirmation become a chant for all of the ladies as they "repeat to themselves softly the lines 'I found god in myself & I loved her.'" The chant becomes "a song of joy" that "the ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience." (63-64) In this sacred and liberating moment, the differences of women are transformed into something they can relate to. It reaffirms their ability to relate to each other's feelings of loss, suffering, and displacement as their own and willingness to purge them together. More importantly, it invokes our desire to be a part of that ritual.

The significance of Shange's choreopoem as a black female aesthetic is that, as a cultural response to the racial and sexist oppression, opened up space for women of color to articulate ideas, feelings, and experiences particular to their life at the intersection of race, gender, and class, when there was little avenue for self-expression.⁶⁰ In her 1976 preface to the printed version of *for colored girls*, Shange recalls the sense of urgency that drove many women artists of color – including Shange herself – to create a range of cultural spaces for women in the 1970s San Francisco. The area was "inundated with women poets, women's readings, & a multilingual woman presence, new to all of us & desperately appreciated." (Shange, ix) The collective desire and energy to tell women's stories and listen to each other gave birth to the evolution of *for colored girls*. First

⁶⁰ Many African American women writers of the earlier generation were aware of the lack of representational space for women of color and wrestled with the issue. For instance, a black actress's struggle to carve out space for self-representation in Alice Childress's 1955 play *Trouble in Mind* can be a metaphor for such predicaments women artists of color had. However, while such works as Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Childress's *Wedding Band* (1966) won commercial success and reached wider audience, dramatic realism, a primary mode of representation these plays opted for, had its own limitations in delivering the radicalism of the subject matter. One exception might be Adrienne Kennedy, whose surrealism in such plays as *Funnyhouse of a Negro* betrayed the clash between real and fantasy located in the meta/physical space of house, where a woman of color is stricken with a sense of displacement and goes through identity crisis in the schizophrenic space.

presented at a woman's bar called Bacchanal, *for colored girls* began as a workshop piece that Shange and her artist friends played with poetry, dance, and music to a small number of audiences that were mostly comprised of women at such different venues as Women's Studies Departments to bars, cafes, and poetry centers (Shange, xiii-ix). These intimate and improvisatory performances, as Shange notes, were marked by rawness of female energy in search of articulation. They further promised the reciprocity inherent in women's communities, who were not just consumers of female spectacles but also co-creators and commentators of a show that speaks for the communities.

While it celebrated a culture that transcends the romanticized values prescribed by gender, sexuality, race, and class through interdependence among women, as a work that specifically speaks for women defined at the intersection of race and gender, the choreopoem also offered a critique of white femininity that coerces women of color to contain their feelings and desires. For instance, Lady in blue deplored that expressing anger, or too much emotion, is often accused of being "colored" in opposition to the white values characterized by rationality: "we deal wit emotion too much/ so why don't we go on ahead & be white then/ & make everythin dry & abstract wit no rhythm & no reelin for sheer sensual pleasure/ yes let's go on & be white. . . lets think our way outta feelin/ lets abstract ourselves" (*for colored girls* 44-5). The play both resists and celebrates "excess" – the overflow of emotion, sexuality, and desire – a quality that has often defined women of color in the mainstream. One realizes that the wide spectrum of desires, fear, anger, and traumatic experiences Shange's characters go through cannot be reduced to any racial and gender stereotypes. Exploration of body as a means to make sense of a black female identity was central to the poetics of *for colored girls*, as Shange

states that “with the acceptance of the ethnicity of my thighs & backside, came a clearer understanding of my voice as a woman & as a poet. . . everything African, everything halfway colloquial, a grimace, a strut, an arched back over a yawn, waz mine. I moved what waz my unconscious knowledge of being in a colored woman’s body to my known everydayness.” (xi) Therefore, the woman’s theatre that Shange and her collaborators collectively envisioned and the aesthetic that they explored were primarily African American although the final version of the choreopoem includes several vignettes from Latino American experiences.

Considering the Afro-centeredness of the early years of women’s theater that this piece represented, the multiracial casting in a 1999 production by the Penumbra Theater Company suggested an even broader scope in which one could imagine female solidarity within the category of “women of color.”⁶¹ This multiethnic production highlights the multi-coloredness of such experience that expands beyond exclusively African American and Latino American. With two Korean American actresses along with mostly African American actresses, the production embraced Asians in the category of “colored.” Such strategic cross-racial identificatory moments effectively aroused the sense of affinity that transcends boundaries of race. The effects sometimes faltered and became questionable when the bodies contradicted particular racial and cultural experiences expressed in Shange’s play – such as an Asian woman claiming that she grew up in a predominantly Latino neighborhood – as one reviewer noted.

⁶¹ My reading draws upon the 1999 performance. I am grateful to the Givens Collection at the Anderson Library at University of Minnesota for providing me with the VHS version of *for colored girls*, performed live at the Penumbra Theatre, St. Paul Minnesota.

However, this discrepancy between the body of the performer and the racial experience it claims to inhabit ironically created an inseparable tie between African Americans and Asians in the viewer's mind. One instance is when Sun-Mee Chomet performed as Lady in Red. Performed by an African American woman, this story would epitomize a moment where racism inculcates the prevalent domestic violence for African Americans and victimizes both African American men and women. Chomet's performance evokes a fundamentally different image of suffering and visceral and troubling effects: the lady in red's story begins by arousing the audiences' collective memory of the wars in Asian countries, of which US war veterans such as beau willie was part of: "there waznt nothin wrong with him / there waznt nothin wrong / with him / he kept telling crystal / any niggah wanna kill vietnamese children more n stay home / & raise his own is sicker than a rabid dog" (*for colored girls* 55).

On one hand, the Penumbra production strives for the effect of a women's solidarity that transcends various markers of material difference such as race and class. On the other, it consciously (or unintentionally) grapples with the difficulties of intimate bonding among women, which reaffirms that identification is anything but perfect. For the audiences, points of identification with Asian American actresses vacillate from sympathy to detachment at different moments in the play, depending on whether Asian women's racial experience is passable as African American or not. At the same time, it thus generates the effect of evoking the two racial groups' interrelatedness, which emerges at different moments in the play.

Rethinking such canonical work as *for colored girls* in a multiracial context prods us to consider the evolving forms of feminist performances in the twenty-first century.

Performances by women that evoke commonality of women based on shared experiences of oppression under patriarchy and racism have regularly resurfaced since Shange's groundbreaking work. These works strive to create moments of collective healing and transformation, especially for the audiences who can identify with portrayed experiences. What is noteworthy is the rise of young Asian American women artists, who actively revise the political ideas and aesthetic forms of their black and white feminist predecessors. To list just a few examples here, Diana Son's *R.A.W. 'Cause I'm a Woman* (1996) seems modeled after Shange's work in that it incorporated dance, music, and spoken words to deliver Asian American female experiences in a broad spectrum. Four "Raunchy Asian Women" on stage confess how they dealt with various stereotypes and expectations attached to Asian women. Their confessions are not just 'complaints'; they are also affirmations of their courage and capacity to navigate and challenge the demands of the white-supremacist, male-centered society. In *Hmong-Lao Friendship Play/Lao-Hmong Friendship Play* (2015), a Hmong poet-performer May Lee-Yang and a Lao playwright-poet Saymoukda Vongsay collaborated to explore the interrelatedness of the two ethnic groups that share histories of displacement and seek cross-cultural understanding.⁶² The histories of Southeast Asia and familiar narratives of immigration were retold as mythic stories and colorful anecdotes at the hands of two young performers. The show also provided a critique of a mainstream culture that objectifies Asian women through light-hearted (and sometimes even grotesque) parodies of ethnicized/sexualized performances such as beauty pageant and an Asian cooking show. At one point, the show good-humoredly entertained the audiences with the pictures of

⁶² The show premiered at Intermedia Arts (Minneapolis) in September 17-19, 2015. My analysis is based on its encore performance at Penumbra Theater on October 29, 2015.

“hot Asian men” that feature various local as well as international Asian male celebrities. As each picture came up on a screen, the two actresses would swoon and feign to be sexually aroused. Members of the audience gradually chimed in laughing and shouting. This brief moment of collective orgy, while playfully overturning the power dynamic inherent in gendered spectatorship, revives the pleasure of being in a liberating and empowering space of performance mutually felt in each other’s presence.

I would like to turn to Young Jean Lee’s recent works that seem to suggest a rather elusive vision of feminist futurity in the arguably post-racial, post-feminist era. Lee has been at the forefront of the American avant-garde with works that boldly deal with polemical issues of identity politics. Her earlier work *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2005) is more in line with the aforementioned plays in that it presents somewhat grotesque and uncanny performances of Asian women who restage stereotypical narratives of Asian American women’s life stories such as myths around homeland, traditional cooking, and violence on Asian/American women. These parodic portrayals would evoke more laughter than tears. Despite the gravity of its content, the characters’ suffering becomes a laughing matter due to the hyperbolic performance of Asianness and femininity. The incongruity is even more visible as Lee juxtaposes these spectacles with conversations between a white man and woman on trivial matters in an unduly serious tone.

Lee’s *Untitled Feminist Show* (2012) pays homage to the ideas, ideals, and strategies put forward by Lee’s feminist predecessors. Lee describes the genesis of the play as her response to the “zeitgeist” of the time, the instinctive feeling that “it is the

right time for a feminist show.”⁶³ The urgency that sparked the project – the ominous feeling that “women are in real danger of certain rights getting taken away which we had fought for” – bespeaks the unspoken consensus regarding the demise of feminism as a movement. In contrast to the impending doom of the feminism, which initially motivated Lee and her collaborators, the show is surprisingly gleeful and filled with optimism. The play is interlaced with a series of random vignettes where performers impersonate various characters with dance and mimes. The show relies on other theatrical elements – music and abstract visual images and emphasizes the full range of physicality that the six female performers in nudity orchestrate. The women continuously change their fictional identities, their role-playing is often more comical than serious, followed by happy endings.

For many people, the utopian universe Lee created in *UFS* was nostalgically reminiscent of *for colored girls* and evoked a similar sense of hope. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Hilton Als observed that it simultaneously awakened in him a “yearn[ing] to be part of her utopia.” Like the inception of Shange’s play, *UFS* began as a workshop, where Lee and six women performers – most of whom have established careers as solo artists, performers, and musicians – exchanged their own thoughts on feminist ideas and aesthetics. The outcome of such collaboration seems to be a range of perspectives that comprise the present state of feminism, not a sustained political agenda.

Lee’s project may not be seen as an ambitious departure from aesthetic experiments that her predecessors tried out. By no means, the strong emphasis on body over words is unprecedented in feminist theater. What differentiates Lee’s performance seems to be its inclusivity and ambiguity in portraying the notion of feminism. As Lee

⁶³ See her interview with Michèle Steinwald, curator of the Walker Art Center.

boldly put in the title “feminist” and “untitled,” a feminist utopia that *UFS* envisions would welcome any member who enters ‘untitled’ – that is, no socially sanctioned identities attached. In this ideal world, the fluidity of identity is accepted and racial differences matter no more than differing degrees of pigmentation just like various body shapes.⁶⁴ Each woman’s physical traits are still there for us to notice, but our eagerness to discriminate one from the other gradually slips away. As they collectively mimic domestic chores such as cleaning the house and reenacting female stereotypes as in fairy tales, the concerted movements and gestures emphasize the familiar images of femininity that they share.

A feminist utopia where identities are constantly in flux is a liberating idea. At the same time, it can be politically ambivalent: the connection between the futurity and the present gets lost as we forget to see the subjectivity of a performer at the intersection of race, class, and sexuality, which matters in the real world. Furthermore, the fluidity of identity as a concept and the female nudity as theatricality, which rendered the biological female-ness hyper-visible, came into clash. This was baffling to male spectators who were uncertain about their membership to this seemingly female-only world. Kee-Yoon Nahm, for instance, ponders, “But if no dividing lines are drawn, in what sense is this show feminist? Am I, a male spectator, granted entry into Lee’s utopia, or am I tactlessly intruding on someone else’s party?” (591)⁶⁵ Charles Isherwood also noted the discrepancy between Lee’s initial vision of identity-less paradise and the persistent

⁶⁴ Lee’s intention is made clear in her program notes to *Untitled Feminist Show* (qtd. in Isherwood, “Beneath Pink Parasols, Identity in Stark Form”)

⁶⁵ Hilton Als similarly confesses his feeling of exclusion when he says: “As with Shange’s all-female world, Lee’s universe is so emotionally complete that I yearned to be part of her utopia, where truths grow like weeds, but that wouldn’t be right: gender has made *me* different.”

exposure of the performers' sex through nudity, which would inevitably remind the viewers of the very gendered-ness that define the universe.

Despite these contradictions, however, one cannot easily dismiss the vision of a nearly post-identity feminist utopia in *UFS* as a naïve reiteration of utopian discourses that Lee's predecessors have experimented with. One could read the radical approach *UFS* takes evinces the exhaustion of feminist 'discourses.' Removal of verbal elements evinces Lee's frustration with discourses around feminism ('talking' about feminism) filled with didacticism and high theories. If feminism has become a fetishized notion that is often discussed in the realm of high theory and abstraction, Lee seems to suggest that, when embodied and enacted, being *feminist* is more physical than metaphysical, and more senseless and even absurd than orderly and coherent. In this world, there is freedom not to make a political statement both literally (by being non-verbal) and figuratively (by eluding sustained position). This decision could liberate one not just from the female body, but also from the oversaturated notion of feminism.

The buoyant, feel-good approach to the discursive journey that feminism has taken leaves us with a question: where will it take us then? While women's ritualistic performance often promises to articulate scattered voices of women of color and transform them into a potentially political collective force, ritual-like moments in Lee's play constantly elude meaningful intervention on the part of the viewer. They are more enigmatic than sublime, leaving the viewers keep wondering. In fact, the play seems to suggest that this utopia is a purely imaginary space that we could not dare to reach out to. When the light is on after the show, all the performers reappear on stage to respond to the audiences' applause. On seeing them clad in various styles and accessories, the viewers

would get freshly reminded of their personhood in their presumably ‘real’ everyday life. As different reviewers noted, the curtain call brought out the individuality of each performer that has been somehow forgotten. The sudden transition from boundary-less bodies to dissimilar actresses makes us realize that we have been – despite our initial skepticism – indeed temporarily pulled into an ideal world and pushed back onto the everydayness.

Returning to this question that informed the inception of this dissertation, then, does Lee’s show end by merely suggesting the end of feminist performance as a contained form of entertainment filled with wishful thinking? As Peggy Phelan proposes, is it the fate of performance to admit and face the “impossibility of seizing/seeing the real anywhere anytime”? (192) How can a feminist performance, while not purporting to position itself in any conspicuously political way, provoke the mutual desire to change the world into a better place – since the “politics lie in the desire to feel the potential of elsewhere” (Dolan, “Utopia” 170)? As Jose Muñoz suggests, the political force of performance in its performativity, not in its epistemological approach to a world, which provides us with various visions of possible worlds:

Performance is capable of providing a ground-level assault on a hegemonic world vision that substantiates the dominant public sphere. Disidentificatory performance’s performativity is manifest through strategies of iteration and reiteration. . . . This reiteration builds worlds. It proliferates “reals,” or what I call worlds, and establishes the groundwork for potential oppositional counterpublics. (*Disidentifications* 196)

The sheer fictionality of the vision one witnesses in *UFS* might frustrate the viewer who becomes even more aware of the improbability that such utopic vision can be actualized. However, having descended from the feminist version of Eden of Arden, the performers in *UFS* seem closer to us, individuals with distinct tastes and dissimilar beliefs. It thus heightens the sense of identification on a more fundamental, human level that derives from our “creatural bond with the actor, who stands before us in a vulnerable space” (States 119). It is through this transportation from the unattainable vision of *no place* to the feeling of being *here* with fellow human beings— and the very vulnerability of performance — that we see ourselves redirected to the ordinariness that we share with strangers. It is a different kind of empathy — not one based on imagined sympathy for the other’s suffering, but one that comes from the shared understanding that none of us (creators and viewers alike) is in the ideal world, but at least, we can dream of it together.

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