

# Model Minority Masochism

*Performing the Cultural Politics of Asian  
American Masculinity*

Takeo Rivera

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Oxford University Press 2022

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

CIP data is on file at the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-0-19-755749-5 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-19-755748-8 (hbk.)

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197557488.001.0001

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Paperback printed by Marquis, Canada  
Hardback printed by Bridgeport National Bindery, Inc., United States of America

### 3

## An Asian Is Being Whipped

### The Afro-Asian Superego in the Theater of Philip Kan Gotanda

“You are not White and that is what matters to some men.”

—Learned Jack, from Philip Gotanda’s *I Dream of Chang and Eng*

“Three years they lock you up. And now you’re standin’ there defendin’ that White boy over me.”

—Earl, from Philip Gotanda’s *After the War*

“How does it feel to be a solution?”

—Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*

In the introduction to her 2012 text *Samurai among Panthers: Richard Aoki on Race, Resistance, and a Paradoxical Life*, Diane Fujino describes her subject, Richard Aoki, as “the most iconic figure of the Asian American Movement” (2012, xiii). Fujino’s intricate, vital biography of Aoki is admiring of the “Che-esque” (2012, xi) figure who was both one of the leaders of the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) and the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), as well as one of the most prominent and visible personifications of Afro-Asian solidarity. As a gun runner, Aoki was the highest-ranking nonblack member of the Black Panthers, and his agitational work in the TWLF contributed to the foundation of the academic field that has enabled me to write this very book. The emblematic photo of a young Aoki strikingly embodies this dual importance: his expression nonchalant, hidden behind sunglasses, a light mustache above his neutral lips, but most importantly, atop his head, a Black Panther beret affixed with a button of the AAPA. The photo characterized much of what would become Aoki’s public persona and image for decades until his suicide in 2009, a revolutionary swagger that would effortlessly draw from Black masculinity and early Asian American self-formation alike.

It was thus no wonder that the left-wing community of Asian American activists and scholars was devastated by the allegation, on August 20, 2012, that Richard Aoki was an FBI informant. Journalist Seth Rosenfeld, as part of his upcoming 2013 manuscript *Subversives: The FBI’s War on Student Radicals and Reagan’s Rise to Power*, released hundreds of pages of redacted FBI files that seemed to indicate that Aoki had been recruited by the FBI in the 1950s and continued to inform the Bureau of various

radical groups' activities throughout the '60s for a total of 16 years. Rosenfeld's account was damning, including an interview with Aoki's handler Burney Threadgill, who claimed that he had "developed" Aoki, and said of him, "Very pleasant little guy. He always wore dark glasses. I got to know him. . . . The activities he got involved in . . . was because of us using him as an informant" (2013, 421). Rosenfeld then cites how Threadgill exploited Aoki's contempt of the Communist Party of the United States' support of Japanese American internment to easily recruit him, and Aoki, a war veteran, was more than happy to undermine domestic communists' causes. Although he is unable to definitively tie Aoki to specific informant actions in the FBI files due to considerable redactions, Rosenfeld implies that Aoki continued to spy on and undermine both Black Panther and TWLF causes, including through his arming of the Panthers (which, Rosenfeld argues, resulted in police shoot-outs that would undermine the Panthers' popularity and boost the support of Reagan and the police), and his violent tactics during the 1969 strike that included the rejection of compromise, the kidnapping and interrogation of a fellow activist, and *perhaps* even committing arson on the UC Berkeley campus.

Activists and Asian American studies scholars—most notably Diane Fujino, Scott Kurashige, artist Fred Ho, and even Black Panther Party cofounder Bobby Seale—sprang to action to defend Aoki's record and reputation against the accusation. Many prominent Asian Americans refused to acknowledge the possibility that he might have been, or insist that perhaps he was, a double-agent who came around to believing in the causes he was associated with, well until his suicide at age 70 in 2009 (which occurred shortly after his potentially damning interview with Rosenfeld). Kurashige pondered shortly after Rosenfeld's allegations:

My best guess based on the available evidence is that Aoki—like other young people of all races and especially people of color—developed a new identity during the mid-to-late 1960s, renouncing earlier attempts to fit into America and moving instead to be a Third World revolutionary. (Kurashige 2012)

Given the expansive account in Diane Fujino's biography, and Aoki's decades-long commitment to leftist politics and racial justice that continued well after the 16-year period that Rosenfeld marks, this is a fair if nearly unverifiable hypothesis.

Ultimately, however, this chapter is not about Richard Aoki; I do not intend to defend or excoriate Rosenfeld's claims regarding Aoki's complicity. Aoki is one example among many demonstrating the Asian American political attachment to Blackness; I invoke the Aoki controversy in order to draw attention to the symbolic capital that Aoki accrued as a figure within the Asian American consciousness, which has in turn impelled his defense, the antithesis of the model minority, proof positive of the possibility of Asian American solidarity with the cause of the Black freedom struggle. Aoki-as-symbol has been canonized through his performance of solidarity with the politicized Black masculinity of the Panthers, offering a model contrast to the standard Asian American model minority, in addition to the "emasculated" Asian

American male. Although Aoki the person died in 2009, 2012 witnessed his tragic symbolic death, the demise of one of the most visible personifications of Black/Asian solidarity in the United States.

The destruction of Aoki-as-myth is incidentally symbolic of the demographic, and indeed epistemic, shift of Asian America from its radical conceptual birth as the Asian American movement in the 1960s (Wei, Espiritu) for which Aoki himself was present, to its mainstream political consolidation as “an institutional (academic and governmental) sociological category” (Lye 2008b, 95) in the 1980s, and finally to the contemporary moment in which the “Asian American” is figured as “the ideal subject of neoliberal ideologies under global capitalism” (Jun 2011, 129). With high median incomes, broad access to education, and deepening ties to transnational capital and prestige—that is, with the actualization of the model minority stereotype—it is becoming increasingly clear that theorists of Asian America, at least to some degree, require a shift away from the politics of resentment. Yet, for radical Asian American activists, scholars, and artists still oriented toward an antiracist praxis, there remains the question of how to formulate a radical Asian American positionality within such a multidimensional milieu, a task that was dealt a moral blow by the revelations surrounding Richard Aoki. Members of the Asian American movement in the late 1960s and ’70s aligned themselves with a broader Third Worldist politic that positioned themselves as fellow nonwhite, colonized peoples, taking a particular affinity toward Blackness. Aoki served as a potent symbol of this, and his fall most clearly exposes the political importance that he served, although he is not alone in this symbolism: consider, for example, the Asian American iconography of Grace Lee Boggs and Yuri Kochiyama, whose importance within Asian American activist communities is earned principally through their proximity to the Black freedom struggle. However, in the landscape of the neoliberal present, such expressions may read as idealistic at best, or quixotic at worst, particularly given the heightened absurdity of equating Asian racialization with that of Blackness. The desire for a contemporary Asian American radicality opposed to whiteness is thus complicated by a cruel pragmatism that bespeaks of the possibility of the model minority as an achieved material reality. Figuratively, it is haunted by the possibility that Aoki has been an informant all along, and that perhaps, metaphorically, so have we all, and that even the nostalgic Third Worldist Asian America of the 1960s was compromised by an allegiance to the white surveillance state since the very beginning, bringing a chilling new valence to Tina Chen’s compelling claim that Asian Americanness is instantiated “through a politics of impersonation” (2005, xvi).

This chapter considers the means by which Blackness has operated as both a psychic haunting and a disciplinary apparatus for the production of Asian American masculine subjection. Here, I engage with earlier Asian Americanist preoccupations with Blackness and conclude by examining two contemporary works of playwright Philip Kan Gotanda, *I Dream of Chang and Eng* and *After the War (Blues)*. As a Japanese American Sansei<sup>1</sup> artist who has personally engaged with the Asian American movement since its formative years, Gotanda offers insights into the struggles surrounding

Asian America through his cultural production, presenting a critical glimpse into the Asian American literary and political imagination. I argue that in *I Dream of Chang and Eng* and *After the War*, Gotanda positions Blackness as a moral center of racial subjugation, offering Asian Americans the political choice of either aligning in solidarity with Blackness, or seizing upon the opportunity for model minoritarianism aligned with whiteness. Although both plays are historical—*I Dream of Chang and Eng* in the 19th century and *After the War* in the late 1940s—they both euphemistically dramatize post-1990s Asian American concerns over Afro-Asian solidarity and the broader definitions of Asian American(ist) sociopolitical formation more broadly. Blackness, not unproblematically, offers a utopian alternative to the model minority, but one that remains masochistically out of reach. Gotanda's plays stage and variously contend with the Afro-Asian superego as a framework for an Asian American anti-racist ethics.

## The Afro-Asian Superego

In truth, Asian American preoccupations with Afro-Asian solidarity have existed since the foundation of Asian American panethnicity in general. To find a clear example, one need only turn to Amy Uyematsu's 1969 essay, "The Emergence of Yellow Power in America," published in the Japanese American journal *Gidra* and reprinted in the monumental if largely overlooked 1971 anthology *Roots: An Asian American Reader*. Crediting the rise of the "yellow power" movement to inspiration from Black power, Uyematsu makes observations about late-1960s Asian American model minoritarianism that have become even more heightened at the time of this writing, noting that

Precisely because Asian Americans have become economically secure, do they face serious identity problems. Fully committed to a system that subordinates them on the basis of non-whiteness, Asian Americans still try to gain complete acceptance by denying their yellowness. They have become white in every respect but color. (1971, 9)

Uyematsu ties complicity to capitalist economic norms to an allegiance to racial hierarchy, whiteness achieved not only through the denial of "yellowness" but also through class embourgeoisement. The net result of this, argues Uyematsu, is also a de facto allegiance to antiblackness:

Today the Asian Americans are still scared. Their passive behavior serves to keep national attention on the black people. By being as inconspicuous as possible, they keep pressure off of themselves at the expense of the blacks. Asian Americans have formed an uneasy alliance with white Americans to keep the blacks down.

They close their eyes to the latent white racism toward them which has never changed. (1971, 11)

Thus, according to Uyematsu, Asian American complicity is necessarily antiblack, and part of the impetus of “yellow power” is to develop an identity around an anti-racist, anticapitalist militancy. In a sense, this vision would be most rigorously sustained not necessarily through the decades of Asian American cultural politics, but through the rise of women of color feminism, most emblematically symbolized by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga’s *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1981.

Then, the last several decades of post-1992<sup>2</sup> Asian Americanist scholarship have seen a revival of Afro-Asian academic solidarity work, much of it ultimately concerned with broader politico-ethical projects of Asian American Studies at large, exemplified by such works as Vijay Prashad’s *The Karma of Brown Folk* and *Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting*, Bill Mullen’s *Afro-Orientalism*, Daryl Maeda’s *Chains of Babylon*, and Ho and Mullen’s *Afro-Asia*. As Colleen Lye observed in 2008, the “neo-Bandung allegiance of this Afro-Asianism” (2008a, 1732) may be reflective of Asian American Left’s growing anxiety about its potentially reactionary positioning within the U.S. racial order. Lye writes,

Despite this Afro-Asianist project’s more open recognition of the relevance of Asian embourgeoisement to its own desire for a renewed resistance politics, however, it is not yet clear whether the retrieval of Third Worldist genealogies accomplishes something more than a nostalgic response to the rise of Asian capitalism on a world scale and to the thinning claim of Asian American intellectuals to any representative function. (2008a, 1732)

That is, much of the optimistic Afro-Asian solidarity work produced in the last few decades speak to the yearnings for a radical, resistant Asian American positionality that was much more visibly and clearly articulated as an anti-imperial, anti-racist project in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. In many ways, as Asian American studies underwent its so-called “transnational turn” (or “denationalization”) in the 1990s, heralded by Pacific Rim discourse and diaspora-focused works, there was growing anxiety within Asian Americanist scholarship that the field would cease its radical orientations.

This anxiety is best captured by Sau-Ling Wong’s highly contentious 1995 essay “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads,” in which she affirms the value of performatively “claiming America,” which she loosely defines as “establishing the Asian American presence in the context of the United States’ national cultural legacy and contemporary cultural production” (1995, 17). In effect, Wong’s insistence is largely to keep the focus on the presence of Asians in the United States (and, by extension, the Americas at large) precisely because exclusion—both material and epistemic—has been a hallmark of anti-Asianism since the early chapters of Asian American historical narrative (beginning

most blatantly with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act). To retain the Americanist focus on Asian America, then, is to claim space in U.S. history and to counteract the pervasive perpetual foreignness that stems from both yellow peril and orientalist optics.

It is noteworthy, however, that Wong draws upon an Afro-Asian comparison in order to illustrate her point, drawing a comparative racialization between Asianness and Blackness in relation to foreignness. Noting that Black studies was also moving toward a transnational diasporic frame—Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1995) being most emblematic of this shift—Wong asserts that the differing racializations of Asianness and Blackness attach different valences to denationalization: “A shift from an African-American domestic to an African diaspora perspective might be more politicizing for African-Americans, while a corresponding move might be depoliticizing for Asian Americans” (1995, 18). African origins, Wong writes, can offer “a powerful means of undoing the cultural amnesia white society attempted to impose” (1995, 18), while denationalization with Asian America “may exacerbate liberal pluralism’s already oppressive tendency to ‘disembody,’ leaving America’s racialized power structure intact” (1995, 18–19). This is largely because Blackness in the United States has long been associated with a kind of “culturelessness,” characterized by deficiency and lack, whereas Asianness has been not so much “cultureless” as inscrutably foreign, a perverse mirror image of occidental modernity rather than a “zone of non-being,” as Frantz Fanon has described Blackness in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Additionally, Wong also invokes Elliott Butler-Evans’ argument that “Rodney King was beaten [in Los Angeles in 1991] as a member of an American minority, not as a member of the black diaspora” (1995, 18), in order to demonstrate that local minoritarianism—in this case, racialization within the specific national context of the United States—is the impetus of racial violence, rather than a sense of diasporic origin. Thus, argues Wong, even in the case of antiblack violence, it is local racial otherness—that is to say, nonwhiteness—that should be of the highest political and analytic priority, rather than diaspora, which is in Wong’s view at most a secondary impetus for racial violence. Consequently, argues Wong, “coalitions of Asian American and other racial/ethnic minorities within the U.S. should take precedence over those formed with Asian peoples in the diaspora” (1995, 18). The primary line of political and analytical alliance, according to Wong, should then coalesce around shared marginalization, rather than shared origin.

Wong’s argument against denationalization, then, contains not only an anxiety over the potential loss of Asian American studies’ anti-racist critique, but also an anxiety over the loss of alliance with Blackness. I would furthermore infer that within Asian American anti-racist critique, these two are largely intertwined. That is, Asian Americanist critiques of racism have historically entailed an alliance with Blackness, or alternately, an imitation of Blackness. Wong’s argument is much in the same spirit of earlier Asian Americanist adaptations of Black masculine militancy, in which the performance of Blackness is a necessary component of the performance of anti-racism. Uyehara’s “yellow power,” for example, is in direct homage to “black power”—the articulation of Black liberation is a necessary prerequisite to



Asian American cultural nationalism. And certainly, Black masculinity has held a particular importance, especially in its association with militancy and confrontation. Moreover, to reinterpret Frantz Fanon's description of Blackness as the "zone of non-being," Blackness becomes the social position of absolute racialization. This interpretation is entrenched in Afro-pessimism, an emergent school of contemporary Black Studies scholarship—officially inaugurated by scholars Frank Wilderson III and Jared Sexton—operating from the postulate of Blackness as a mode of social death, and essentially inextricable from slaveness (Wilderson 2010, 10–11). Also prevalent in Afro-pessimism is a tendency toward Black exceptionalism, insisting that race relations best be understood not from a white/nonwhite binary, but a Black/nonblack one; Jared Sexton, in his essay aptly titled "People of Color Blindness," argues that the latter half of the enslaved/free binary is "better termed *all nonblacks* (or, less economically, the unequally arrayed category of nonblackness), because it is racial blackness as a necessary condition for enslavement that matters most, rather than whiteness as a sufficient condition for freedom" (Sexton 2010, 36). The result of Sexton's argument is ultimately an anti-coalitional stance, one that centers antiblackness as the locus of racial subjugation at large.

Although a number of scholars have critiqued the Afro-pessimism of Wilderson and Sexton,<sup>3</sup> the foundationalism of Black antiracism persists, including within some strands of Asian American thought, especially of the masculinist variety, in which the politicized Black man figures as the "ideal type" of racial resistance. Daniel Y. Kim illustrates this dynamic in his superb reading of Frank Chin's masculine cultural nationalist project, which we can cautiously regard as representative of a dominant strain of Asian American masculinity.<sup>4</sup> Noting that Chin lambasts Chinese Americans as occupying an "Uncle Tom" role within the racial drama of liberation—that is, "as being just like *certain* kinds of blacks" (Kim 2005, 34), Kim asserts that "[t]o be an Asian American is to be like an African American who wants to be white—it is to be trapped in the perpetual motion of a failed racial mimesis" (2005, 34–35). As Kim insightfully argues, Frank Chin's masculinist assertion is simultaneously homophobic and homoerotic, violently rejecting the heteronormatively understood emasculation of Asian men produced by the white optic, while simultaneously homoerotically investing in the aesthetics of Black masculinity:

Lacking an ethnically distinct ideal of virility of "their own" with which they can identify, Asian American men are left imitating "styles" of masculinity that belong, properly speaking, to men of other races. . . . But the "solution" that Chin prescribes for this problematic interracial mimetic desire that threatens to homosexualize Asian American men . . . is not the eradication of this desire, but rather its melancholic intensification via the aesthetic. (2005, 36)

For Chin, there is an imperative not to sidestep the mimesis of Black masculinity but, rather, to loathe oneself for the impossibility of attaining it.

Within the antiracist paradigm upon which Asian American studies and the Asian American movement were founded, we can characterize Blackness as occupying the position of racial superego, an Afro-Asian superego, the disciplinary apparatus of the Asian American psyche, counterposed to the id of assimilation and the fulfillment of the model minority. I thus offer Sigmund Freud's well-known tripartite model of the ego, superego, and id as a loose analogy for the Asian American masculine political consciousness, which regulates the moral-ethical orientation of panethnic Asian American identity. The superego, according to Freud, is the ego ideal, which works primarily to suppress the pleasure principle sought by the id and substitute the Oedipal complex. However, the superego is not merely a clone of the disciplinary apparatus of the Father; according to Freud, the superego's

relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: "You *ought to be* like this (like your father)." It also comprises the prohibition: "You *may not be* like this (like your father)—that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative." (1989, 641–642, emphasis in original)

The superego is thus a kind of inverted disidentification, one that simultaneously produces an aspirational ideal and the moral boundaries to achieving that ideal (in psychoanalytic terms, the Oedipal sexual objectification of the mother). Similarly, as Freud notes, the superego "answers to everything that is expected of the higher nature of man" and thus "contains the germ from which all religions have evolved" (1989, 643).

In a similar sense, the antiracist Asian American masculine political project has positioned Blackness as the Father figure idealized by the superego, as that which one "ought to be like" while simultaneously placing prohibitions on that mimesis. This is, in effect, an inversion of the logic of assimilationist model minoritarianism, which positions white respectability as a kind of superego. Blackness—and Black masculinity in particular for the Asian American masculine subject—becomes the antiracist ideal to be approximated but not appropriated. However, as David Eng insightfully observes in *The Feeling of Kinship*, the ego ideal "is brought about through the sublimation of homosexual libido into a collective social conscience and through the affective charge of guilt. The disavowal and management of homosexual desire emerges precisely of custodial dread in relation to a judgmental ego-ideal" (2010, 51). The masculine superego develops from a masochistic disavowal of a queer longing. Again, Daniel Y. Kim's analysis of Frank Chin is indispensable here. Chin's now-canonical *Chickencoop Chinaman* (which, among other things, presents a Black boxer as a father figure ideal for the Asian male protagonists who eventually fail to live up to the ideal) demonstrates not only the complex dynamics of the Afro-Asian superego, but also the masochism to which the Afro-Asian superego leads:

Although [*Chickencoop Chinaman*] insists that the Asian American artist will never be able to stand shoulder to shoulder . . . with his African American brothers if his

attitude toward them is one of fawning adulation, it also seems to suggest the impossibility of finding another model for an authentic minority tradition. Where the narrative tends, then, is toward a masochistic repetition of the predicament in which Tam finds himself at the opening of the play—that of having no non-white ideal of racialized masculinity to claim as his own other than those that are associated with African American culture. If Asian American men are thus resigned to “faking blackness,” as Kenji puts it, then the message that the reading of *The Chickencoop Chinaman* seems to convey is that they should at least fully acknowledge and embrace the self-hatred that is expressed in their abject relationship to black culture (Kim 2005, 201–202).

In Kim’s estimation of *Chinaman*, Black masculinity is an ideal that must not be imitated, precisely because that imitation precludes actual fraternity with Blackness, as a consequence of the performative femininity and queerness that such fawning engenders. Yet, since Black masculinity remains the only viable nonwhite ideal, Chin’s ideal Asian American masculinity is a masochistic self-flagellation that acknowledges the failure and impossibility of measuring up to Blackness. Kim then concludes that Chin, in fact, finds something “generative” in this self-punishment; that is to say, “the illusion of virility” (2005, 202) that is ultimately predicated upon an inwardly directed sadism directed toward femininity, queerness, and other “failures” of the ideal masculine Father.

Although Asian Americanist antiracism was obviously not universally committed to the homophobia and misogyny—not to mention the masculine essentialism of Blackness—that subtended the work of Chin, Sau-Ling Wong’s essay is evidence that the superego relationship to Blackness nevertheless persisted in the 1990s, and the Asian Americanist responses to the Richard Aoki incident demonstrate its continuation into the second decade of the 21st century, the time of this writing. To clarify, like Lye, I am critical of this turn, and yet, also like Lye, I fully concur with its political necessity. The Afro-Asian superego has the potential to question radically and productively the Asian Americanist paradigm of inclusion, disrupting the Asian American longing for inclusion into U.S. normativity. Yet, the Afro-Asian superego is premised upon an impossibility of mimesis, placing the father as the new masculine ego ideal that the Asian American subject never attains. This is Freudian moral masochism, a shame-driven pursuit of suffering in which the “ego reacts with feelings of anxiety (conscience anxiety) to the perception that it has not come up to the demands made by its ideal, the super-ego” (Freud 1989, 280). In fact, the shame is over failure to achieve the demands of the emblematic “bad subject,” the Black ideal, configured in the Asian American gaze as the Father.<sup>5</sup>

By theatricalizing this Afro-Asian superego and the shame it precipitates, the recent 21st-century plays of Philip Kan Gotanda are able to not only present but also actualize the shame of antiblack model minoritarianism while simultaneously and pessimistically demonstrating the structural impossibility of completely disrupting it. Through various deployments of characters that represent the Afro-Asian superego,

Gotanda subtends the paradoxical position of aspiring to a Black ethics outside of white supremacy, while it always necessarily remains out of reach.

### **“What Would Learned Jack Think?”: Black Judgment in *I Dream of Chang & Eng***

The dramatic work of one of the most important Asian American playwrights of the 20th and 21st centuries, Philip Kan Gotanda, spans from 1978 to the present day of this writing. Esther Kim Lee groups Gotanda with David Henry Hwang, Velina Hasu Houston, and Jeannie Barroga as one of the central figures of the “second wave” of Asian American playwrights<sup>6</sup> whose work came to prominence in the 1980s, characterized by their “attitude and preparedness” (2006, 126) and “professional training as actors, playwrights, and designers” (2006, 126). These playwrights also wrote at a time in which the likes of Genny Lim, Frank Chin, Momoko Iko, Mako, and others had already laid the groundwork for Asian American theater, and Asian American theater institutions such as East West Players and the Asian American Theater Workshop had already been established. “With formal training in playwriting and a tradition to follow,” writes Lee, “the second wave playwrights found the job title ‘Asian American playwright’ not at all strange or novel, a contrast to the first wave writers who practically invented the term” (2006, 126). Yet, despite his being one of the most celebrated figures of this “second wave,” Gotanda is a slight exception to this characterization, emerging more from a music background than a dramatic one, and was in fact completing his law degree at the University of California, Hastings, at the time he was writing his first play, a musical entitled *The Avocado Kid*. Unlike his peer, friend, and frequent collaborator David Henry Hwang, Gotanda would rise to prominence primarily through Asian American theater institutions. “Whereas Hwang found his big break at the Public Theater and worked mainly in mainstream venues on the East Coast,” writes Lee, “Gotanda began and developed his career as a playwright at Asian American theatre companies, especially the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco” (2006, 139). Through such institutions, Gotanda would go on to write and stage a vast and widely celebrated oeuvre, such as *Yankee Dawg You Die*, *The Wash*, *Fish Head Soup*, *The Ballad of Yachiyo*, *The Wind Cries Mary*, and *The Dream of Kitamura*, among others. Gotanda’s work would eventually earn him mainstream recognition that would solidify his place among the greatest U.S. playwrights of the late 20th and early 21st century, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, an award from the Dramatists’ Guild, and the Asian American Theater Company’s Lifetime Achievement Award. Gotanda’s work is formally diverse, although one of his specialties has been the traditional American family drama and the naturalistic, character-driven writing that attends the genre, applying the technique to the particularities of the Japanese American household; this is most notably showcased in such plays as *The Wash*, *Fish Head Soup*, *A Song for a Nisei Fisherman*, and *Sisters Matsumoto*. Interestingly, the play that has arguably garnered the most critical attention within

Asian American studies has been *Yankee Dawg You Die*, a comedic dialogue between an older-generation Asian American actor whose career has consisted of playing a wide range of stereotypical roles, and a newer-generation idealist actor who accuses his predecessor of a racial treason.

What is vital to note is that Gotanda is a writer who strongly embraces the Third-Worldist solidarity politics of the radical late-1960s Asian American movement, a kind of politics that has suffused his writing well into more liberal and neoliberal periods of Asian American structures of feeling from the 1980s onward. Since the turn of the 21st century, Gotanda has been increasingly interested in turning his gaze outward from Asian America and toward other narratives of color, particularly African American ones. His 2006 play *Yohen*, for example, centers around an interracial marriage between a Japanese American woman and an African American man. Many of his plays are implicitly aware of the model minoritarian turn of the Asian American mainstream of his present, but Gotanda sometimes reaches into the distant past in order to critique the Asian American cultural politics of the present. This is absolutely the case in the two plays I examine in the remainder of this chapter: 2011's *I Dream of Chang and Eng*, and the 2007 *After the War*, restaged in 2014 as *After the War Blues*. Both of these historical fictions masochistically critique the present, while also interrogating whether Asian American antiblackness may have been a transhistorical component of Asian Americanness itself.

With its world premiere in 2011 produced through UC Berkeley's Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies, *I Dream of Chang and Eng* is simultaneously one of Gotanda's most recent yet oldest works. The play is an ambitious biographical sketch of Chang and Eng Bunker (b. 1811, d. 1874), the "original Siamese twins" who spectacularly toured the United States in "freak show" fashion until eventually settling down in North Carolina to become "Gentleman Farmers." The twins, who were born in Siam to a mostly ethnically Chinese family in 1811 before being picked up to tour the West, "were so well known as public figures and so ubiquitous as conjoined twins that the term 'Siamese twins' eventually came to describe all such twins even, anachronistically, those who had lived before they did" (Wu 2012, 2). Gotanda has stated that he has worked on this play for over 30 years before finally premiering the version directed by Peter Glazer in the spring of 2011. In an interview in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Gotanda explains that he had originally aspired to an epic historical fidelity to the Bunkers' lives, conducting extensive research of the twins, but ultimately decided to embrace a fictionalization of their lives,<sup>7</sup> resulting in a play that occasionally suspends realism (such as allowing the twins to at times metaphorically separate by detaching their Velcro cord). Ultimately, the play is a meditative account of the brothers, proto-Asian Americans who capitalize upon their "freak," nonnormatively bodied status to eventually profit from spectacularizing their otherness to white American audiences but also struggle with the ontological paradox of being conjoined, desiring a space for privacy and intimacy especially as they wed the Yates sisters—Southern white Americans—and father a total of 21 children.

Not unlike Suzan-Lori Parks' 1996 play *Venus*, which delves into the signification, exploitation, and complexity of Sarah Baartman (1789–1815), Gotanda's *I Dream of Chang and Eng* locates the intersection of bodily "freakishness" with racial freakishness. Whereas *Venus* focuses on the queerly excessive posterior of Sarah Baartman, which came to function as an eroticized totem for the simultaneous objectification and abjection of Black femininity, *I Dream of Chang and Eng* principally focuses on the twins' status as completely unintelligible abominations "never before seen before by occidental eyes" (Gotanda 2013, 25), and conversely, their own confusion over their identity. Chang and Eng simultaneously suffer from and leverage their complete foreignness from the American field of intelligibility. Being ethnically Chinese but raised in Thailand, the twins struggle over their ethnic location more broadly, especially when brought to the United States. At the beginning of the second act, the Bunkers confer with Afong Moy, who herself was taken from Guangzhou to New York City in 1834 as the "The Chinese Woman," also a paid object of spectacle due to her bound feet. In the encounter, the Bunkers find Moy to be a curiosity as well, due to her authentic "Chineseness," but both Moy and the Bunkers concur that they are not "freaks." Rather, they see themselves as businesspeople and performers who, rather than being passive objects in a cage, actively showcase their bodies as a skill—they performatively enact what Anne Anlin Cheng has recently termed "ornamentalism," taking on a perihuman ontology to constitute oneself as an object of orientalist display.

Baartman herself is referenced during Elizabeth Yates' first encounter with Chang and Eng. Chang and Eng ask Elizabeth about the enlarged bustle in her dress, crudely remarking, "Why are your arses so big?" She responds,

ELIZABETH: It is called a bustle. It is the current fashion.

ENG: I do not understand.

CHANG: (reaching out to touch) Can we?

ELIZABETH: No.

Chang touches her—

ENG: How is this fashion? Explain.

ELIZABETH: The Hotentot Venus? One, Sara Baartman. An exotic, beautiful, full-bodied African lady—brought over, paraded around. Like you, everyone came to see her. Her *posterior* was large.

CHANG: (to Eng) Arse?

ENG: Yes.

ELIZABETH: We all stared but no one would speak it aloud. Instead we went home, closed our bedroom doors and fantasized about this posterior until one day we woke up and voila! We had *big arses*! In a *fashion* of speaking.

CHANG: I do not understand.

ELIZABETH: May you Gentlemen not suffer her fate. (Gotanda 2013, 30)

The exchange between Elizabeth and the Bunkers renders explicit the erotic allure of Baartman, who would serve as a racial bodily template for their own objectification: “Like you, everyone came to see her.” Elizabeth narrates the conversion of Baartman from freak show display to masturbatory pornotrope, transmuted into the creation of the bustle itself, a spectral appropriation of Baartman’s image while the body of Baartman herself was medically dissected as a dehumanized specimen of scientific curiosity. Elizabeth then bids the brothers hope that they “not suffer her fate,” which suggests that she hopes that the Bunkers avoid the transformation into fetish object, a dual thingification as both eroticized aesthetic fashion and object of “rational” knowledge. Thus, the Bunkers’ legibility, and indeed fate, is dependent upon the racial formation of Blackness—and in the case of Baartman, Black femininity—which produces the conceptual vocabulary of otherness that brackets the even more illegibly foreign Bunkers. Baartman has helped establish what Diana Taylor has referred to as a *scenario*, which “conjure[s] up past situations” through “reactivation rather than duplication” (2013, 32). The performative objectification of Chang and Eng is thus caught up in the reiterative space of Blackness, but given the agency that they ascribe to their position, their positionality within the U.S. racial system becomes, at least to an extent, a political choice.

This sense of political choice is provided, in part, by Gotanda’s choice to add a fictional black masculine critic to the play. In part due to the dramaturgical process at UC Berkeley, Gotanda decided to add a critical supporting character to the narrative, a gay Black sailor named Learned Jack. Throughout the play, Learned Jack assumes various roles across gender, always figuring as the Black character in each scene, but his “core” character of Learned Jack is a free Black crewman of the English vessel *Sachem*, which transports Chang and Eng to the United States for the first time in Act 1. Chang and Eng board the ship as “precious cargo” and quickly befriend Learned Jack and his white lover and crewmate, Good John. The two sailors are equally inclined toward maritime vernacular as they are toward indexing markers of formal education, swearing and quoting Coleridge (see Figure 3.1). As the banter continues, Chang and Eng begin to ask Learned Jack questions regarding his background. Eng tells Learned Jack, “You do not make sense.” When Jack asks for an explanation, Eng continues by saying “Your father was an American slave,” and Chang finishes the thought with “You speak the King’s English.” Learned Jack first compliments the twins on their insight—“You see ’neath the skin of things”—and proceeds to explain that his father, who “never took to being owned,” fought as a Tory against his slaveholders and was freed as a reward and brought to London. Consequently, adds Jack, his father raised him “with a keen sense of justice” (Gotanda 2013, 18).

Jack, John, and the twins then have a brief but telling discussion on the respective conditions of their existence, and eventually race (Gotanda 2013, 18–19):

LEARNED JACK: Do you abide by the way you are?

CHANG: We are special.

ENG: The heavens want us together more than not.





**Figure 3.1** Learned Jack discusses American racialization with Chang & Eng. From Philip Kan Gotanda's *I Dream of Chang & Eng* at University of California Berkeley, 2011. Photo by Josh Hesslein / Courtesy of UC Berkeley Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies.

LEARNED JACK: What if the heavens do not give a damn?

ENG: Do you abide by the way you are?

LEARNED JACK: I abide by the way I am. I do not abide by the way others see I am.

ENG: How do others see you?

LEARNED JACK: What comes of you if they cut you apart?

CHANG: The King's physician said we would die.

GOOD JOHN: So would we . . .

ENG: How do others see you Mr. Jack?

LEARNED JACK helps GOOD JOHN up—

LEARNED JACK: We make land soon. You will enjoy Boston. As you come into harbor it smells of a spit roasted lamb, spiced with offerings from an Irish Shantee.

CHANG: You show us Boston.

LEARNED JACK: Boston is a free city but my father is in me and I will not abide by a nation that buys and sells men. We will not step onto land there.

ENG: By all accounts you are treated no different than the white sailors. You are paid an equal wage, move freely above and below the decks—

LEARNED JACK: I am a *Black Jack*. Only at sea. You may think America knows you. It does not.

ENG: We are not Black.



LEARNED JACK: You are not White and that is what matters to some men. Come dear John, come awake now—

LEARNED JACK holds GOOD JOHN—

LEARNED JACK: —They have not seen the likes of you in color of skin or shape of body. It is yet to be seen what you are in America's eyes.

The beginning of this exchange opens with a question of “abiding by what you are” — Chang and Eng defer to “the heavens,” and thus fate, as the source of their otherness; they are consigned to their position as “freaks.” When the question is turned to Learned Jack, however, he makes a critical distinction between exterior reception and interior selfhood, abiding by “who he is” but not by others’ perspectives of him. Learned Jack is notably evasive when the twins persist in asking him what that perspective is, but Jack invokes the violence of racism when he refuses to take them to see Boston, making the political decision to not step foot on U.S. soil so long as the slave trade continues. When the twins naively insist on Learned Jack’s equal status, Jack clarifies that he is a “Black Jack. Only at sea,” pointing to the queer maritime space as the only one in which he can be, to some degree, free.

Then, Learned Jack fatefully warns the twins of racism, stating that America does not “know them.” When Eng insists that they are “not Black,” Learned Jack immediately responds with “You are not White and that is what matters to some men.” The exchange reflects two separate conceptualizations of racism, with Eng pointing to their nonblackness as a potential source of freedom from racial subjugation, and Learned Jack highlighting their nonwhiteness. Symbolically, Learned Jack extends an invitation to solidarity, recognizing commonality in structural positions against a common white hegemony. When Learned Jack adds that “They have not seen the likes of you in color of skin or shape of body. It is yet to be seen what you are in America’s eyes,” he highlights the foreignness of Chang and Eng, their unknowability, foreshadowing their inevitable orientalizing, speaking from his experience as a veteran to racism by virtue of his Blackness; he possesses a “wisdom” surrounding the racist “truth” of America, offering benevolent warning to a fellow nonwhites, extending solidarity. Chang and Eng in turn feel indebted to Jack and, to some degree, responsible to him and what he stands for, especially in later scenes.

Unfortunately, for all of Learned Jack’s discussion of interiority and exteriority, Learned Jack lacks a degree of interiority himself, existing primarily as a moral counterpoint to Chang and Eng’s trajectory. Paradoxically, he takes on some of the characteristics of the so-called “magical negro,” a term popularized by filmmaker Spike Lee and described by Matthew Hughey as

a lower class, uneducated black person who possesses supernatural or magical powers. These powers are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation. (2009, 544)

Learned Jack is decidedly not uneducated, and Chang and Eng are decidedly not white, but Learned Jack assumes a similar role as a “magical negro” nonetheless, freely offering wisdom and clarity to the wayward Asian subjects, ironically regarding racism itself. His lack of interiority also allows Chang and Eng, and by virtue the audience, to project an idealization of anti-racist subjectivity, and Learned Jack correspondingly reappears throughout the play in different forms to remind Chang and Eng of this idealization.

Nevertheless, between Sarah Baartman and Learned Jack, the Bunkers find themselves both cautioned by the victimization of Black femininity and offered warning (but also solidarity) by Black (gay) masculinity. Learned Jack is referenced admirably by Chang and Eng throughout as the play continues, especially as Chang and Eng encounter both horrific American racist violence and the privileges associated with being Southern landowners. Nonblackness and nonwhiteness compete as the dominant factors of their racialization. In one scene, shortly after putting on a show in their 1835 nationwide tour, Chang and Eng are captured by a massive lynch mob, mistaken for “Indians” despite their insistence that they are “the famous Siamese twins,” saved at the last minute by a white gentleman, Joshua, who vouches for their status as international celebrities. As relief settles over the two of them, they catch a glimpse of two hanged figures who disturbingly match the description of Learned Jack and Good John on the darkened stage. Breaking the realism of the scene, the two victims, metatheatrically doubled by Jack and John, reveal themselves to Chang and Eng. When Chang asks Eng, “Are we colored or abominations?,” Learned Jack replies with a familiar “You are not white.” When Eng replies that they are now famous, Learned Jack warns them, “Before they had no name for you. Beware. They have seen the likes of you now and America knows what you are” (Gotanda 2013, 43).

Here, the lynched Learned Jack points to the danger of racial subjecthood, of the named subject who remains fixed within the white American gaze, to reference Fanon. In classic Foucauldian fashion, with legibility and knowability comes killability, the quality of being an identifiable target to be abjected from the white supremacist order. Learned Jack thus marks this shift from orientalized inscrutability, of being outside the grid of racial intelligibility altogether, to the state of being “known” by America. They are “known,” of course, insofar as “knowing” is itself a technology of otherness and categorization, of which Blackness has been an object par excellence. “Knowing” is not a realization of any material reality but, rather, more reflective of racial objectification, extracting value to reinforce the social supremacy of whiteness. Learned Jack, by invoking this didactic refrain, becomes a sage of racialization, the fact of Blackness that provides him a bare insight into the mechanics of race with which Chang and Eng slowly comprehend. In a sense, the journey of Chang and Eng serves as a euphemism for Asian American subject formation itself as they negotiate between whiteness and Blackness.

Perhaps the most damning moment in Chang and Eng’s relationship to Blackness occurs in the scene “Chang and Eng and Slavery.” At this point of the play, Chang and Eng begin to settle into their burgeoning role as wealthy landowners in the American

South, a privilege of course foreclosed to Blacks. Chang and Eng's future father-in-law, Father Yates, opens the scene mid-conversation, explaining that "We are in the South. It is how things are done here." He proceeds to extoll the economic benefits of slavery, explaining that a massive investment will lead to a significant payoff as the slave continues to work for free. Chang is clearly somewhat uneasy about this, and a crucial interaction transpires between Chang, Eng, and "Canaan," Father Yates' slave, who is, once again, metatheatrically doubled by Learned Jack:

CHANG: There were slaves in Siam.

ENG: They were indentured workers not slaves.

CHANG: They were Chinese. Chinese slaves.

No response—

CANAAN moves to the other side of the mirror—

CHANG: Just like us.

CHANG and ENG face the mirror, looking at their imagined reflections.

CANAAN stares back at them.

ENG: We are free men.

CHANG: They will figure out what we are. They will have a name for us.

ENG: It is the only way to make a profit. It is what they do here.

Canaan steps through the mirror and hands Eng a *letter*—

CANAAN: (As Learned Jack commenting on his slave character) For you *massa*—

ENG and LEARNED JACK/CANAAN look at each other for a beat—LEARNED JACK exits.

When Eng, after hesitation, replies, "We are free men," Chang responds by invoking Learned Jack's previous line: "They will figure out what we are. They will have a name for us." Eng insists that slavery is the only means to make a profit, but Learned Jack/Canaan, in a bitter moment indexing awareness of their betrayal, addresses Eng as "massa." In this moment, Chang and Eng's nonblackness supersedes their nonwhiteness; they stare into the mirror to imagine themselves occupying the space of whiteness, and such a transition necessitates the betrayal of Learned Jack and of Blackness. Their complicity and perpetuation of slavery facilitates their acceptability, and eventually their marriage to the Yates daughters. Their decision to purchase and exploit enslaved Africans recalls Toni Morrison's indictment of immigrant antiblackness, that new immigrants participate "freely in this most enduring and efficient rite of passage into American culture: negative appraisals of the native-born black population. Only when the lesson of racial estrangement is learned is assimilation complete." Learned Jack's presence in the mirror as subjugated property is the ultimate signifier of Chang and Eng's ascension into American society, but it also highlights the sense of moral failing on the part of the twins, haunting them with guilt, that by participating in slavery, they are by extension enslaving their comrade and former mentor. But also, Chang locates himself and his brother in the "slave" position, pointing out the slavery in Siam to which they themselves had been consigned. Chang's comment also

broadens the culpability of slavery beyond whiteness, while Eng's reply ("They were indentured servants") simultaneously distances them from the analogy of enslaved Blackness while (futilely) attempting to redeem Asianness from its complicity with forced labor. Yet, the presence of Canaan / Learned Jack in the mirror suggests that Chang and Eng are indeed somehow analogous to Blackness. They are, to return to Sexton, "masters," just by virtue of their nonblackness, but also nevertheless non-white; by being both nonblack and nonwhite, they are also caught between the two binaries of valuation that those negatory categories signify (white/nonwhite, Black/nonblack).

The presence of the mirror in this scene evokes the familiar Lacanian "mirror stage," in which a young child recognizes themselves for the first time in the mirror image; doing so produces an identification. As Lacan writes: "It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification*, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image" (2002, 4). In identifying with the image, the subject understands himself as self *and* other, that they exist in the social world, and is an *other* relative to their others. The mirror stage, however, does not come seamlessly; Lacan states,

This development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the individual's formation into history: the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation—and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an "orthopedic" form of its totality—and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. (2002, 6)

Thus, Lacan's mirror stage entails a dialectical fracturing caused by the disjuncture between the image in one's mind and the image seen in the mirror. The rise of this fractured subject marks the end of the mirror stage, and the dialectic of this fracture "will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations" (Lacan 2002, 7). As a consequence, the process of the mirror stage is both crucial to the subject's understanding of herself as a being in a social world and also, as a consequence of the fracture, inculcates in the subject a desire for the other's desire, understanding themselves to not just be subject but also object within the scopical regime.

But as the twins see Learned Jack in the mirror, particularly at the point in which they have attained a degree of symbolic whiteness through the act of owning slaves themselves, the play suggests a troubling but productive ambiguity, particularly in the context of contemporary Asian American relations at the time of its writing. There is indeed a Lacanian disjuncture between the image of the conjoined twins who, through unique and fortuitous historical circumstances, have become Southern gentlemen, and the figure of Learned Jack / Canaan. They have achieved "freedom" through the uniquely American paradox of owning slaves, of subjugating Blackness, and yet they still see the image of Blackness in the mirror. The play suggests, then, that

the Bunker twins—and perhaps Asian America at large—are existentially more proximal to Blackness than to whiteness even as they perform the most vicious antiblackness possible. And it is this complicity in slavery, paired with their own identification/disidentification with Blackness that is most perverse—in the classic Hegelian sense, by achieving freedom through enslaving, they are also bound up in the object of that slavery, that they are enslaving themselves.

Tellingly, the brothers express a sense of reluctance, a cognitive dissonance. Gotanda's project is not, as stated earlier, to be faithful to the literal history of Chang and Eng, but the incongruence here between history and dramatization is telling. According to *The Two*, a biography on Chang and Eng written in 1978 by Irving and Amy Wallace, Chang and Eng together owned a total of 28 slaves by 1860, and “were rumored to be hard on their slaves, sometimes whipping them” (1978, 189). Wallace and Wallace then continue to cite rather brutal historical anecdotes about the twins' relationship with their slaves, such as exhibiting “a malignant air” when they “saw the negro standing in the front door” rather than entering from the rear and insisting that he “knew his place” (1978, 189). The same person, J. E. Johnson, recalls how, when one of Chang's slaves escaped and was shot dead by a white citizen, Chang and Eng refused the killer's compensation for lost property “and expressed their satisfaction that the negro was out of the way” (Wallace and Wallace 1978, 190). Wallace and Wallace also state that Chang and Eng would fondly tell a story in which they won “a negro” in a game of cards and sold him back at a major profit to the gamblers.

The asymmetry between Chang and Eng, the sympathetic characters who befriend Learned Jack, and Chang and Eng, the brutal overseers who are relieved at the murder of their escaped slave, epitomizes the moral masochism of the Afro-Asian superego, and Gotanda's desire for coalition and solidarity in spite of a material moment in which our protagonists furthered and capitalized upon antiblack exploitation. Of course, this asymmetry also stresses the necessity to read Gotanda's play as a literary rather than historical project, pointing to the underlying political project of *I Dream of Chang and Eng*. The relentless presence of Learned Jack, who haunts the play as Blackness haunts the Asian American political and literary imagination, insists that Asian America find political alliance with fellow racialized peoples, even if it has also benefited from strategic privileges from its oppressors. Learned Jack shames Asian America to ask, as Eng muses upon his decision to start a plantation, “What would Learned Jack think?”

### **“Orientals Can't Play No Jazz”: Yearning for Solidarity in *After the War***

Gotanda's *After the War*, commissioned by and staged at the American Conservatory Theater (ACT) in San Francisco in 2007 and revised and restaged at UC Berkeley in 2014 as *After the War Blues*,<sup>8</sup> is a sweeping drama surrounding life in a Japanese American-owned boarding house in the San Francisco Fillmore district in 1946.

Gotanda tellingly dedicates the play to August Wilson and John Okada, and audiences familiar with the works of Wilson and Okada can immediately pinpoint the influences of both writers. *After the War* echoes the narrative and character structure of Wilson's boardinghouse play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and also spends ample time wrestling with the postwar angst of a No No Boy (male Japanese Americans who refused conscription and a loyalty oath while in camp and thus relocated to other, harsher camps), most famously treated by John Okada's novel of the same name. Gotanda's explicit reference to both writers, performing masterful homage through the lyrical style and raw expression of the text, itself performs an Afro/Asian solidarity.

However, *After the War* concerns itself with a key moment of agonizing Black/Asian conflict centered on San Francisco's Fillmore district. Postwar Fillmore reflects a time in which Japanese Americans return to a former Japanesetown that had been resettled by Blacks during their internment. Not only does *After the War* express the challenges faced by two differently oppressed groups competing over limited space and resources, but it also represents a clash of narratives of racialization. The narrative of Japanese American internment comes face to face with the narrative of Black subjugation and slavery, and despite beginning in solidarity, that solidarity eventually proves unsustainable. As I will elaborate later, central protagonist Chet Monkawa ultimately sides with whiteness, insofar as we understand whiteness in this play to be "property," as Cheryl Harris has provocatively argued in her powerful 1993 essay of the same name.

With a large, diverse ensemble cast, the largely naturalistic *After the War* invites a range of analytical angles, but again I focus on the role of Black characters, in particular Earl Worthing, a mid-40s dockworker behind on his rent and one of the most central characters to the narrative, and his sister-in-law Leona Hitchings, an educated woman in her mid-40s who is much more distrustful of Japanese Americans than her brother-in-law. Unlike the quasi-magical Learned Jack, who serves as more of a mystical literary device than a fleshed-out character, treated with comparative thinness as an allegorical symbol, Earl and Leona are full, realist characters and thus not as easily identifiable as racial superegos. Rather than embodying the Afro-Asian superego, they invoke it and conjure it. Yet, Earl and Leona serve a similar function in respect to Asian American agony, raising once again the question of Asian American positionality vis-à-vis Blackness, ending with a tragically pessimistic conclusion that coalition may be structurally impossible, or at least extremely difficult.

The play begins portraying the strong friendship between Earl and the play's central character, Chet Monkawa, a former No-No Boy who manages the boarding house and was once an aspiring jazz musician. In a sense, Chet is ostensibly an "ideal critical subject," having actively resisted the internment rather than rehearsing the model minoritarianism and respectability of the Japanese American Citizens League; he even borders on embodying the Afro-Asian superego itself. The solidarity between the Chet and Earl is both personal and political. In Act 1 Scene 7, Chet and Earl exchange a one-on-one conversation, in which Earl begins complimenting Chet on how effectively he can perform Blackness: "We walk in [to the jazz club], you Japanese.

I turn around, suddenly you a colored man” (Gotanda 2007, 18). As the discussion veers into Chet’s incarceration at Tule Lake for his political protest, Earl insists that Chet never deserved to be especially imprisoned, nor Japanese Americans as a whole interned, regardless of the circumstances:

EARL: Don’t matter, don’t matter. All you folks shoulda never been took to Camps and you shoulda never been put into that Tule Lake place. I don’t even need to know why and I understand. Man don’t need to have a reason, he change the rules to suit hisself then say it’s for everybody’s good, like hell. Specially when it come to war time. Civil War, my great grandpa fought, hell who wants to be a slave? Sides we gonna get 40 acres and a mule. See my 40 acres? See my mule? First World War. Course they want the Colored man, who’s gonna do all the dirty work. Okay, we go, America gonna finally give us our due. We fight, we do the dirty work and we die. What we got to show for it? Our very own graveyard on the other side of the fence where the weeds growin’. This War? Where my pretty backyard with the swimmin’ pool? Where the hell my martini? Ship yards close down ’cause we won the war but guess who the first one lose his job? Over one year now Earl T. Worthing ain’t found steady work. All us Colored folks losin’ jobs, no wonder the music gettin’ meaner. (Gotanda 2007, 19)

In this moment at the beginning of the play, Earl can easily indicate the common villain in the U.S. state for both the Japanese American and African American communities, with the former unnecessarily incarcerated, and the latter repeatedly disenfranchised. Earl is also attentive to the specificity of the No-No Boy narrative, pointing out the futility of wartime service in achieving redress.<sup>9</sup> The friendship of the two men displays the possibility for political empathy, although this also hinges upon Chet’s channeling of Black masculinity, symbolized by his musical prowess (jazz in the 2007 *After the War*, blues in the 2014 *After the War Blues*). Chet’s acceptance by Earl, in performatively masculine terms, fulfills the yearning for Black acceptance found in the writings of Frank Chin, and it also represents a form of success in relation to the Afro-Asian superego that Chang and Eng spectacularly failed.

However, the ease of solidarity becomes complicated by the entrance of Earl’s sister-in-law, Leona. Unlike Earl at the beginning of the play, Leona is Black-centric in her interests, distrusting the Japanese American characters at the Monkawa boarding house. In effect, she serves as the voice of Afro-pessimist critique throughout the play. In Act 1, Scene 10, when Earl urges Leona to be empathetic to the Japanese, given their prior eviction from the Fillmore, Leona retorts,

And then they come back, after they lose the war and what happens? After *they* lose the war and we won, all us Colored folks get thrown out and all these Japs get to move in. That’s just like it always is but that doesn’t mean it’s right. (Gotanda 2007, 27)



Earl rightfully reminds her of the distinction between Japanese and Japanese Americans, which Leona refuses, given what she considers to be their identical relationship to Black people. When Earl pleads that “They just got back from being locked up,” Leona provocatively replies,

It doesn't matter things like this, everybody got some pain they have to jive with. Lord knows, no one's got more pain than Colored folk. That includes your Jap—“oriental” friends. So they been locked up for 3, 4 years? So what? That ain't pain. I got a life time of pain. 3, 4 years—that's a walk in the woods compared to our pain. Japs don't know nothing about pain. (Gotanda 2007, 27)

Leona's commentary, tainted by overt anti-Asian bigotry such as the usage of “Jap,” bluntly belittles Japanese American dispossession relative to the intergenerational atrocity of slavery and its aftermath. Leona's comparative framing of the discussion of racial injury is predicated primarily upon a resentment ethos of injury—the legitimacy of sympathy is predicated upon the depths of the trauma. Nevertheless, Leona provides a valuable historical critique of the Japanese American position that within the multi-century context of slavery and mass dispossession, the Japanese American internment is hardly exceptional, and that they are at least partly agents in the furthering of antiblack displacement.

In Act 2, Scene 18, Leona persists in her assertion of the totalizing nature of Black racialization in a later conversation with Lillian, the former fiancée of Chet's brother and Chet's primary love interest in the play:

You think it just happens to be that way. For Coloreds it can't be like that because when bad stuff happens, you don't just see what's happening to you right then, you see back to your mother, grandmother, great grandmother. You got a memory of things doesn't even belong to you but connected to you. And you know it didn't just happen. What happened before and now is all connected. (Gotanda 2007, 51)

When Leona accuses Lillian of not having any idea of what “Colored” people have been through, Lillian replies that Leona doesn't have any idea of what Japanese Americans have been through, although she cannot counter Leona's point of deeply embedded intergenerational racialized trauma. Leona's commentary establishes Blackness as exceptional among racializations, and that despite the vicious trauma of the internment, Japanese Americans find themselves in structural domination over Blacks, leaving Leona with no incentive to express solidarity.

The climax of the play conveys the tragic disintegration of Earl and Chet's friendship in a catalyzing moment of violence. One of the central character conflicts of *After the War* entails Earl and Chet's complex rivalry for the affections of Mary-Louise, the white Okie taxi hall dancer and sex worker who had once had a relationship with Chet and currently beds Earl (whom she refers to behind his back as a “nigger”), eventually pregnant with his child. Mary-Louise was once Chet's partner, although



Chet eventually comes to favor Lillian by the end of the play, but Earl's detection of their intimacy throws Earl into a rage. However, the climactic confrontation between Earl, Chet, Mary-Louise, and Mary-Louise's brother Benji shatters the possibility of solidarity established at the onset of the play. Earl begins to violently shake Mary-Louise in a jealous rage, which prompts Benji to train a shotgun at Earl. Chet succeeds at pulling the gun away from Benji but then, crucially, points the gun at Earl, whom he perceives to be the biggest threat in the moment. Incredulous, Earl implicates him and ultimately agrees with Leona:

EARL: 3 years they lock you up. And now you standin' there defendin' that White boy over me.

CHET: It's got nothing to do with the boy's race—

EARL: It's all got to do with race. Everything's 'bout race. What they done to you they been doin' to us for a long time, can't you see that? We on the same side of the fence. (beat) But maybe you know that. Maybe that's what this all about.

CHET: What are you saying Earl?

EARL: I ask myself what you doin' on that side of the door holdin' a gun in my face and now I think I know, Leona right all along.

CHET: Earl, what's wrong with you? Don't measure me like White folks.

EARL: You got the gun, you the landlord, well?

CHET: If it's not Colored it's gotta be White? Is that it?

EARL: 'Cause that's all there is as far as I know.

CHET: Look at me. Look at me, Earl. I'm standing right here. Can't you see me? Look. Look.

(beat)

EARL: I'm a Colored man, Chester. That's all I know. (Gotanda 2007)

When Chet points the gun at Earl, Earl suddenly realizes that in this moment, Chet's nonblackness outweighs his nonwhiteness, that Chet has symbolically chosen whiteness. Suddenly, the black/white binary becomes reified as a structural paradigm, within which the Japanese American Chet has made a political decision. "Leona," in other words, was "right all along." This is, of course, doubly heightened by the fact that Chet unquestionably holds greater institutional power in this moment, also effectively being Earl's landlord and, spurred on by competition over Mary-Louise, in pursuit of overdue rent. Structurally, as property manager, despite his radicality as a jazz artist and No-No Boy, despite his own history of exclusion, Chet is in effect fated to turn the gun on the Black man. The circumstances of the narrative thus distill the relationship between Chet and Earl to its barest materiality of landlord and tenant.

In this moment, economic hierarchy suddenly becomes a racial one. This should come as no surprise in light of Cheryl Harris' powerful 1993 observation that "American law has recognized a property interest in whiteness" (1993, 1713), "rights in property and contingent on, intertwined with, and conflated with race" (1993, 1714). The confrontation is between Chet, who is propertied and assuming

the position typically afforded to whiteness, and Earl, slave descendant, racialized-as-property, over the status afforded to the claim over the white woman's whiteness, as well as the debt of rent to stay within *literal* property. And although the narrative places most of the "fault" of the conflict on Earl's actions rather than Chet's, there is nevertheless an overpowering sense of betrayal when Chet aims the gun. The homo-social solidarity between Chet and Earl becomes heteromale rivalry through the collision of whiteness and property, and Chet chooses, by and large, to preserve both.

With Earl and Chet's friendship irrevocably dead, *After the War* makes us wonder whether Earl's earlier skepticism of whether "an Oriental can play jazz" was correct, after all. That is to say, Chet is able to *perform* a culture of Blackness without inhabiting its political position; to "play jazz," then, is to do both. Chet Monkawa's approximation of Blackness reveals itself for having been taboo, incestuously imitating the style of Black masculine cool while ultimately finding himself on the side of capital and white property relations, despite all the best intentions. It was the privilege of nonblackness that finds Monkawa trapped in the position of the oppressor.

Nevertheless, Chet's defense of property is ultimately futile; as the final supertitles of the play read, Japanese Town is marked for eminent domain seizure and is effectively razed to the ground by 1960 to make room for transnational Japanese capitalists to build the Kintetsu Mall, which still stands to this day. The play's conclusion implies that Chet is to Earl what the Japanese companies are to the Monkawa Boarding House, that racialization and property's intertwining relies upon eviction or the threat of it. It also, moreover, speaks to precisely the politics embedded within Sau-Ling Wong's skepticism of denationalization 12 years prior, that a lateral, local solidarity with other U.S.-based people of color bears more promise than a transnational one of shared ethnicity.

*After the War* thus asks the question of whether Asian American advancement and inclusion depends precisely upon antiblackness, and whether an ethico-political choice is in fact possible for the Asian American subject in this regard—it seems to share the pessimism of Sexton and Wilderson, or the critique of the Asian American panethnic political project that we would see in the work of Susan Koshy. In a sense, *After the War* is ironically more fatalistic than *I Dream of Chang and Eng*, despite the latter being based on actual historical events; Learned Jack appears explicitly to the brothers of *Chang and Eng* as if offering a choice between self-interested moves toward identification with whiteness, or solidarity with Blackness. In contrast, *After the War* presents Leona—and eventually Earl—as paranoid interlocutors for an Afro-Asian superego, with Chet reasonable and well intentioned, with the moment of antiblackness presenting an Aristotelian end to his tragedy (although it is the friendship, rather than Chet himself, who dies). While Chang and Eng choose to be oppressors, Chet lands upon the position due to his hamartia, which is non-blackness. Whereas *I Dream of Chang and Eng* implicitly seems to ask "what if" the Bunkers hadn't become complicit in a system of slavery, the fictional *After the War* demonstrates that Chet's structural position as model minority overwhelms his agentic attempts at solidarity.

It is possible to read both of these plays as demonstrations of the Afro-pessimist position, that the Asian American is inevitably the “master” to the Black subject’s “slave.” *I Dream of Chang and Eng* fits this diagnosis in a literal sense. But *After the War* offers up a complex critique of model minoritarianism and antiblackness while at the same time refusing to offer an “ideal type”—in this case, an Afro-Asian superego *figure*—to emulate. The closest to this “ideal type,” if anything, is Chet himself, with his No-No Boy political consciousness and comfortable heteromascularity. Chet’s failure as a figure of solidarity demonstrates that it is the circuitous flow of racial power that determines racial structural positions, more than any intent to oppress, as in the episteme of resentment.

Moreover, it is worth considering that while Chet can be read as aspiring to “whiteness as power,” Earl and Chet are, in effect, making competing claims to whiteness, albeit in different ways. In this sense, *After the War* works both with and against the exceptionalism of the Afro-pessimist paradigm. While Chet finds himself the beneficiary of whiteness as power through property, Earl seeks whiteness *sexually* through the imperfect (lumpenproletarian) vessel of Mary-Louise. The male competition over the white woman speaks to a kind of colonized desire, made explicit by Leona’s accusation to Earl that he desires the white “whore” over her and does not look at Leona with the same desire. However, Earl’s claim to whiteness is not assimilationist per se; in a sense, Earl’s eroticism and possessiveness of Mary-Louise can be understood as heteromasculine resentment. In the context of his early soliloquy (“See my 40 acres? See my mule?”), Mary-Louise is objectified and idealized as recompense within Earl’s compensatory logic. In this context, Frantz Fanon’s oft-quoted treatise of the subject seems descriptive of Earl’s eroticism of Mary-Louise, the “desire to be suddenly *white*.... But ... who better than the white woman to bring this about? By loving me, she proves to me that I am worthy of a white love. I am loved like a white man” (Fanon 2008, 45). And while Earl’s perception of Chet’s affections for Mary-Louise catalyze the conflict between the two men, Chet ultimately chooses not to couple with Mary-Louise but nevertheless retains the (white) power of property. While *After the War* acknowledges the gravitational pull of the Black racialization in setting the paradigm of race at large and the logics of antiblackness that animate the politics of inclusion, it is critical of all racialized subjects who attempt to pursue redress from whiteness *through* whiteness, including Black ones. Rather than an exceptionalist ontology of Black social death, *After the War* offers a model of variegated traumas and multiple, messy, conflicting attempts at racial rebuilding.

Nevertheless, in both *After the War* and *I Dream of Chang and Eng*, it is the Asian being morally whipped. These plays confront their audiences with shame, hinting at an idealized resentment but instead turning in on themselves. They commit to a moral masochism that necessitates self-interrogation, while simultaneously making its subjects intently and uncomfortably aware of their socialities. And although their shapes do not materialize within these performances, the plays necessitate imaginings for new political possibilities, either with the presence of a clear superego against antiblackness (as in *Chang and Eng*), or a diffuse one (as in *After the War*).

## Coda: Nurturing the Psychic Life of Coalition

Several years ago, I posed a question to Philip Gotanda, pondering whether or not Asian Americans were, on a multitude of levels, actualizing their “model minority” status. It was an early version of the question that I have explored throughout this chapter, wondering what direction Asian American cultural politics should head in the face of increasing embourgeoisement and material gains.

It was then that he shot me a wryly ironic smile and asked, “Well, isn’t that what we wanted all along?”

What have we wanted? In a sense, Asian America itself has principally been an aspiration since its coining by Yuji Ichioka in 1968, one premised on the rejection of “Oriental,” seeking something like freedom within its panethnic rallying cry. By asking what Asian America has wanted, we ask what it is, what it always has been.

Gotanda’s work makes us question the ethico-political aspirations of Asian American cultural politics altogether. Since 2014, Gotanda has worked on an initiative he has entitled “The American Adaptation Cycle,” in which he adapts his celebrated 1985 play *The Wash* to non-Japanese American cultural contexts. For the first leg of the project, Gotanda worked in close collaboration with longtime colleague, actor, and director Steven Anthony Jones to develop “The Jamaican Wash,” rewriting the play to fit Jamaican American diasporic mores and historical circumstances. According to Gotanda, this project aims to produce cross-cultural understandings through a solidarity of shared marginality, a collaboration of what Deleuze once called “minor literatures,” in order not only to produce solidarities, but also to collectively unseat the universality of the white canon.

In any event, Gotanda’s engagement with Blackness as a mode of anti-racist ethics powerfully dramatizes the Asian Americanist anxiety of becoming a model minority. At the time of this writing, an age in which Richard Aoki has been discovered to be a likely informant, when many Chinese Americans rallied to support Peter Liang after he killed unarmed Black man Akai Gurley,<sup>10</sup> when public awareness of the extrajudicial killings of Black people has reached a fevered pitch with the Black Lives Matter movement, the question of Asian American positionality vis-à-vis Blackness becomes all too imperative. Perhaps that is why Earl was initially skeptical that “an Oriental can play jazz.” Perhaps Earl was right.

## Chapter 2

1. See Karen Shimakawa's *National Abjection* (2001) and Joshua Chambers-Letson's *A Race So Different* (2013).
2. Well in line with the history of racialized people in the United States—the Buffalo Soldiers, the Tuskegee Airmen, the 442nd Infantry Battalion, the American Indian code talkers, and so on—utilizing military service to demonstrate loyalty and perform equality.
3. As Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman have written regarding the question of slavery reparations in the writings of Ottobah Gugoano, “justice is beyond the scope of the law, and redress necessarily inadequate. If what has been done cannot be undone, then the forms of legal and social compensation available are less a matter of wiping the slate clean than of embracing the limited scope of the possible in the face of the irreparable, and calling attention to the incommensurability between pain and compensation” (2005, 1–2). *Chinoiserie* gestures toward this form of reparation, although, as I argue, it remains limited by its attachments to normative grievability.
4. Documentary theater is a medium well rehearsed within performance studies, and like all such works, the UC Hastings re-enactment provokes the question posed by Carol Martin: “not everything in the archive is part of the documentary. . . . What is the basis for the selection, order, and manner of presentation of materials from the archive?” (2006, 9). Consequently, continues Martin, “The process of selection, editing, organization is where the creative work of documentary theatre gets done” (2006, 9). In other words, documentary theater is a curatorial medium, defined as much by its selections from the archive as much as that from its omissions, all the while creating “its own aesthetic imaginaries while claiming a special factual legitimacy” (2006, 10), and “[a]s staged politics, specific instances of documentary theatre construct the past in service of the future the authors would like to create” (2006, 10).

## Chapter 3

1. Third-generation American; grandparents immigrated to the United States.
2. Here, I note 1992 as a key historical inflection point due to the Los Angeles riots / LA rebellion, which occurred from April 29 to May 4, 1992, waged principally by Black and Latinx communities outraged over the acquittal of the police officers who brutally beat African American motorist Rodney King. As David Palumbo-Liu, Helen Jun, Claire Jean Kim, and others have discussed, the mainstream media also rhetorically positioned Korean American business owners as victims of the uprising, wherein Koreans were very blatantly demonstrated as entrepreneurial model minorities in contrast to criminalized Blackness. It should be noted that the LA riots also occurred in the wake of the murder of Latasha Harlans, an African American teenager, by a Korean grocer who accused her of theft and did not serve jail time in the resulting trial, which occurred one week before the riots. The spectacle of the LA riots also signaled to many within Asian American activist communities the collapse of the Asian/Black coalition.
3. Within Black/African American studies, the most notable confrontation of Afro-pessimism has been an ongoing critique from Fred Moten, who forcefully argues that Black life, rather than Black social death, should be the locus of critical attention; Moten also argues that it is not *social* death that constitutes Blackness, but *political* death (2013). Within ethnic

studies more broadly, one of the most compelling critiques of Afro-pessimism comes from Iyko Day, who writes: “According to Sexton, no other oppression is reducible to antiblackness, but the relative totality of antiblackness is the privileged perspective from which to understand racial formation more broadly. But unlike the way feminist and queer critical theory interrogate heteropatriarchy from a subjectless standpoint, Sexton’s entire point seems to rest on the very specificity and singularity—rather than subjectlessness—of black critical theory’s capacity to understand race. The privilege of this embodied viewpoint similarly relies on rigidly binaristic conceptions of land and bodily integrity” (2015, 112). That is, Sexton requires an ossification of the subject, and an essentialist equivalence between the body and the subject, in order to make claims to Black exceptionalism. Moreover, Day makes reference to the “subjectlessness” of feminist and queer critical theory, a valuation most assertively pushed by Grace Hong and Roderick Ferguson in *Strange Affinities*, that difference in women of color feminism and queer of color critique is “not a multiculturalist celebration, not an excuse for presuming a commonality among all racialized peoples, but a clear-eyed appraisal of the dividing line between valued and devalued, which can cut within, as well as across, racial groupings” (Hong and Ferguson 2011, 11). This heterotopian woman of color feminist model, according to Hong and Ferguson, furthermore counters the epistemology of “ideal types” that undergirds the logics of cultural nationalisms that we see equally in Afro-pessimist and Afro-Asian coalitional thought (namely, the resistant Black subject), seeking instead a cultural politics that acts “as a rejection of the ways in which bourgeois and minority nationalisms create idealized identities” (Hong and Ferguson 2011, 11) altogether.

4. As Kim rightfully notes, Chin’s literary specialty is “the self-loathing, masochism, and the melancholy that define Asian American masculinity” (2005, 143).
5. A profound irony, given Hortense Spillers’ indispensable 1987 essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” which psychoanalytically dwells on the supposed and pathologized absence of the Black father with respect to the notorious 1965 Moynihan Report.
6. The “first wave” consisting of Frank Chin, Momoko Iko, and other playwrights who worked in the 1960s and ’70s with East West Players, Asian American Theater Workshop, and others. See Lee’s indispensable *A History of Asian American Theater* for a thorough historical overview.
7. From the article: “‘I wanted to include everything,’ Gotanda says by phone from his Berkeley home. ‘I did all kinds of research and was deeply invested in the whole political and cultural backdrop from their birth to Chinese parents in Siam in 1811 to their arrival in Boston nearly 20 years later. But then I just let go and decided to write whatever I write and not worry about history.’”  
 ...  
 “This is a reimagining of their lives,” the playwright says.  
 (Jones 2011).
8. For the purposes of this discussion, my analysis will be focusing on the 2007 script of the play produced at ACT. Interestingly, some of the scenes discussed in this chapter were cut in the 2014 version of the script in the interest of streamlining character interactions, but I have decided to focus on the 2007 version primarily because of its more overt treatment of Afro-Asian thematics and, secondarily, its greater tendency toward stylistic homage to August Wilson in the form of monologic poetic flourishes.