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Race and Role: The Mixed-race Asian Experience in American Drama

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Theater Studies

by

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June 2018

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## ABSTRACT

Race and Role: The Mixed-race Asian Experience in American Drama

by

Rena M. Heinrich

Mixed-race subjects have long posed an invisible threat to the stability of racial categories in America. Given that racialization has influenced government policies since the country's inception, the subordination of various ethnic groups based on their physiognomy has served to control non-white people deemed socially inferior while attempting to keep white bloodlines "pure." Influenced by the human "scientific" taxonomy proposed by Carrolus Linneaus and Johann Blumenbach, among others, Western hegemonic discourse has historically centered on the assumption that human beings are rightfully divided into different races, which places white Europeans at the top of the hierarchy and non-white people from various ethnic groups scattered among the different classes below. This social stratification also functions through the belief in naturalized hypodescent, which forces mixed-race people to identify as monoracials, who are only able to claim their non-white parentage. Evelyn Alsultany calls this structure of racialization a "monoracial cultural logic" that dictates monoracial designations to the body politic.

Imposed monoraciality has erased the majority of historical narratives about mixed-race people in the United States. The resulting lack of documentation seems to suggest that interracial marriages and their mixed-race offspring are anomalies in society, rare in previous generations, and only recently on the rise. In previous decades, however, social mores denounced interracial unions as impure and often erased them from the discourse. These

silenced histories have been replaced by tropes in the social imaginary that depict mixed-race children as defective, deviant, and tragically trapped between two worlds. Nonetheless, Americans have been mixing and marrying individuals from other ethnic backgrounds for generations, and instances of interracial marriages have taken place in significant numbers between various ethnic groups.

In this dissertation, I examine the experiences of mixed-race individuals with one Asian and one non-Asian parent as represented in performance, and I argue that one of the most critically important ways these mixed-Asian American histories have survived is through theatrical texts. These dramas elucidate the external social pressures and cultural limitations that have played a key role in the development of mixed-race identity. Further, plays written since the new millennium present mixed-race subjectivity in a different light, which, I assert, is due to the government's formal acknowledgment of the mixed-race population on the 2000 United States census. As a result, the mixed-race narrative in theater has begun to shift from one of the tragic Eurasian to that of a wholly integrated identity, one who shape shifts to resist the rigidity of racial designations.

This dissertation traces the depiction of mixed-race Amerasians in American theater from the late-nineteenth century to the new millennium and investigates a new canon of politically-charged mixed-race Asian American plays. Through archival research, ethnographic methods, and cultural materialist readings of theatrical texts and their performances, I suggest that an understanding of this “doubly liminal” hapa consciousness, constructed and embodied in a liminal space outside of monoracial binaries, is crucial for the examination of the mixed-Asian American stories. These narratives, when transformed into performance texts, can often dismantle the social and cultural assignments that are imposed

upon mixed-race bodies. They complete a historical narrative that begins in the nineteenth century and delivers us to the present day—to an age in which a post-racial society remains ever elusive.

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## Chapter 1

### Stages of Denial

The third-annual National Asian American Theater Conference was a historic event for the Asian American theater community in 2011. Held in Los Angeles, it was the first time the convening was presented in conjunction with the National Asian American Theater Festival. The joint affair featured a wide array of artists, scholars, and activists from a variety of different Asian diasporic populations, including Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, Hmong, Indian, Japanese, Chinese, and Pacific Islander groups. The Consortium of Asian American Theaters and Artists (CAATA) presented the collaborative event and East West Players and TeAda Productions, resident theater companies in Los Angeles, served as the event hosts. Tim Dang, then the artistic director of East West Players, spoke to Reed Johnson of the *Los Angeles Times*, and asserted that "We tried not to say, 'You're Asian, you're not Asian' or 'You're only half-Asian.' If you self-identify as Asian, then we welcome you into our community."<sup>1</sup> The festival itself thus provided an atmosphere of inclusion and sought to showcase the diversity of Pan-Asian artists within the community.

Nonetheless, at the town hall meeting, a well-known Filipino American film actor stood up and addressed a theater full of conference and festival attendees, contending that mixed-race Amerasians "were not real Asians." He vehemently maintained that these performers stole acting jobs from bona fide "Asian Americans," and in his passion and agitation, it was clear that he believed he was speaking to "his people." Playwright and

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<sup>1</sup> Reed Johnson, "Asian American Theater Conference Widens Its Embrace," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 2011, <<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/mar/22/entertainment/la-et-asian-american-theater-20110322>>

Cornerstone Theater Company ensemble member, Shishir Kudrup, who was sitting near me, leapt to his feet and publicly confronted the actor, announcing his support of mixed-race Asian artists and calling them "the future" of the community. In the restored church, which had been converted into the theater space that held the oldest Asian American theater company in the country, Kudrup pointed directly at me in front of the entire assembly and acknowledged me as a member of the Asian American theater community. As a mixed-race Asian actor and director, it was the first time I felt publicly validated as an Asian American artist in the community.

This ambivalence in the Asian American theater community over the acceptance of mixed-race theater artists illustrates, I think, the confusion and instability caused by the presence of the mixed-race figure. If the leaders and members of the Asian American theater community were torn about the validity of the membership and contribution of mixed-Asians within their group, how is it possible to assign Amerasian<sup>2</sup> playwrights and their plays to the Asian American theater canon? If they don't belong there, to what category do they belong?

This dissertation examines the presence and absence of mixed-Asian playwrights, narratives, and performances in American drama. Western theater scholarship has placed (perhaps correctly) mixed-Asian plays in the Asian American theatrical canon. However, as the CAATA example above demonstrates, Asian American theater makers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have often been reluctant to fully embrace these plays, their playwrights, and the performers who would embody mixed-race characters as authentically "Asian." The fear that mixed-race Asians would infiltrate a space, like theater or film, strictly

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<sup>2</sup> Originally referring to the mixed-race children of American GI fathers and Asian mothers, the term's definition has broadened to encompass any individual with both Asian and non-Asian parentage.

reserved for “real” Asians reveals a subdominant discourse that “others” multiracial subjects. At the same time, mixed-race bodies are co-opted by the dominant ideology to fill quotas and act as racial salves without regard for the multiracial’s unique positionality. Can mixed-race bodies, performers, and playwrights intervene in the United States racial mechanism that would place them outside of both Western and Asian American frameworks? Does the denial of the mixed-race body in drama point to the larger ways racial hierarchies have penetrated institutions like theater? Can mixed-race performers overturn the hierarchy and enact racially transgressive performances through dramatized encounters with the monoracial bodies onstage? As leading mixed-race scholar Naomi Zack contends, “since human biological race is a fiction, so is mixed-race.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, does the very acknowledgment of race ultimately reinforce dominant codes by claiming a mixed “race” identity and inadvertently reifying racial categorization?

A multiracial’s choice to claim a mixed-race identity, rather than one that is multiethnic, is perhaps contradictory. By identifying as mixed-race, the Amerasian subject acknowledges the existence of a racial construct and subscribes to the very mechanism that she seeks to resist in claiming mixedness. Therefore, I further ask if mixed-race theatermakers engage specifically in theater as a tactical maneuver to interrogate and subvert the racial framework in place. Or has theater foreclosed its generative power—and the promise of a collective remembering through performance and theatrical texts—to mixed-race artists, forcing them instead into a monoracial identity?

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<sup>3</sup> Naomi Zack, “American Mixed Race: The United States 2000 Census and Related Issues,” in *Mixing it Up: Multiracial Subjects*, eds. SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004): 13.

This dissertation fuses ethnographic methods with archival research and cultural materialist readings of theatrical texts and their performances to unearth this hidden corpus of mixed-race drama from the Asian American theatrical canon. Specifically, I examine how certain Asian American plays since the nineteenth century have long advocated for the social significance of mixed-race people and their particular dilemma as a subjugated group that has been erased from political discourse. My case studies address three major periods in the last two centuries of American performance history: the 1890s-1900s, the 1980s-1990s, and the new millennium. By focusing on the periods that surround the beginning and end of the twentieth century, my goal is to analyze how the bookends of the twentieth century speak to each other and to ascertain how much change in racial classification and performance have occurred over the span of a century, if at all.

These plays and performances also explore the various historical, social, and cultural milestones that have accompanied the rise of mixed-Asian drama in the United States. In analyzing the plays, I pay particular attention to how the identity politics of each respective time period influenced the depiction of the mixed-race subject and how mixed-race dramatists responded to these circumstances. The next two chapters focus on the life and dramatic work of the curiously overlooked nineteenth-century Japanese-German-American playwright Sadakichi Hartmann, the yellow face portrayal of the Chinese-Irish character Chin Sum in T.S. Denison's 1895 farce *Patsy O'Wang*, and the twentieth-century mixed-Asian characters of award-winning Japanese-African American playwright Velina Hasu Houston. In the fourth chapter, I examine the ways in which cutting-edge playwrights in the new millennium, like Christopher Chen and Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, continue their key predecessors' important cultural work by contesting the problematic idea of "colorblind

racial transcendence" and by championing theater that validates cultural diversity, particularly the uniqueness of the mixed-race experience.<sup>4</sup>

By limiting my study specifically to mixed-race Asian drama (as opposed to mixed-race drama more generally), I can focus on the ways in which this hidden corpus of the Asian American dramatic canon challenges American racial frameworks. Mixed-Asian drama is often overlooked for its failure to fit smoothly into static (i.e. "black-and-white") racial categories, thereby rendering it inconsequential in larger scholarly discourse about race and performance. However, the very invisibility of the multiracial Asian American experience exposes the underlying tensions in the polarization of race and compels us to question the very boundaries in which the white hegemony is so profoundly invested. This study also exposes the invisible discrimination that takes place within minority groups like those in Asian America, a landscape collectively coded as the ever-appropriate "model" minority.<sup>5</sup> How then might an exploration and careful consideration of the depiction and performance of mixed-race Asian American figures help to decolonize all racialized bodies? How could a consideration of the doubly liminal space occupied by the mixed-race body of Asian descent lead to the disassembly of racial codes and enable us to investigate the very scaffolding that holds subjugated bodies in place?

In the United States, a country sustained by Eurocentric hegemonic ideology, the assignment of races still functions as a way to maintain power for whites. This culture of

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<sup>4</sup> Colorblindness purports to not only look beyond and "transcend" the physical markers of race but to naively not see race at all.

<sup>5</sup> Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999): 11 and 149 and William Peterson, "Success Story: Japanese American Style," *New York Times Magazine*, January 9, 1966, <[http://inside.sfuhs.org/dept/history/US\\_History\\_reader/Chapter14/modelminority.pdf](http://inside.sfuhs.org/dept/history/US_History_reader/Chapter14/modelminority.pdf)>.

racialization operates through what Evelyn Alsultany calls a “monoracial cultural logic that “imposes monoracial identities onto the population” in order to easily maintain a racial social hierarchy.<sup>6</sup> Individuals of mixed-race heritage, like Chin Sum in T.S. Denison’s nineteenth-century play *Patsy O’Wang* (1895), create confusion and disorder in this regimented monoracial system. Because mixed-race subjects cannot fully extract themselves from daily life in a racialized national corpus, I suggest that they deploy de Certeauian “tactics” to shape shift or move between different racial identities. French theorist Michel de Certeau defines tactics as actions deployed by an individual to circumvent the expectations or laws employed by structural institutions.<sup>7</sup> This means that mixed-race persons use different tactics to outwit the fixity of racial codes prescribed by the dominant. Multiracial subjects complicate, subvert, and trouble the tenuous boundaries of monoracial cultural logic. In theater, mixed-race artists further deploy the art of embodiment and capitalize on their shape shifting prowess to enact racially transgressive performances.<sup>8</sup>

### **Stage Management: The Construction of Race**

I start with the premise that the racialization of the United States population has strongly influenced United States government policies since the country’s inception. The subordination of various ethnic groups based on their physical characteristics has functioned as a way to control non-white people deemed socially inferior while also attempting to keep

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<sup>6</sup> Evelyn Alsultany, “Toward a Multiethnic Cartography: Multiethnic Identity, Monoracial Cultural Logic, and Popular Culture,” *Mixing It Up: Multiracial Subjects*, eds. SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004): 141-162.

<sup>7</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Translated by Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 29.

<sup>8</sup> Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011): 21.

white bloodlines "pure." Shaped by human "scientific" taxonomies proposed by Carrolus Linneaus and Johann Blumenbach, among others, Western hegemonic discourse has historically centered on the assumption that human beings are rightfully divided into different "races" that places white Europeans at the top of the hierarchy and non-white people from various ethnicities scattered among the different classes below.<sup>9</sup> This social stratification also functions through a belief in naturalized hypodescent in which a mixed-race individual is identified by the race of the parent deemed socially subordinate. Hypodescent forces mixed-race people to identify as monoracials who are only able to claim their non-white parentage.<sup>10</sup> This imposed monoraciality has erased many historical narratives about mixed-race people, such as the case of Anna Leonowens, the real-life governess celebrated in the famed 1951 musical *The King and I*, who for decades was believed to be a white woman of purely English descent.<sup>11</sup> Suppressed documentation about figures like Leonowens seems to suggest that interracial marriages and their mixed-race offspring are anomalies in society, rare in previous generations, and only recently on the rise. In previous decades, however, social mores repudiated many interracial unions and often removed them from the discourse. These silenced histories have been replaced by tropes in the social imaginary that depict mixed-race children as defective, deviant, and tragically trapped between two worlds.

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Marks, *Human Biodiversity: Genes, Race, and History* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 1995): 11.

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion, see: G. Reginald Daniel, "Black and White Identity in the New Millennium: Unsevering the Ties That Bind," in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996): 121-139.

<sup>11</sup> Anna Leonowens was of mixed Anglo-Indian descent. For further discussion, see Alfred Habegger, *Masked: The Life of Anna Leonowens, Schoolmistress at the Court of Siam* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014) and Susan Morgan, *Bombay Anna: The Real Story and Remarkable Adventures of the King and I Governess* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

Nonetheless, Americans have been “mixing” and marrying individuals from ethnic backgrounds other than their own for generations. Instances of interracial marriages have taken place in significant numbers between various ethnic groups. This dissertation looks specifically at the treatment and experience of mixed-race individuals with one Asian and one non-Asian parent.

As critical mixed-race studies rapidly becomes a growing subfield in academia, a consideration of doubly liminal, mixed-race subjectivity will significantly contribute to this expanding scholarship. While the majority of the work thus far has focused on education, sociology, history, literature, and cinema,<sup>12</sup> very little mixed-race scholarship has addressed multiracial representation in theater.

I argue that one of the most critically important ways these mixed-race histories have survived is through theatrical texts. These dramas elucidate the external social pressures and cultural limitations that have played a key role in the development of mixed-race subjectivity. Most significantly, plays written since the new millennium present mixed-race subjectivity in a whole new light, which, I assert, is due to the government’s formal acknowledgment of the mixed-race population on the 2000 U.S. census. The activism of specific multiracial groups in the 1990s spurred the U.S. Census Bureau to change its racial categorization policy in

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<sup>12</sup> See: Kimberly McClain DaCosta, *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in Redrawing of the Color Line* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Helena Grice “Face-ing/De-Face-ing Racism: Physiognomy as Ethnic Marker in Early Eurasian/Amerasian Women’s Texts,” *Re/collecting Early Asian America: Essays in Cultural History*, eds. Josephine Lee, Imogene L. Lim, and Yuko Matsukawa (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002): 255-269; Leilani Nishime, “The *Matrix* Trilogy and Multiraciality at the End of Time,” *Undercover Asian: Multiracial Asian Americans in Visual Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014): 85-106; Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, ed., *Mixed Race Studies: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Maria P.P. Root, ed., *Racially Mixed People in America*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1992); and Paul Spickard with Jeffrey Moniz and Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly, *Race in Mind: Critical Essays* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

1997, allowing persons to identify with more than one designation.<sup>13</sup> The multiracial characters in new work by the 2017 Obie award-winning playwright Christopher Chen are, for instance, unapologetic, self-possessed, and befuddled by the crumbling yet persistent stereotypes that surround them in millennial modernity. If, as Edward W. Said so expertly illustrates in his seminal work, *Culture and Imperialism*, literature cannot escape the political world in which it is produced, Chen's plays illuminate fissures in the American racial discourse.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the mixed-race Asian American narrative in theater has begun to shift from one of the tragic "Eurasian" to one of a wholly integrated identity that resists the rigidity of monoracial designation.

Similar to the trope of the tragic mulatto, the tragic Eurasian is characterized as a mixed-Asian figure who struggles with races at war within her mixed-race body.<sup>15</sup> In his 1918 dissertation entitled *The Mulatto in the United States*, Edward Bryont Reuter describes Eurasians as physically:

slight and weak. Their personal appearance is subject to the greatest variations. In skin color, for example, they are often darker even than the Asiatic parent. They are naturally indolent and will enter into no employment requiring exertion or labor. This lack of energy is correlated with an incapacity for organization. They will not assume

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<sup>13</sup> Kimberly McClain DaCosta, *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in Redrawing of the Color Line* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 1-20.

<sup>14</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993): xxii.

<sup>15</sup> Carole DeSouza, "Against Erasure: The Multiracial Voice in Cherrie Moraga's *Loving in the War Years*," in *Mixing It Up: Multiracial Subjects*, eds. SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004): 182; Antonia N. Glenn, "Racing and E-Racing the Stage: the Politics of Mixed Race Performance" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2004): 46; and Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982): 9.

burdensome responsibilities, but they make passable clerks where only routine labor is required.<sup>16</sup>

The trope of the tragic Eurasian portrays the mixed-race individual as biologically impure where the incompatible blood from parents of different racial backgrounds causes pathology, deviance, physical and mental weakness, and emotional instability. The tragic Eurasian almost always desires to be white and has historically been played by white actors who can supposedly sidestep yellowface and also “play race” by portraying mixed-white character.<sup>17</sup>

This dissertation traces the depiction of mixed-race Amerasians from the late nineteenth century to an investigation of a new canon of politically-charged mixed-race Asian American plays in the present day. It examines T.S. Denison's 1895 play, *Patsy O'Wang*, a farce about a Chinese-Irish multiracial born before the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the drama of Japanese-German playwright, Sadakichi Hartmann, whose mixed-race characters foreground multiraciality in an America that was already multiracial and intercultural long before end of the nineteenth century. These two plays demonstrate how mixed-race figures employed shape shifting tactics to navigate nineteenth-century society in America. Historian Paul Spickard defines shape shifting as the mixed-race person's ability to slip through the porous boundaries of race.<sup>18</sup> While racial expectation assumes that a

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Spickard with Jeffrey Moniz and Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly, “What Must I Be? Asian Americans and the Question of Multiethnic Identity” in *Race in Mind: Critical Essays*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015): 185. I reference Reuter's dissertation as quoted in Spickard.

<sup>17</sup> Antonia N. Glenn, “Racing and E-Racing the Stage: the Politics of Mixed Race Performance” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2004): 3-4

<sup>18</sup> Paul Spickard, “Not Passing—Shape Shifting: Reflections on Racial Plasticity,” in *Shape Shifters: Journeys Across Terrains of Race and Identity*, eds. Lily Anne Y. Welty Tamai, Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly, and Paul Spickard (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, in press).

perceived phenotype ensures an assignment to the most superficially correct racial category, ethnically ambiguous bodies can shape shift and bend racial expectation to adopt multiple racial assignments through performance and reception. The contemporary mixed-race character portrayals of Amerasian playwrights Velina Hasu Houston, Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, and Christopher Chen continue these interventions to reveal how shape shifting performances in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries expose the fragility of race, especially when confronted by transnational experiences and global migration. Specifically, the plays of Chen and Cowhig interrogate the political and legal systems that hold racial frameworks in place. An understanding of this mixed-race consciousness, constructed and embodied in a liminal space outside of monoracial binaries, is crucial for the examination of the mixed-race Asian American stories. These narratives, when transformed into performance texts,<sup>19</sup> can often dismantle the social and cultural assignments that are imposed on mixed-race people.

Furthermore, I argue that multiraciality illuminates both the dominant culture's desired fixity of race and the various subdominant groups' co-opting of these constructs. By tracing the theatrical depiction of mixed-race persons, we can witness the ways that performance both exposes the systemic parameters in place and also destabilizes those boundaries by constructing performances of racial transgression. Performance theorist Brandi Wilkins Catanese contends that the antidote to colorblind racial "transcendence" is an awareness of the divisions put in place by race, rather than a denial of their existence.

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<sup>19</sup> Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004). Knowles identifies the performance text as the translation of a performance into a "recollected experience" that is then "read" and interpreted.

Catanese argues that the more humane pursuit is not to ignore race but to acknowledge the division and destruction that racialization has caused. She calls this approach racial transgression, and she advocates for performances that defy racial frameworks to unmask the inherent inability of transcendence to bring about social change.<sup>20</sup> Mixed-race performances of racial transgression exploit the interstitial spaces that allow for shape shifting practices to outwit the strategies of what Rebecca Schneider calls “the monumental.”<sup>21</sup> Teresa Kay Williams similarly calls shape shifting the act of “doing race,” and she likens the process to the way one “does gender.”<sup>22</sup> Williams elucidates the ways that the multiracial subject twists and turns in and out of the “racial molds” assigned to her by monumental hegemony.<sup>23</sup> In theater, contemporary plays, such as Chen’s *Mutt* (2014) and Velina Hasu Houston’s *Thirst* (1985) and *Kokoro (True Heart)* (1994), demonstrate the ways that Jim Crow and Coolie-era social constructs, which have been enforced by racialized language, attempt to regulate mixed-race people, and how the multiethnic characters in these plays shape shift to illuminate the slippage that occurs between the boundaries of race.

I contend that theater has been at the forefront of opening spaces of sanctuary for multiracial acceptance within a racialized United States since the late nineteenth century. This reclaimed space sheds light on the double cultural consciousness that mixed-race people

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<sup>20</sup> Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011): 21-22.

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Schneider, “Never, Again,” *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, eds. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2006): 28.

<sup>22</sup> Teresa Kay Williams, “Race as Process: Reassessing the ‘What Are You?’ Encounters of Biracial Individuals,” in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996): 210.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

have constructed inside and outside of the dominant and subdominant discourses—a subjectivity that is the center in multiracial everyday life.

Specifically, I examine three conditions of mixed-race subjectivity and the performance of mixed-race embodiment. In the second chapter, I demonstrate the use of shape shifting as a de Certeauian tactic for navigating United States racial hierarchy by examining the life of multiethnic playwright, Sadakichi Hartmann and mixed-race characters in the 1890s. In the third chapter, I illuminate the double liminality of the mixed-race subject, who may feel shunned by both the dominant discourse and the subdominant discourse that she encounters from members of a subjugated, racialized parent group (or by both as the case may be). This condition and predicament of the doubly liminal subject can be seen in the mixed-race plays of Velina Hasu Houston and in the productions of these dramas in the late-twentieth century. In the fourth chapter, performances in racial transgression in the twenty-first century, such as those in Christopher Chen's *Mutt* and Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig's *Lidless* (2011), reject the transcendent seduction of colorblindness and critique the West's appropriation of shape shifting practices to reify the racial status quo. Together, this research exposes the disconnect between monoracial cultural logic and the reality of the mixed-race subject as a liminal outsider, encumbered by American cultural dependence on prescribed racial codes and the naturalization of hypodescent.

Beyond examining how mixed-race theater disrupts established social categories, I also demonstrate how it offers paradigmatic possibilities for viewing and encountering mixed-race subjects outside of our current hierarchical restraints. The next three chapters consider theatrical narratives that foreground mixed-race bodies in central roles and specifically address the histories of oppression specific to mixed-race subjectivity. Mixed-

race bodies destabilize racial codes as impenetrable and choose shape shifting practices to manage their own racial performativity. How do these characters subvert fixed notions of race? How do mixed-race characters stage ruptures in the current racial hierarchy? Does the acknowledgment of race within the mixed-race body erase the possibility to explore a multiracial consciousness?

### **Setting the Stage: Diverging from the Racial Paradigm**

The classification of multiracial people in the United States has largely referenced the African American community. In the 1890s, the United States was still grappling with how to categorize the rising mixed-race demographic, and the one-drop rule, engineered to manage the African American population after slavery, became a legally sanctioned ideology in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision.<sup>24</sup> The racially ambiguous Homer Plessy, who was predominantly of white descent, was regarded as “colored” in the eyes of the state.<sup>25</sup> However, mixed-African Americans were still legally recognized on the U.S. census until 1930 when the categories of mixedness (such as mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon) were abolished from the U.S. Census enumeration. After 1930, state-sanctioned monoraciality, vis-à-vis the one-drop rule, was securely in place and normalized through social acceptance. Mixed-Asian identity was never recorded on early-twentieth-century census surveys.

Sixty years later in 1990, nearly .25 million people identified as multiracial by writing

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<sup>24</sup> Kimberly McClain DaCosta, *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in Redrawing of the Color Line* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 25.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 25 and Cynthia L. Nakashima, “An Invisible Monster: The Creation and Denial of Mixed-race People in America,” in *Racially Mixed People in America*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, Inc., 1992): 174. Homer Plessy was seven-eighths white.

in a mixed-race designation.<sup>26</sup> Beginning in 1993, the activism of grassroots, multiracial groups spurred the U.S. Census Bureau to officially change its racial categorization policy, and 2.1 million Asian or Pacific Islander Americans specifically identified themselves as multiethnic when the census allowed respondents to choose more than one box in 2000. Author Adriane E. Gamble observes that since this change in racial categorization, a mixed-race community “has been emerging, as individuals reject traditional monoracial categories and labels, and increasingly identify as hapa.”<sup>27</sup>

The word hapa comes from the Hawaiian term *hapa-Haole* and referred originally to multiethnic individuals with one native Hawaiian parent and one non-Hawaiian parent. *Haole* meant “stranger” or “foreigner” in native Hawaiian, and after contact with the white foreign world in 1778, it referred specifically to white Europeans or white Americans.<sup>28</sup> *Hapa* is a Hawaiian pidgin term for “half” or “part,” and *hapa-Haole* identified a mixed heritage, native Hawaiian who was “half-white.” The Japanese American community—and ultimately the Asian American community—appropriated the term in Hawai‘i, extending its definition to mean part Asian and part non-Asian descent.<sup>29</sup> Hapa has been popularized as the preferred contemporary term for mixed-race Americans of Asian descent and now often refers to racial mixing that includes both an Asian and a non-Asian parent. When used as a noun to refer to a

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<sup>26</sup> Maria P.P. Root, “The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as a Significant Frontier in Race Relations,” in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996): xvii.

<sup>27</sup> Adriane E. Gamble, “Hapas: Emerging Identity, Emerging Terms and Labels and the Social Construction of Race,” *Stanford Journal of Asian American Studies*, no. 2 (2009): 12-13.

<sup>28</sup> Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993): 26.

<sup>29</sup> Antonia N. Glenn, “Racing and E-Racing the Stage: the Politics of Mixed Race Performance” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2004): 12.

person of mixed-race heritage, the word is capitalized.

I also employ the term, Amerasian, and use it synonymously with hapa. Coined in 1930 by Pearl S. Buck in the novel *East Wind, West Wind*, Amerasian originally referred to mixed-race children born of American GI fathers and Asian mothers. However, the term's definition has widened to encompass any individual with both Asian and non-Asian parentage. I prefer the term Amerasian to Eurasian; the latter originally referred to "Anglo-Indians" of mixed British and Indian parentage and emerged from the rigid caste structures of colonial India. Amerasian also differs from the term "Asian American" in that the former denotes one non-Asian parent, while Asian American most commonly indicates two parents of Asian descent.

In this dissertation, I employ the terms multiracial, mixed-race, mixed-Asian, and multiethnic as well. I use them interchangeably, even though the definitions of race and ethnicity describe different states of identity and arise from different modes of power. According to sociologists Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, ethnicity denotes a group of people with a shared ancestry or culture, history, and symbolism, i.e. a common homeland, language, or religion.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, race is a socially constructed classification based mainly on phenotypic characteristics. It is a product of perception and is assigned to individuals whose physical characteristics are believed to be inherent.<sup>31</sup> Conceivably, the concept of race maintains a structure of power based on a Eurocentric belief in white superiority. While race is often an imposed construct, ethnicity connotes agency because it allows for self-

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<sup>30</sup> Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making identities in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1998): 19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

identification.

While I understand that race and ethnicity are not conceptually the same, I use them interchangeably in terms such as “multiracial” or “multiethnic” because the individuals I examine in this dissertation are both. A Hapa who might identify as half-Asian and half-white can be aptly described—by herself or others—as multiracial or mixed race. This same person, however, might also self-identify as part-Chinese and Thai and part-German descent, thereby accurately characterizing herself as multiethnic. Since many Hapas tend to reject monoraciality, they often skip race identification entirely and lay claim to all the ethnicities in their cultural make-up.

In the following chapters, I concentrate specifically on mixed-race Asian subjectivity due to its unique formulation both within and outside of the dominant discourse’s assumptions about national identity. Claire Jean Kim’s theory of racial triangulation suggests that Asians and Asian Americans are judged by a different set of criteria than African Americans for example.<sup>32</sup> While African Americans may be falsely conceived of as “inferior” based on racial assumptions of character and personhood, they are rightly recognized as American citizens. Asians and Asian Americans, on the other hand, who are perhaps believed to be equal to white Americans in terms of “desirable” traits like economic drive or intelligence, are often not considered to be American nationals. Historian Mae M. Ngai observes that individuals of Asian descent, are often perceived as “alien citizens.”<sup>33</sup> They

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<sup>32</sup> Shannon Steen, *Racial Geometries of the Black Atlantic, Asian Pacific, and American Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 171. I reference Claire Jean Kim’s theory of racial triangulation as quoted in Steen.

<sup>33</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004): 2-9. Ngai also recognizes members of Latino community as often perceived to be “alien citizens.”

may be American-born but they are most always presumed to be foreigners and ultimately from elsewhere. This hegemonic assessment of Asians and Asian Americans presents mixed-race hapa subjects with a double jeopardy. Not only must they navigate cultural assumptions about hypodescent but they must also defend their citizenship and their Americanness. Hapa individuals, then, occupy a circumstantial space different from other mixed-race groups. While I in no way mean to compare or qualify the mixed-race experiences of different communities, this question of national belonging brings a unique facet to the multiracial Asian experience.

The question of belonging and the barriers presented by monoracial cultural logic, which is a dominant discourse, are not the only obstacles that Asian Hapas face in the process of self-identification. The *subdominant discourse* may also refuse to acknowledge and accept racial multiplicity. Coined by historian Paul Spickard, the term subdominant discourse refers to attitudes and beliefs imposed upon multiethnic Asians by monoracial Asian Americans.<sup>34</sup> The subdominant discourse often does not recognize mixed-race Asians as being Asian enough to belong in the monoracial category. Conversely, the dominant discourse also refuses membership to multiracials, forcing them instead to identify solely as Asian. Therefore, the dominant assigns individuals to monoracial groups, who then police bodies to hold the system in place. By subscribing to biological, fixed notions of race, both dominant and subdominant cultural thought may trap the mixed-race person within a rigid binary.

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<sup>34</sup> Paul Spickard with Jeffrey Moniz and Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly, “What Must I Be? Asian Americans and the Question of Multiethnic Identity” in *Race in Mind: Critical Essays*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015): 182.

This dilemma brings me to the precarious place of multiethnic identity construction, which Hapas undertake outside the realm of the dominant/subdominant pairing. I contend that mixed-race Asians form a particular subjectivity that is constructed in response to dominant and subdominant discourses and tempered by lived experience and an individual's own assertion of self. Here, I build on Anurima Banerji's theory of *paratopia* and bell hooks's notion of marginality as center. Coined by dance theorist Anurima Banerji, the term *paratopia* is derived from the Greek prefixes *para* meaning "beside or alongside of" and *topos* meaning "place." This "space of alterity" differs from the idealized *utopia*.<sup>35</sup> It does share similarities with Foucault's *heterotopia*,<sup>36</sup> but differs in that *paratopia* is only evoked through embodied acts. For Banerji, *paratopia* is a space that exists in tandem with the dominant. That is, it is "another" way of being rather than a place of the "other." While the term "other" implies that there is a primary positionality, which is more correct or more acceptable, "another" points to a space that is equal in legitimacy and exists parallel to the dominant subject position.<sup>37</sup> I assert that with mixed-race subjects, this parallel space is claimed neither by the dominant nor the subdominant but instead is acted upon by both of these opposing forces. bell hooks designates this marginal place as a center that, for her,

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<sup>35</sup> Anurima Banerji, "Paratopias of Performance: The Choreographic Practices of Chandralekha," in *Planes of Composition: Dance, Theory, and the Global*, eds. André Lepecki & Jenn Joy (Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 2009): 346-347.

<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," Jay Miskowiec, trans., *Diacritics* 16, no.1 (1986): 22-27. Foucault defines heterotopias as "counter-sites," which exist as alternative spaces meant to represent or invert reality within a culture. For example, a garden is a heterotopia; it is a real, concrete space yet, because of its varied collection of plants, represents many different places in a single space.

<sup>37</sup> Anurima Banerji, "Paratopias of Performance: The Choreographic Practices of Chandralekha," in *Planes of Composition: Dance, Theory, and the Global*, eds. André Lepecki & Jenn Joy (Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 2009): 346-371.

exists as a site of radical resistance.<sup>38</sup> She also rejects the notion of “other,” which serves as an erasure. hooks observes that living “at the edges” of the dominant culture enables one to “develop a particular way of seeing reality.”<sup>39</sup> In this centralized space, the mixed-race subject reconciles social habits with personal experiences and develops an alternate way of seeing.

I extend Banerji and hooks’s notions of marginality as center to the mixed-race hapa experience. I call this space *double liminality*. It is a position that is doubly liminal from two (or more) racial groups. In this space, the mixed-race person constructs a “hapa consciousness.” At the threshold of more than one racial group, but perhaps never fully accepted therein, she negotiates each concrete social interaction through a different cultural consciousness, whereby she employs two (or more) worldviews that constantly give way to each other. As the mixed-race Asian character Hanna explains to Nick in Christopher Chen’s play, *Mutt*:

HANNA. Okay. Well, I'm a hapa, like you, so I identify as a minority. And yet I was still conscious of, of being able to fit in, in [a way that] my full Asian brethren couldn't. So it was like... maybe I could use this key I'd been given to . . . try and open some doors.<sup>40</sup>

This “another” way of being, of having the ability to use a different “key,” is the reason I

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<sup>38</sup> bell hooks, “marginality as site of resistance,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Min-ha, and Cornell West (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990): 341-343.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Chen, “Mutt” (unpublished manuscript, December 8, 2015), Portable Document Format file. 47.

champion double liminality to describe the fluidity of hapa subjectivity. Hanna's ability to shape shift in between two different racial groups affords her a particular access to both.

Mixed-race subjects can also be doubly liminal from each other. For example, the mixed-race characters Len and Nick in *Mutt* have two very different ethnic backgrounds. Nick identifies as half-Chinese and half-white, whereas Len is a mix of every major race in the world. While these figures have mixedness in common, they do not have a similar culture nor upbringing, which would characterize them as belonging to the same racial group.

Like Banerji's paratopia, this constructed self becomes evident in embodied acts. Interacting with another individual activates the complex processes of cultural code-switching, or shape shifting, that depends on the circumstances of the exchange. Hence, this identity comes into being through the everyday act of performance. Yet to the doubly liminal subject, this shape shifting process can be seamless since the cultural beliefs, customs, and mindsets of both parent cultures are fully integrated into one identity when she acts as two self-identified wholes able to maneuver through society as one integrated identity. While mixed-race individuals are able to perform "race," switching effortlessly between one performance to the next, they do so because they encompass both; they have integrated two sets of habits into their consciousness in varying degrees.<sup>41</sup> In this way, they may participate in acts of "doing race" in their daily performance of self.

Literary theorist Stefani Dunning notes that no two "biracial" experiences are alike. She asserts that "this multiplicity of experience should be looked upon as a strength that

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<sup>41</sup> For further discussion, see: Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

destabilizes any essentializing narrative of the biracial experience.”<sup>42</sup> In line with Dunning, I seek not to essentialize the experience of multiracials but merely to name the process by which multiethnic persons construct their unique perspectives as they navigate assigned social impositions and masterfully blend cultures and subcultures into one whole identity. For multiracial subjects facing potential rejection from one or both parent cultures, this is a whole new level of complexity with which monoracial individuals do not have to contend. This informs the hapa consciousness. Theater is an optimal way to illustrate this complexity and enables mixed-race bodies to talk back to dominant social structures through the audience’s encounter with the embodied act of performance

Because racial designations dominate the ways in which we categorize each other, monoracial individuals are often confused when they encounter a subject with mixed-race parentage. As Dunning notes, multiracials "must constantly defend their ethnic heritage and explain their bodies."<sup>43</sup> Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant refer to this occurrence as "a crisis in racial meaning,"<sup>44</sup> in which a mixed-race individual’s physical characteristics fail to fit neatly into a prescribed racial category, potentially prompting a monoracial observer to ask, "What are you?" Unlike other scholars of mixed race, I trace the development and representation of the constructed self through theater, explaining this fluid process within performative acts in drama. I demonstrate how this subjectivity exists in an ever-shifting process of embodied acts. It is a subjectivity that works against the system

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<sup>42</sup> Stefanie Dunning, "Brown Like Me: Explorations of a Shifting Self," in *Mixing it Up: Multiracial Subjects*, eds. SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004): 125.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 127 (Dunning discussing Maria P.P. Root).

<sup>44</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

through performance and demonstrates the reality of two whole cultural selves that simultaneously exist with a third hapa consciousness.

The shape-shifting quality of the multiracial, whose ambiguous countenance and hapa consciousness enables her to move from one racial group to another, is crucial in understanding the racially transgressive nature of double liminality. Shape shifting enables the subject to defy racial legibility due to ambiguous phenotypical features and potentially involves performing the race of the mixed-race subject's choosing, a process that includes the embodiment of a particular race, ethnicity, or culture. For the mixed-race figure, these performances can become naturalized over time as a seamless repertoire of behavior. When considered on stage, the embodied performances disrupt systemic racial codes and expand the ways that race is perceived in the United States. They challenge racialized expectations and elucidate the porous, unstable boundaries that mixed-race individuals slip across, sometimes with great effort and sometimes, effortlessly.

Omi and Winant effectively argue that race is not a biologically determined state but an engineered construct supported by political and social structures.<sup>45</sup> Yet Western hegemonic discourse continues to other brown bodies based on racial phenotype and the supposedly corresponding indelible character traits. Based on these assessments, persons of color are relegated to the second, subjugated position in an oppositional pair or binary while white subjects occupy the primary position. This process denies these secondary individuals access to the same privileges, agency, or personhood available to white Americans.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 7 and 110.

Theater historian Harvey Young's extension of habitus is useful here in considering the construction of non-white identities under this racial regime. Young extends sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus to elucidate "double vision" within the performance of Blackness.<sup>46</sup> His application of the complexities of habitus is also instrumental in understanding mixed-race subjectivity. As Young explains, habitus can be understood as a "regulated improvisation" where "social expectations are incorporated into the individual, and the individual projects those expectations back upon society."<sup>47</sup> In other words, the theory of habitus evinces an understanding of the body—whether the Black body as in Young's example or the mixed-Asian body as in this dissertation—as socially constructed and as continually reconstructing its own self. External assumptions about the body penetrate the flesh, become inscribed internally, and are ultimately incorporated into the self.

This process of socialization instructs bodies how to behave under a racialized hierarchy, and raced individuals may become unwittingly complicit in their own marginalization. Young's understanding of habitus is contingent upon legible characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, and other physical features. Upon viewing a body's phenotype, the observer may deploy—in the seeing of body—racialized assumptions, histories, and violence, which are then mapped onto the body in question. The observed subject internalizes this way of being seen. Young notes, for instance, that a black shopper might dress up to go shopping to lessen the chances of “being (mis)read as a potential

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<sup>46</sup> Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010): 20. I have elected to capitalize the word “Black” when it refers to African Americans and their experiences. In this capacity, the term serves as a proper adjective and should be capitalized.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

shoplifter.”<sup>48</sup> Likewise, an egregious set of barriers also meets bodies of Asian and Pacific Island descent,<sup>49</sup> including a history of segregation, exclusion, and gross stereotypes—either a hypersexual yet submissive and deadly femininity, or an effeminate, domesticated masculinity, among others.<sup>50</sup> Members of the Asian diaspora also internalize these false perceptions.

By contrast, multiethnic individuals often lack a concrete racial phenotype that would connect them to any particular group. Thus, their seemingly ambiguous features potentially place them in multiple communities, including ones with which they may not identify, like the mixed-Asian actor Michael Reyes from *Mutt*, who is continuously mistaken for Latino.<sup>51</sup> This presents multiracial people with a paradox. While they incorporate one or more *habiti* into their personhoods, they may still face rejection from the very groups with which they have been forced to associate. While *habitus* may assign an individual to a specific grouping, this membership can afford monoracials a certain assurance of belonging.<sup>52</sup> The mixed-race person is, however, left adrift, anchorless within a prescribed community while simultaneously maintaining *habiti* that have been externally imposed and internally inscribed.

Nonetheless, multiracial Asian Americans can lay claim to multiple racial

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>49</sup> Though Asians and Pacific Islanders are sometimes differentiated, these different groups of people are often placed together in the same racial category and identified as “Asian.”

<sup>50</sup> Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999): 9 and Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 59-61.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Reyes, (actor) in discussion with the author, January 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010): 20.

experiences because of their inherent ambiguity and because the reception of observers alters how they are received. This unique positionality causes them to operate outside of the rules of monoraciality and to inhabit a space apart from dominant and subdominant parameters. Even after they negotiate and aggregate a particular habitus of one racial state, they must then switch and perform the habits of another. While they may be rejected by the dominant and fight to control their own identity, they are also subjected to a subdominant discourse and othered by the monoracial Asian Americans, who may not identify them as fully Asian but as persons who are made murky by another ethnic background. However, they must still work through their Asian Americanness while, paradoxically, also being marginalized from the minority group. Mixed-race Asian Americans, therefore, must aggregate more than one set of racial habitus and often do so with little sense of inclusion in those groups.

This positionality constructed outside of full inclusion within discrete racial groups in many ways fits the description of Anurima Banerji's *paratopia*. The space of paratopia is not a defined architectural space but a site of corporeality, created by the body's movement.<sup>53</sup> For example, as Banerji asserts, the true self identifies neither as solely female nor solely male, as mandated by heteronormative discourse. Banerji offers Indian dance choreographer Chandralekha's *Raga: In Search of Femininity* as an example of a paratopic space where bodies are freed from binaries of gender. In the dance, the "principal duet is unexpectedly . . . composed of two men and their erotic engagement" and is meant to assert that "masculine and feminine elements reside in a single body."<sup>54</sup> Bodily expression in performance—

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<sup>53</sup> Anurima Banerji, "Paratopias of Performance: The Choreographic Practices of Chandralekha," in *Planes of Composition: Dance, Theory, and the Global*, eds. André Lepecki & Jenn Joy (Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 2009): 350.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

specifically dance performance in Banerji's analysis—liberates the self from the demands of the dominant and provides a site where both genders can co-exist.

Whereas Banerji targets gender, I look to paratopia, or in my view “double liminality,” to describe an alternate space where mixed-race subjectivity subverts racialized discourses and where two or more races or ethnicities are expressed within a single body. As with paratopia, double liminality is not constructed as a mode of resistance—though it can serve as one—nor does it necessarily seek to be a direct form of protest. It is not other but another, meaning that it exists alongside dominant categories of racial identity as one more expression of consciousness. It describes performances that take place in the present and exist outside of the dominant *and* subdominant realms by expressing an understanding of identity on its own terms.

Banerji asserts that "corporeal expression becomes a site for the practice of freedom."<sup>55</sup> As applied to mixed-race performances, this is evident when, in Christopher Chen's *Mutt*, hapa characters Nick and Hanna discuss their racial identity. Nick's dialogue reveals the freedom to which Banerji refers. While Nick does not seem burdened by the rules of hypodescent, his predecessors in previous multiracial plays do not have the luxury of experiencing this liberated state of being, which demonstrates how theater has tracked the shifting of the multiracial experience over time. Moreover, Nick does not subscribe to one fixed category of race and instead alludes to what he perceives as a racial fluidity.

NICK. You identify as an Asian?

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 354.

HANNA. If you're mixed race in America, you identify as a minority.

NICK. See I never even thought about which side I identify with more. . . . It's funny how we don't really have a "racial" identity, you know? . . . there's just so much, so much evolution going on? Like trying to hit a moving target?<sup>56</sup>

As Chen demonstrates above, contemporary mixed-race subjectivity creates a bodily site where two or more racial or ethnic identities freely co-exist and where the perception of racial categories undergoes a metamorphosis. While paratopia, as elucidated by Banerji, is not specifically limited to racial expression, I designate those elements of paratopia that resonate with the construction of mixed-race subjectivity as doubly liminal. This in-between but centered position exists outside—and therefore slyly rejects—the dominant and subdominant discourses and relies on its own understanding of the phenomenon we call identity.

This freedom to racially self-identify and express this chosen identity in embodied acts elucidates the process Paul Spickard refers to as shape shifting. Different than racial “passing,” ethnically ambiguous mixed-race bodies can slip into many different racial designations. Spickard defines shape shifting as the mixed-race person’s ability to defy preexisting racial codes by slipping through the porous boundaries of race. This process is contingent on social and historical context, geographical location, the multiracial individual’s personal genealogical knowledge, and the performance of self and its reception.<sup>57</sup> Personal

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<sup>56</sup> Christopher Chen, "Mutt" (unpublished manuscript, December 8, 2015), Portable Document Format file. 48.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Spickard, “Not Passing—Shape Shifting: Reflections on Racial Plasticity,” in *Shape Shifters: Journeys Across Terrains of Race and Identity*, eds. Lily Anne Y. Welty Tamai, Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly, and Paul Spickard (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, in press).

genealogical knowledge is crucial in this process as it provides mixed-race subjects a particular agency through which to assert control over their own reception. Without knowledge of their personal racial history, multiethnic bodies slip into reified categories of race, leaving their mixed histories inevitably behind. Furthermore, cultural geography plays a key role in the reception of the shape shifter. Racial cartographies provide various cultural expectations that enable the shape shifting process to take place. The ability of the mixed-race body to shape shift across racial lines then becomes contingent on social, historical, and geographical context as well as the reception of the individual in each of these sites.

Shape shifting allows the mixed-race individual a certain amount of control over the reception of their racial mutability. Because their phenotypical features are not easily legible, the observer relies on confirmation from the mixed-race subject to complete the assignment of the body to the most superficially correct racial category. However, the mixed-race figure's refusal to respond or offer confirmation about their true multiethnic parentage can bar the observer from completing the process. In this way, the mixed-race figure is able to control how she is racialized within the encounter.

The mixed-race artists and characters discussed in this dissertation actively exercise their ability to shape shift and control these encounters in everyday life. They deploy shape shifting as a tactic in order to navigate the racial limitations of the quotidian. Coined by Michel de Certeau, the tactic "is the space of the other."<sup>58</sup> De Certeau characterizes tactics as the "art of making do." These are intentional behaviors, "artistic tricks," and "modalities of

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<sup>58</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Translated by Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 37.

action” that take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves. Tactics are used to negotiate the strategies of the dominant.<sup>59</sup> De Certeau defines strategies as calculations, laws, and practices employed by sites of power to regulate the movement of bodies in daily life. For example, De Certeau elucidates the ways in which colonized indigenous peoples used tactics to resist the strategies of the Spanish colonizers. They found ways within the dominant order to subvert the rules without entirely leaving the system.<sup>60</sup> I argue that the shape shifting behaviors deployed by multiracial individuals are also tactics used to negotiate the strategies of monoracial cultural logic.

This practice of bodily inscription and resistance also governs theater spectatorship. Nontraditional casting, or the casting of actors “in roles where race, ethnicity, gender, or physical capability are not necessary to the characters’ or the play’s development,”<sup>61</sup> can be jarring for audience members, who are surprised by bodies that do not reflect their experiences as viewers. Spectators may experience anxiety if the phenotype of a particular actor prohibits them from affixing certain expectations onto the performer’s body or, likewise, if the performer’s physiognomy challenges their expectations about the character. Nontraditional casting can intervene in traditional audience spectatorship by hiring ambiguous mixed-race actors to play these kinds of “open” roles as a way to foreground the existence of the multiracial subject. As performance theorist Angela C. Pao asserts, “Nontraditional racial casting exposes and destabilizes not just the normativity of all-white

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 29 and 37.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>61</sup> Angela C. Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010): 1.

casting practices, but more significantly, the normativity of white social and cultural dominance, both of which could be taken for granted until the 1960s.”<sup>62</sup> Nontraditional casting also applies to mixed-race characters whose different ethnic backgrounds are viewed as perhaps more accessible or more American if they are part white. This can be seen in the production history of Velina Hasu Houston’s play *Kokoro (True Heart)* in chapter three. Nontraditional casting can be helpful in disrupting audience complacency and can reclaim particular roles from the realm of spectatorial control, ensuring the representation of all mixed-race people.<sup>63</sup>

### **Stage Directions: Early Embodiments of Mixed-race Performance**

My purpose in beginning at the *fin de siècle* is to demonstrate the existence of the mixed-race subject as not merely a contemporary phenomenon but as one who has long occupied a place in American society and, therefore, on American stages. The erasure of the mixed-race bodies from drama has produced an unfortunate hole in American popular knowledge. Though Asians have been present on American soil since as early as 1763,<sup>64</sup> a large influx of Chinese immigrants began to arrive in the mid-nineteenth century, primarily due to the discovery of gold in California in 1848. Because few of these folks were women, many Chinese men married white—predominantly Irish—brides. In 1882, at least seventy

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>63</sup> Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997): 97.

<sup>64</sup> Jonathan H. X. Lee and Kathleen M. Nadeau, *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011): 387-388. I refer here to the establishment of Saint Malo by Filipino “Manilamen” in 18<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Louisiana.

Chinese families in New York were composed of Chinese-Irish interracial unions.<sup>65</sup> Historian Robert G. Lee asserts that:

the marriage of Chinese immigrant men to Irish immigrant women, while not significant in a demographic sense, occurred with sufficient frequency to present itself as an imagined threat to working-class whites whose status was precarious and to immigrants whose amalgamation into whiteness was not yet complete.<sup>66</sup>

Likewise, Chinese-Irish marriages were noticeable enough to gain media attention within the city. In 1890, *Harper's Weekly* magazine featured a double-page spread on an interracial couple and their Chinese-Irish children.<sup>67</sup>

The 1895 farce, *Patsy O'Wang*, by T.S. Denison captures the social tension created by these nineteenth-century mixed marriages. The main character, Chin Sum, is half-Chinese and half-Irish. When he drinks tea, he transforms into a subservient, simple-minded Chinese cook. When he drinks whiskey, however, he metamorphoses into Patsy O'Wang, a drunken, belligerent Irishman. Through the monstrous, yet comical, result of such a union, *Patsy O'Wang* documents not only one of the earliest dramatizations of a hapa character but also underscores the public, Coolie-era assumptions that the mixed-race body evoked. Denison's rendering of Patsy foregrounds the popular belief that patterns of behavior were racially inherited and that intermixing created a volatile combination of character flaws. This

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<sup>65</sup> Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999): 75. Lee observes that a little less than 150 Chinese residents were reported in New York's Chinatown on the 1880 census.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>67</sup> Jack Kuo Wei Tchen, "Quimbo Appo's Fear of Fenians: Chinese Irish-Anglo Relations in New York City," in *The New York Irish*, eds. Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996): 129.

pathologized treatment of the multiracial figure was common in mixed-race character portrayals penned and imagined by white authors throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>68</sup> As Carole DeSouza asserts, the representation of the mixed-race identity, like the Chin Sum/Patsy O'Wang character, has not historically been rendered by people of multiethnic ancestry.<sup>69</sup>

The life of Japanese-German playwright Sadakichi Hartmann offers an astonishing contrast to Denison's mixed-race dramatization. Hartmann (1867-1937), who was also an artist, critic, novelist, performer, and shape shifter, came of age during the *fin de siècle* movement, which was a period unlike any other in American history. During the time of the Industrial Revolution, Hartmann began writing plays at a time that saw rapid change in the West, which encouraged global migration. Between the 1880s and 1920s, the West saw the transition from oil and gas lighting to electricity, an accomplishment that also facilitated trans-Atlantic communication and global flows of people, ideas, art, and culture. The continual migration of people contributed to the constant shifting of ideas and identities, as rapid technological advancements also brought about a multiplicity of identities and upward mobility, especially within arts circles. Hartmann came of age in this historical milieu, traveling back and forth from America to Europe multiple times between 1880 and 1920, all while claiming and asserting his Japanese, German, and American identities in the global sanctuary of the *fin de siècle*. The fact that mixed-race Hartmann, son of a European

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<sup>68</sup> Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982): 9.

<sup>69</sup> Carole DeSouza, "Against Erasure: The Multiracial Voice in Cherrie Moraga's *Loving in the War Years*," in *Mixing It Up: Multiracial Subjects*, eds. SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004): 182-183.

merchant who traversed the globe to create a family with a Japanese woman of unknown rank, came of age at this moment of time is perhaps ironic, as it seems to suggest that the era was indeed made, and perhaps was made for, him.

Hartmann's life is provocative because of his sheer range of experiences. His personal history is comingled with the entire cultural, technological, social metamorphosis of the Progressive Era in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His artistic work and writings, which he kept producing until 1937, became one of the cornerstones of American art and photographic criticism. A cross section of his personal history produces experiences and historical memory so broad that it led John Barrymore to sadly dismiss the stories of his life as musings of a drunken old man. Hartmann's life, however, is a sum total of multiple lives lived through multiple identities. This dissertation attempts to shed light on one of those lives, that of a theater maker, which was, in relation to all his others, perhaps his most important personage of all. Significantly, his play *Osadda's Revenge* (1890) dramatized a mixed-race Asian experience, much like Hartmann's own life, as seen at the turn of the century.

Throughout the 1940s-1960s in America, it is not so much that there was a lack of mixed-race characters, but rather that these characters were hidden under a veil of monoraciality and erased from popular discourse.<sup>70</sup> The 1951 stage musical *The King and I* was based on the true-life story of Anna Leonowens, who in 1860 became the governess of

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<sup>70</sup> Multiracial authors also wrote mixed-race Asian characters in fiction in the mid-century. See: Diana C. Chang, *The Frontiers of Love* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1956) and Han Suyin, *A Many-Splendoured Thing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1952). The novel *A Many-Splendoured Thing* was reimagined as the film *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* in 1955. White American actress Jennifer Jones portrayed the Eurasian Suyin.

King Mongkut in Siam (modern-day Thailand). The film was based on the 1944 novel *Anna and the King* by American author Margaret Landon. Leonowens was born in India in 1831 to Englishman Thomas Edwards and Mary Anne Glascott, a woman whose ethnic parentage was not fully known. Glascott's parents, Leonwoens' maternal grandparents, were William Glascott, an officer in the British army and a "lady not entirely white."<sup>71</sup> Leonowens' biographer Susan Morgan affirms that William Glascott's wife was a "local woman" whose name and presence remain lost to history save for traces of her existence as the Glascott matriarch. Her omission from the ledger of marriages by the civil servants of the East India Company suggests that she was not European but most likely Eurasian (mixed-race "Anglo-Indian") instead. Leonowens herself kept the ethnic background of her grandmother and mother hidden and instead presented, even to her family, a version of herself that she invented.<sup>72</sup> She chose to shape shift completely into British whiteness. In the *Anna and the King* novel, Margaret Landon refashioned many details of Leonowens's life, including her ethnic background, partly because Leonowens kept these details in obscurity. Morgan asserts, however, that Leonowens:

would have been delighted with her resurrection as the well-born and gently bred English lady of Margaret Landon's book. Landon's Anna was the very gentlewoman whom Anna, so long ago in Singapore, had envisioned and then

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<sup>71</sup> Susan Morgan, *Bombay Anna: The Real Story and Remarkable Adventures of the King and I Governess* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008): 28. Morgan quotes Mary Martha Sherwood in *Stories Explanatory of Church Catechism*. This author has not been able to locate the original reference.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

declared herself to be.”<sup>73</sup>

By the time Leonowens appeared as a character in the musical production of *King and I* in 1951, the reality of her mixed-race body had vanished altogether in the portrayal by white English actress Gertrude Lawrence.<sup>74</sup>

White cultural dominance persisted in theater until the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, whose effects paved the way for the feminist and equal rights movements. Specifically, the student protests during the five-month strike at San Francisco State University in 1968 ignited the Asian American Movement in 1969.<sup>75</sup> In theater, as Angela C. Pao asserts, "racially mixed companies and productions became instances of the integration of the workplace, schools, and residential neighborhoods that was being legislated and celebrated on one side and often very violently opposed on the other."<sup>76</sup> The first play written by an Asian American to be professionally produced in New York exemplifies the theater born from these movements. Frank Chin, considered to be the grandfather of the first wave or first generation of Asian American playwrights, wrote *The Chickencoop Chinaman* in 1971. The play, which premiered in New York at the American Place Theatre in 1972, confronts the hegemonic emasculation of the Asian male and expresses a deep desire for masculine Asian and Asian American role models in popular

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 5. In various film versions, Leonowens has also been portrayed by white actresses: Irene Dunne in 1946, Deborah Kerr in 1956 and Jodi Foster in 1999.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Spickard with Jeffrey Moniz and Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly, "What Must I Be? Asian Americans and the Question of Multiethnic Identity" in *Race in Mind: Critical Essays*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015): 178.

<sup>76</sup> Angela C. Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010): 17.

discourse.

*The Chickencoop Chinaman* is valuable to this chapter, however, for its inclusion of the hapa character, Lee. Rarely discussed in the criticism of Chin's plays, Lee is described as a “possible Eurasian or Chinese American passing for white,” which conflates two very different sensibilities as the same subjectivity.<sup>77</sup> Like Anna Leonowens in the stage production *The King and I*, Lee was portrayed in the original production of *Chickencoop Chinaman* by a white actress—in this case, Sally Kirkland.<sup>78</sup> This is all the more curious given that lines from the play clearly mark her as mixed-race. Protagonist Tam Lum confronts Lee's Chinese American ex-husband, Tom, who refuses to recognize her Chinese heritage:

TAM. . . . You wanted to be "accepted" by whites so much, you *created one* to accept you. You didn't know Lee's got a bucket of Chinese blood in her? At least a bucket?<sup>79</sup>

Tam seems to subscribe to the rule of hypodescent in the assertion above. He implies that Lee's white identity is an invention since her “bucket of Chinese blood” disqualifies her from claiming her whiteness.

Unlike Leonowens, whose desire to shape shift resulted in a persona that was, in many ways, a “transformed descendent of the version” she created, the character of Lee provides evidence of the subdominant discourse that Chin inadvertently highlights in his

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<sup>77</sup> Frank Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman/The Year of the Dragon: Two Plays* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981): 2-3.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 59. This author's emphasis.

play.<sup>80</sup> The drama unintentionally reveals a bias against hapa subjects who choose to shape shift. Chin characterizes Lee as a Eurasian *or* as an Asian American passing for white. While it may seem that Chin highlights the ambiguity of Lee's social position, the parallel assumes that mixed-Asian subjects prefer to identify as white people or that this claim would, in fact, be false. This is particularly significant, since this example of the subdominant discourse in drama emerges, perhaps ironically, at the confluence of the equal rights movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While Tam recognizes Lee's "Asianness" and demonizes her for not identifying with her Chinese background, the play proceeds to mark her as white in the minds of other Asian American characters in the text and onstage physically in the original production. The result dismisses her mixed-race identity, which equally encompasses both ethnic backgrounds, and erases her multiracial body from view by casting a white actress to portray her. This is no different than the 1989 production of *Miss Saigon* in which producers cast white Welsh performer Jonathan Pryce to play the Eurasian character known simply as The Engineer. Cynthia L. Nakashima notes that The Engineer was originally a Vietnamese character that was later changed to Eurasian so that Pryce could embody the role.<sup>81</sup> In these examples of Lee and The Engineer, mixed-race bodies have been co-opted to serve a specific purpose in the larger narratives in which they appear. Monoracial artists and theater makers in Asian and white America failed to recognize the unique subjectivity of the multiracial

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<sup>80</sup> Susan Morgan, *Bombay Anna: The Real Story and Remarkable Adventures of the King and I Governess* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008): 5.

<sup>81</sup> Cynthia L. Nakashima, "An Invisible Monster: The Creation and Denial of Mixed-race People in America," in *Racially Mixed People in America*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, Inc., 1992): 176 and 178. For a further discussion on the casting history of *Miss Saigon*, see: Antonia N. Glenn, "Racing and E-Racing the Stage: the Politics of Mixed Race Performance" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2004): 4 and 85, and Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 177-199.

characters present in their productions.

### **Staging Presence: Mixed-race Dramas in America**

The next chapters explore mixed-race performance as envisioned or witnessed in the character portrayals in American plays in three distinct time periods: the late nineteenth century, the late twentieth century, and the early twenty-first century. My analysis of this work explores if, how, and to what extent the dramatic depiction and, when available, the performances of these characters, illuminate the racialized experience specific to mixed-race persons—a condition I call doubly liminality.

Given the fluidity of this liminal position, I focus on how these characters and, by extension, the playwrights who breathed life into them, contest the fixity of racial classifications reinforced by the dominant and subdominant discourses. These playwrights and their characters isolate interstitial spaces within the racial scaffolding and create opportunities to capitalize on this slippage. The playwrights also demonstrate how these characters use shapeshifting tactics to enact performances of racial transgression and subvert the systemic strategies that hold monoraciality in place. To what extent do these representations illuminate the calculated negotiations that multiracial people perform on a daily basis? How do they defy social expectations about what it means to be mixed-race without reinforcing the racial codes through a simultaneous assertion of monoracial group membership? How can these performances and characters be identified as mixed-race, when, by the very nature of being multiethnic and doubly liminal, they seem to resist a single, mixed-race group identity? If the contested identity of Asian American is already multiple and hybrid, how does a mixed-race identity differ?

The racialized term “Asian” is already fraught as a racial marker that cannot hold the multiple ethnic groups and cultures it supposedly houses. How then can a mixed-race Asian portrayal be a valid representation worthy of scholarly discussion or analysis? I consider the marginalization that connects multiracial Asians together first as members of an Asian American racialized group, and then specifically how mixedness alters the identity construction and reception of the diversity within this doubly liminal group. I consider the threads that connect these plays and their mixed characters, including the disparate ethnicities and issues dramatized within each of these depictions.

In light of this, the following chapters trace the relationship between the socio-historical contexts and variant ethnic backgrounds that inform how mixed-race figures utilize shape shifting practices in response to their particular contexts. As the case studies in chapter two are situated in the 1890s, I conduct a semiotic analysis of photographs, letters, diary entries, reviews, press releases, programs, and other primary sources to ascertain the playwright’s intention and motivation for creating the work and to glean the possible effect these performances had in social and political arenas. I also rely on secondary sources where appropriate and consider how other historians and performance scholars have interpreted this archival evidence. My own exploration of the papers of Sadakichi Hartmann is intended to extend this scholarship and, through the understanding of hapa subjectivity, suggest a richer understanding of the intent behind the playwright’s work—one that centers and illuminates the calculated agency employed by the playwright who was working within a nineteenth-century racial paradigm. In the case of T.S. Denison’s short play *Patsy O’Wang*, I consider the history of the wave of Chinese-Irish intermarriage in the 1870s and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 alongside the emergence of the Irish-American community as a

politically powerful force in white America. The one-act play foregrounds the cultural anxiety surrounding the mixed-race Chinese-Irish character Chin Sum and the way he fully shape shifts into an Irish politician by the play's end, much to the chagrin of many of his contemporaries.

The plays and performances included in the third chapter chronicle the ways that mixed-Japanese and African American playwright Velina Hasu Houston captured the expansion of the mixed-race movement onstage in the 1980s and 90s. Titled "Hapa Identity in Mixed Dramatic Forms: The Work of Velina Hasu Houston," this chapter considers select works of Houston's—*Thirst* (1985) and *Kokoro (True Heart)* (1994)—paying particular attention to how her portrayals of mixed-race characters reflect the political time periods in which they were written. Building on Julia Kristeva's notion of "literary mutation,"<sup>82</sup> I argue that Houston crafts plays that undergo a "literary metamorphosis" by constructing dramas that display a hapa sensibility in their theatrical form. By mixing familiar narratives from classical Western or Japanese drama, Houston is able to craft plays with dramatic forms and aesthetics that mirror a hapa cultural consciousness.

This chapter also references an archive of photographs, press releases, reviews, directors' notes, correspondence, original play manuscripts, playwright interviews, and filmed footage of the productions to illuminate how the scripts evolved in response to the growing awareness of the mixed-race subject in the late-twentieth century. These primary sources also illustrate naturalized concepts embedded in contemporary racialized language, such as the term "American" being synonymous with whiteness. This is revealed both in the

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<sup>82</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Edited by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980): 92-93.

confusion of the characters and in the casting of the performers in Houston's roles. Finally, this chapter examines the ways in which Houston's work galvanizes our understanding of double liminality. Like Hartmann, so many decades earlier, Houston engages in theater as a tactic to navigate the racialized body politic. For Houston, the theater provides an interstitial space where all expressions of multiraciality are possible. While Hartmann uses performance as a vehicle for shape shifting in his daily life, in Houston's theater, the plays also become shape shifters.

Chapter four focuses on the radically transgressive plays of the emerging fifth wave of Asian American mixed-race playwrights as a means to gauge the zeitgeist of mixed-race accessibility in American theater in the new millennium.<sup>83</sup> These playwrights do not focus on the imperialism that creates the mixed-race body, the mixed body as monstrous, nor a need to be understood or validated by society. They do not pen identity plays, but begin from naturalized, hapa identity, where mixedness is taken for granted. The plays of Christopher Chen and Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig fiercely challenge the political and legal frameworks that maintain the hierarchy and will only grant personhood on their own terms. In this chapter, I combine semiotic analysis with ethnographic methods, utilized in a short-term study of the 2016 Midwest premiere of Chen's play *Mutt*, to analyze how the political climate has shaped the evolution of hapa subjectivity into the twenty-first century. I consider Ric Knowles's triangular framework, which examines how the performance text, the conditions of production, and the conditions of reception equally and reflexively work together to produce

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<sup>83</sup> After the mid-century, each generation of emerging Asian American playwrights are referred to as a "wave." Playwrights Frank Chin, Wakako Yamauchi, and Edward Sakamoto, for example, are considered as "first wave" playwrights. For further discussion, see: Velina Hasu Houston, "Respecting History: Asian American Forum Response," Discovernikkei.org, June 24, 2012, <<http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2012/6/24/forum-velina-hasu-houston/>>.

meaning.<sup>84</sup> This chapter demonstrates how the prismatic perspective in Chen's writing interrogates the racial status quo and current race relations. Concretely, Chen lays bare a racialized landscape in the supposedly post-race era and dismantles the "Face of the Future" imaginary. Building on Brandi Wilkins Catanese's performance theory of racial transgression and pairing Spickard's racial theory of shapeshifting with Joshua Chambers-Letson's keen observation that the legal creation of personhood occurs through the performance of race (specifically monoraciality), I consider how Christopher Chen's *Mutt* and Frances Cowhig's *Lidless* demonstrate how the fluidity of mixed-race identity becomes erased and co-opted by polarizing monoracial cultural logic

Together, these chapters and the theoretical analysis of their respective plays and reception significantly contribute to critical mixed-race scholarship and fill a lacuna in ethnic studies in theater and performance studies. I contend that mixed-race subjectivity, formed in response to and outside of the dominant and subdominant discourses, elucidates a process of identity construction unique to the mixed-race experience. This process can be traced through theatrical texts and performances not only in dramas that expose the beliefs of the dominant and subdominant but also in the ways this critical sampling of contemporary mixed-race plays actively call these discourses into question. The hapa playwrights of this work bequeath their own doubly liminal subjectivities to their fictional characters and continue to speak to each other on either side of the twentieth century.

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<sup>84</sup> Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004): 13. Knowles champions a "materialist semiotics," which combines theories of semiotics and the study of reception with cultural materialist practice. Knowles, quoting Scott Wilson, identifies the four main strands of cultural materialist practice as: historical context, theoretical method, political commitment, and textual analysis.



limitations of racial hierarchy as well as a reconsideration of mixed-race identity, an experience that existed among communities of color in the nineteenth century rather than as a solely contemporary phenomenon. The existence of *Osadda's Revenge* stands as a testament to the visibility of Asian multiracial people onstage in the United States at the *fin de siècle*. This is significant because other theatrical narratives, such as the seminal *Madama Butterfly* (1904), have dramatized the mixed-race subject—a child named Sorrow—as an object rendered invisible.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the Orientalist narrative of *Madama Butterfly* has dominated the performance opportunities of Asians and Asian Americans in the West throughout the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. It is perhaps ironic that *Osadda's Revenge* has languished in obscurity, since the play itself dismantles the romantization of “East meets West” in *Madama Butterfly*. Never in *Madama Butterfly* or any of its other iterations, including David Henry Hwang’s play *M. Butterfly* (1986) and the musical *Miss Saigon* (1989), does the mixed-race child of the interracial union speak.<sup>3</sup> The hapa child has remained silenced by those who would write about her, monoracial voices with particular political agendas. This has been the erasure of the mixed-race Asian voice in theater.

Few studies have surveyed mixed-Asian characters in nineteenth-century drama.

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<sup>2</sup> *Madame Butterfly* (1898) is a short story by John Luther Long, who was inspired by Pierre Loti’s novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887). Long’s short story was adapted into a one-act play written by David Belasco in 1900. In turn, Puccini saw the play in London in the same year and was inspired to write the 1904 opera. See John Luther Long, *Madame Butterfly* (New York: The Century Company, 1917); David Belasco, *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan, Representative American Plays* (New York: The Century Company, 1917); and Giacomo Puccini and John Luther Long, *Madama Butterfly: Opera in Three Acts : Founded on the Book by John L. Long and the Drama by David Belasco* (New York: G. Ricordi and Company, 1905).

<sup>3</sup> See Alain Boublil, *Miss Saigon: a Musical* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1990) and David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (New York: Penguin Group, Inc., 1986).

Theater scholar Joyce Flynn has examined multiraciality in the depiction of mixed-race Black characters in narratives such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1858), *The Escape* (1858), and *The Octoroon* (1859).<sup>4</sup> While Flynn briefly mentions the play *Patsy O'Wang* (1895), she does not include multiracial Asian roles in her survey but focuses primarily on period narratives that explore Black and white hybridity, American Indian mixed-blood, and Jewish assimilation. What then of the mixed-race Asian figures? Does theater also serve as an archive for the mixed-Asian experience in the nineteenth century?

The plays I discuss in this chapter illuminate exactly this. These competing discourses dramatize the existence of the mixed-race hapa figure in nineteenth-century society and highlight the ways in which multiracials employ various tactics to “make do” and capitalize on the racialized circumstances in which they are presented. Sadakichi Hartmann, arguably America’s first hapa playwright, wrote about the mixed-Asian experience in *Osadda’s Revenge* ten years before the multiethnic child in *Madama Butterfly* appeared on American stages in 1900 and five years before T.S. Denison penned his yellowface comedy, *Patsy O'Wang* (1895).<sup>5</sup> As a mixed-race figure, Sadakichi Hartmann moved through many different identities and contexts in nineteenth-century America. Throughout this lifetime, he adopted different personae and wrote under a myriad of pen names. Though culturally German, he performed his Japaneseness in elite, social circles that were accessible to him because of his mixed Eurasian identity.

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<sup>4</sup> Joyce Flynn, "Melting Plots: Patterns of Racial and Ethnic Amalgamation in American Drama before Eugene O'Neill," *American Quarterly*, 38 (1986): 417-438.

<sup>5</sup> See T.S. Denison, *Patsy O'Wang*, in *The Chinese Other 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams. (Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997): 125-148.

Hartmann's ability to permeate different social contexts elucidates his use of shape shifting as a tactic in order to navigate the racialized landscape of daily life. Historian Paul Spickard defines shape shifting as the mixed-race person's ability to defy preexisting racial codes by slipping through the porous boundaries of race. While racial expectation assumes that a perceived phenotype ensures an assignment to the most superficially correct racial category, ethnically ambiguous mixed-race bodies can also shape shift and slip into many different racial designations. This process is often facilitated by social and historical context, geographical location, the subject's personal genealogical knowledge, and the performance of self and its reception.<sup>6</sup> I argue that Spickard's shape shifting behavior is what Michel de Certeau has defined as a "tactic." Mixed-race figures employ tactics to navigate the racial limitations imposed by society. De Certeau differentiates these tactics from strategies. While he defines strategies as calculations employed by sites of power to regulate the movement of the quotidian, he characterizes tactics as the "art of making do," noting that a tactic is an intentional action that takes advantage of "opportunities" as they present themselves.<sup>7</sup> "The space of the tactic," according to de Certeau, "is the space of the other."<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Bell notes how de Certeau's tactics are "especially important to explain the making do of marginalized groups and peoples."<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Schneider further concludes that in the banal

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Spickard, "Not Passing—Shape Shifting: Reflections on Racial Plasticity," in *Shape Shifters: Journeys Across Terrains of Race and Identity*, eds. Lily Anne Y. Welty Tamai, Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly, and Paul Spickard (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, in press).

<sup>7</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Translated by Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 37.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Bell, *Theories of Performance* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2008): 229.

detail of the tactic, we can interrupt the “agendas of the monumental.”<sup>10</sup> In his life and in the play *Osadda’s Revenge*, Hartmann demonstrates how he capitalizes on his ambiguous racial phenotype and “makes do,” using the opportunities that materialize to his advantage. Rather than simply “passing,” a maneuver that articulates singular movement from a subjugated category of color into whiteness, Hartmann shape shifts and moves ambiguously between multiple racial identities. To extend de Certeau’s observations, I suggest that Hartmann’s use of shape shifting as a tactic in his writing and in his performance of self follows Bell’s notion of tactics that embody a creative resistant to dominant structures by marginalized individuals and dispels, as Schneider astutely asserts, “the myth of the monumental,” or the larger, hegemonic grand narrative, to which racial passing ultimately subscribes.<sup>11</sup>

Hartmann contended with a fraught association with his status as mixed-race. His experiences and his circumstances as a mixed-race Eurasian shape shifter shed a special luminosity on the period in which he lived, in which mixed blood was often viewed as producing an impure biology and a wayward mind. One famous example is Edward L. Price’s melodrama *In the Tenderloin* (1894), which capitalized on the criminality of the infamous half-Chinese, half-Irish thief, George Appo. In the 1894 New York production, Appo appeared onstage as himself in a narrative partly based on his real-life experience as a pickpocket and an informant for the Lexow Committee, a New York State Senate empaneled commission investigating police corruption in New York’s Tenderloin district.<sup>12</sup> While

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<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Schneider, “Never, Again,” in *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, eds. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2006): 28.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy J. Gilfoyle, “In the Tenderloin,” in *A Pickpocket’s Tale: The Underworld of Nineteenth-Century New York*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006): 420.

Appo's mixed-race body onstage no doubt afforded him an opportunity to wrest a certain amount of spectatorial control from a stereotypical portrayal,<sup>13</sup> Appo's performance within a theatrical framework controlled by white theater makers reenacted representations of otherness and reinforced society's belief in the mental degeneracy and immoral behavior of the impure, pathological half-breed.<sup>14</sup> Hartmann's play *Osadda's Revenge* intervenes in theatrical spaces where the depictions of mixedness have been manipulated by monoracial playwrights. In many ways, the work parallels contemporary performances where mixed-race dramatists and performers also disrupt the coopted multiracial representations evident in twentieth-century theater.

The perilous association of mixed-race as an unstable, biological state is particularly evident in the 1895 farce, *Patsy O'Wang*, by European American playwright Thomas Stewart Denison. In Denison's yellowface comedy, the mixed-Chinese and Irish character Patsy O'Wang transforms from a docile Chinese cook to an ambitious, self-righteous Irishman. The metamorphosis dramatizes the supposed hyperbolic instability of the tragic half-breed and exposes the anxiety surrounding the miscegenation of immigrant populations in the United States. The play specifically underscores the prevalence of multiracial Asians in

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<sup>13</sup> Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997): 97.

<sup>14</sup> Celine Parreñas Shimizu, "The Bind of Representation: Performing and Consuming Sexuality in *Miss Saigon*," in *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 30-57. Celine Shimizu discusses a similar phenomenon in the portrayal of Asian American actresses in productions of *Miss Saigon*. She notes that although the actors craft performances of female power, the audience continues to witness hypersexualized Asian women in positions of subservience, due to what Shimizu refers to as the "bind of representation." No doubt George Appo's portrayal of his criminal past served to reinforce the white audience's anxiety about the ills of miscegenation. For a description of the production, see Timothy J. Gilfoyle, "In the Tenderloin," in *A Pickpocket's Tale: The Underworld of Nineteenth-Century New York*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006): 260-270.

nineteenth-century America, many of whom were often the children of Irish and Chinese interracial relationships.<sup>15</sup> Not only does *Patsy O'Wang* display the social confusion over these undesirable offspring, it also foregrounds an Orientalist attitude toward Chinese immigrants and exposes the Irish transformation from poor, working class laborers into free, middle-class whites with political power.<sup>16</sup> The play is particularly compelling because the character Patsy tactically uses his unusual shape shifting ability to physically transform from one race to another, enabling him to embrace a white persona and reject his Chinese identity. As Denison seems to assert, whiteness is the preferred racial state in Patsy's nineteenth-century world. For Sadakichi Hartmann, it's not.

Hartmann's play *Osadda's Revenge* creates a powerful rupture in the nineteenth-century discourse perpetuated by the white authors of dramas like *In the Tenderloin* and *Patsy O'Wang* (1895), who depict mixed-race subjects as objects or half-caste "creatures."<sup>17</sup> Like Hartmann, the multiethnic protagonist, Hidetada, experiences an agency that had not been previously seen on American stages. Hartmann's thoughts and approaches for engaging with a society that, at times, both accepted and shunned him feels relatively contemporary and closely resembles the same thought processes and challenges undertaken by hapa subjects in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This is significant, as it indicates that the mixed-race experience is not just a modern-day phenomenon. Hartmann's work reveals an alternative way of being in monoracial spaces and

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<sup>15</sup> Robert G. Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999): 75.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion, see: David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, revised ed. (New York: Verso, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> T.S. Denison, *Patsy O'Wang*, in *The Chinese Other 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams. (Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997): 125-148.

an ability to navigate the normative narratives that persistently demonized mixed-race identity, one that is perhaps fueled by his choice to be Japanese rather than German. In Hartmann's own voice, in personal essays and theatrical texts, he writes about an experience where his ethnic backgrounds both arm him with an extraordinary agency and prevent him from being fully accepted in society. In the unpublished play, *Osadda's Revenge*, actor and playwright Hartmann uses theater to also "make do." He writes not from the margins, but from his own center as a mixed-race subject actively participating in a society where his mixedness garners a variety of reactions from the community at large. The voice of his multiethnic character Hidetada reflects Hartmann's keen understanding of mixed-race subjectivity.

The two dramatic texts analyzed in this chapter, *Osadda's Revenge* and *Patsy O'Wang*, illustrate a striking contrast between the different discourses around mixed-race Asians at the *fin de siècle*. Though not strictly comparable, these competing representations of mixed-Asian subjectivity demonstrate the polyvalent landscape of hapa portrayals in nineteenth-century theater and of hapa populations in America. Both protagonists are Eurasian Americans with different Asian ethnic backgrounds—Chinese and Japanese—that are inscribed with different histories of oppression. The reception of the mixed-Chinese immigrant, therefore, is different from that of the mixed-Japanese subject. Furthermore, this is amplified by disparate ethnic European backgrounds where Irish, English, and German people experienced the complexity of whiteness in different ways. For the Irish in the early to mid-nineteenth century, the category of whiteness and their respective claims to it was still evolving. Denison's play dramatizes the transformation of the Irish from poor agrarian immigrants into a white, politically powerful Irish-American class, while in Hartmann's play

the mixed-race Japanese, Hidetada, moves through elite cultural circles with ease. These disparate representations reveal contrasting mixed-race experiences, which disrupt the conflation of mixed-race Asians previously seen in American popular culture in the early twentieth century. These depictions sparked an early public dialogue on miscegenation and racial mixing vis-à-vis performance.

### **The Art of Being in Between**

Jolie A. Sheffer's analysis of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mixed-race fiction reveals a multiethnic America in which race-mixing and miscegenation were much more prevalent than contemporary discourse suggests. I focus specifically on Sheffer's consideration of the "multiracial nation-family" trope as explored in mixed-race writer Winnifred Eaton's short stories.<sup>18</sup> Per Sheffer, the fictional aesthetics of multiraciality began decades before the advent of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-1960s. Sheffer contends that despite a persistent rhetoric of nativism, mixed-race narratives provide us with a "model of a nation as always already multiracial and multicultural."<sup>19</sup> The roots of this idea can be found in the mixed-race romances popular at the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, like those written by Winnifred Eaton. Of Chinese and British descent, Eaton published under the pen name Onoto Watanna and masqueraded as a Japanese author. She is well-known for her collections of short stories and romance novels, which often

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<sup>18</sup> Jolie A. Sheffer, *The Romance of Race: Incest, Miscegenation, and Multiculturalism in the United States, 1880-1930* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013): 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

depicted the mixed-race experience at the turn of the century.<sup>20</sup>

Multiracial romances like Eaton's work dramatize mixed-race characters who, trapped in liminal space, grapple with finding their place in white society. As Sheffer contends, this need for acceptance and belonging is realized in the romantic relationships.<sup>21</sup> The play *Osadda's Revenge* functions as a multiracial romance, which, like the fictional narratives Sheffer analyzes, employs a melodramatic twist that indulges in forbidden interracial and incestuous desires.<sup>22</sup> In Hartmann's play, Hidetada's lust for his sister provides him with an unlikely tactic that recognizes him as an undeniable member of his family of origin. His sister's full-fledged acceptance of Hidetada as her brother validates him as an equal and reinstates the privileges he lost in his father's abandonment. In the play, we also see Hartmann's early explorations with symbolism, which dominate his later dramas and position him as a significant contributor to the genre in theater. Through his craft, Hartmann utilizes various tactics—his European theater training and the themes of his dramatic narratives—both to establish himself in white society and to differentiate himself in the landscape of American drama.

In *Patsy O'Wang*, the main character Patsy also employs tactical shape shifting to obtain equality, not in the dramatization of a multiracial romance but in an assertion of white dominance in the evolving political and legal landscapes of the nineteenth century. The play

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<sup>20</sup> Eaton's older sister, Edith Eaton (1865-1914), also wrote fictional accounts about the mixed-race experience, often under the "Chinese" pen name Sui Sin Far. The Eaton sisters spent most of their lives in Europe or the United States (like Hartmann) and in Canada.

<sup>21</sup> Jolie A. Sheffer, *The Romance of Race: Incest, Miscegenation, and Multiculturalism in the United States, 1880-1930* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013): 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

reveals the cultural misgivings over race mixing, especially between the Chinese and Irish, and ethnic stereotypes associated with immigrants like the Chinese and Irish. As Robert Lee contends, Chinese-Irish miscegenation "occurred with enough frequency to present itself as an imagined threat to working class whites."<sup>23</sup> Like Hartmann's protagonist, Hidetada, Patsy O'Wang also expresses his desire to belong, as he asserts his whiteness and stereotypically consumes whiskey as a tactic to permanently solidify his white Irish identity.

The performances of mixed race in Sadakichi Hartmann and T.S. Denison's plays offer us other ways to witness the encounter between different raced bodies onstage. The embodied presence of mixed-race bodies and the stark contrast between a white actor in yellowface in *Patsy O'Wang* and an actual half-Asian body in *Osadda's Revenge* offers us a cogent way to examine mixed-race in the nineteenth century beyond the short stories and novels popularized by the early multiethnic writers like the Eaton sisters. Through these performances we can observe how the contemporary acceptance of hapa identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has its roots in the multiethnic society present in America in the late 1800s. Hartmann's Hidetada strives for racial equality in the multiracial landscape of America, while the yellowface character, Patsy O'Wang, seeks to liberate whiteness from his mixed-race body.

**Half-Butterfly, Half-Caste: Sadakichi Hartmann and the Mixed-Japanese Drama,  
*Osadda's Revenge*<sup>24</sup>**

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<sup>23</sup> Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999): 76.

<sup>24</sup> Portions of this chapter will appear in a somewhat different form in *Shape Shifters: Journeys Across Terrains*

Sadakichi Hartmann's life (1867-1944) illustrates the shape shifting tactics he employed to navigate normative social structures in nineteenth-century America. By 1905, he had published under the names Sidney Allan, A. Chameleon, Caliban, and Chrysanthemum, among half a dozen others. He aligned himself with luminaries, penetrating their social circles while occupying different professions. He was Walt Whitman's secretary and Alfred Stieglitz's lifelong friend. He corresponded regularly with Ezra Pound and Stéphane Mallarmé. He appeared as the Court Magician in Douglas Fairbanks's 1924 silent film *The Thief of Bagdad* and was frequently found drunk with John Barrymore in John Decker's studio in Los Angeles. Hartmann is most famously known as an art critic and a pioneer in the burgeoning field of photography at the beginning of the twentieth century. Historian Jane Calhoun Weaver has noted that "American art and photography in the United States simply could not have become what they are today without his remarkable presence."<sup>25</sup> The prolific Hartmann was also a poet, a novelist, a journalist, and a short story author. When the desire to produce work in all these other genres left him, he inevitably returned to his lifelong passion. His first love was theater.<sup>26</sup> He continued through the end of his life to write plays and perform in staged readings of his own work and those of beloved authors like Henrik Ibsen and Edgar Allan Poe, whose middle name he adopted for one of his personae, Sidney

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*of Race and Identity*, eds. Lily Anne Y. Welty Tamai, Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly, and Paul Spickard (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, in press).

<sup>25</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, *Critical Modernist: Collected Art Writings*, ed. Jean Calhoun Weaver (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 43.

<sup>26</sup> In his essay "Three Years in Philadelphia," Hartmann describes falling in love with the theater upon seeing the famous American actor Thomas Wallace Keene onstage. "And when Thomas Keene came, and I saw him in MacBeth and Richard III, it happened that I became despairingly in love with the stage." See Sadakichi Hartmann, "Three Years in Philadelphia: June 1882-February 1885," Box 6, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

Allan.<sup>27</sup> As English scholar Linda Trinh Moser notes, “of all his creative efforts, Hartmann seemed most interested in drama.”<sup>28</sup> As a dramatist, Hartmann is most well-known for his realist play, *A Tragedy in a New York Flat* (1896), and five symbolist plays about religious figures: *Christ* (1893), *Buddha* (1897), *Mohammed* (1899), *Confucius* (1923), and *Moses* (1934). A careful consideration of his papers at the University of California, Riverside Special Collections, however, reveals the manuscripts of seventeen other plays and the outline for an eighteenth. This does not include the plays Hartmann recounts writing in his early years in Boston, whose manuscripts appear to be lost to history.<sup>29</sup>

In this chapter, I focus my analysis on Hartmann’s mixed-Asian character, Hidetada, in the play, *Osadda’s Revenge*. Asian American scholar Esther Kim Lee has suggested that Hartmann is perhaps the first Asian American playwright, noting that while “his plays do not address Asian American issues, they are rare symbolist plays with intercultural themes.”<sup>30</sup> However, perhaps due to the vast volumes of literary work produced by Hartmann, very little attention has been paid to his life as a theater artist, much less to his work as an Asian American dramatist. Yet his love of theater quietly, persistently dominates the literature on Hartmann’s life, his accomplishments, his dark, troubled moments, and his very own words.

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<sup>27</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, *Critical Modernist: Collected Art Writings*, ed. Jean Calhoun Weaver (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 30.

<sup>28</sup> Linda Trinh Moser, “Sadakichi Hartmann (1867-1944),” in *Asian American Poets: A Bio-Bibliography Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Guiyou Huang (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002): 129.

<sup>29</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, “Aspirations of a Playwright,” 1920-1930, Box 5, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside. Hartmann mentions two plays he wrote in Boston: *A Child Actress* and *Abraham Lincoln*.

<sup>30</sup> Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 13. Lee quotes Hartmann’s biographer, Jean Calhoun Weaver.

Hartmann is, I argue, America's first mixed-race hapa playwright, writing about mixed-race Asians in America as early as 1890, ten years before the mixed-race child in *Madame Butterfly* appeared on American stages in 1900 and five years before T.S. Denison penned his yellowface caricature, Patsy O'Wang. In Hartmann's plays *Osadda's Revenge* (1890) and *Boston Lions* (1890-96), he explores Asian American identity through mixed-race hapa characters, who are based on his own experiences.<sup>31</sup>

Hartmann's obscurity as a playwright, however, was not a fact lost to him. He lamented his own lack of success as a theater maker and a dramatist. As he dolefully writes in in his unpublished essay, "Aspirations of a Playwright,"

The trouble is that a playwright cannot work independently, he has to write a play specially for a specific purpose, for an actress or actor, cater to the box office and the fads of the time. So what's the use.

My real ambition in the dramatic line was so remote from ordinary facts and conditions. If a man writes *Christ* he should not meddle with writing a popular play. So I am really glad that all my attempts are buried in oblivion, and aside from my religious dramas none remain but my *Boston Lions* and *Tragedy in a New York Flat*.<sup>32</sup>

Hartmann may have believed he was a failure as a dramatist, but his early plays stand firmly in the transition from naturalism to symbolism in theater. His later works like *Christ* (1893)

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<sup>31</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, "Aspirations of a Playwright," 1920-1930, Box 5, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside. In "Aspirations of a Playwright," Hartmann notes that of all his plays, *Boston Lions*, is his favorite. In the comedy, he writes about his experiences on the lecture circuit in Boston and names the caricature of himself Nichi Swartzman.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

and *Buddha* (1897) reveal a theater artist who developed and expanded the symbolist movement. Furthermore, what his plays reveal about the representation of multiracial subjectivity continue to resonate with us today. It is his plays alone that exist as a theatrical archive for mixed-Asian subjectivity in the late 1800s. The actions and choices of both Hartmann and characters like Hidetada demonstrate the ways in which mixed people have sought to navigate and interrogate monoraciality since the nineteenth century.

The circumstances surrounding Hartmann's birth and childhood inform his choices to use shape shifting as a tactic to transverse the social strategies or systems in place in the nineteenth-century world. The child of a German father and a Japanese mother, Carl Sadakichi Hartmann was born on the island of Dejima in Nagasaki Harbor around 1867.<sup>33</sup> The island was solely designated as a Dutch trading post in 1641 during Japan's period of isolationism before the Meiji restoration.<sup>34</sup> Dejima was a manmade islet well-known for having first housed the interracial, multiethnic families of Portuguese traders and Japanese women and their mixed-race children in 1636. Many German merchants, however, docked at Dejima under the pretense of being Dutch. Hartmann's father was among them. Carl Hermann Oskar Hartmann was a multi-lingual German official from Hamburg, a city crucial to Germany's overseas economic prosperity.<sup>35</sup> Hartmann's mother was known only as Osada, and her class and her status in society are not entirely known. Historians disagree over

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<sup>33</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, *White Chrysanthemums: Literary Fragments and Pronouncements*, eds., George Knox and Harry Lawton (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971): 23. Hartmann never knew the exact year of his birth, an omission that troubled him his entire life.

<sup>34</sup> Frits Vos, "Forgotten Foibles: Love and the Dutch at Dejima (1641-1854)," *East Asian History*, no. 39 (2014):139-152.

<sup>35</sup> Richard J. Evans, *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years 1830-1910* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987): 28-34.

whether she was of the servant or merchant classes and even whether she was Carl Hartmann's mistress or wife. Osada died when Hartmann was less than one-year-old. He and his older brother, Hidetaru Oskar, were taken back to Hamburg to be raised by their paternal grandmother and their uncle, Ernst. There Hartmann was baptized Lutheran and raised in considerable wealth. Known in his youth as Carl, he was well-educated and credited his uncle for instilling in him a lifelong interest in the arts, of which theater was an early interest. Sadakichi Hartmann, however, would reinvent the personae of his parents many times over the course of his entire life. He was especially consumed with the vision of his unknown mother and the circumstances of the early death that robbed him of her guidance and care.<sup>36</sup>

Racial bias was a constant in Hartmann's life. Culturally, he was German. In fact, there is very little evidence that he interacted with the Japanese community in Europe or in the United States. Phenotypically Asian, however, Hartmann was not fully accepted as a member of German society. As Weaver notes, early in his life, despite his luxurious upbringing, Hartmann was shunned by his peers for being Japanese.<sup>37</sup> Of mixed marriage or "intercopulation," Hartmann remarked that it was one of the "best character molders. I do not particularly recommend it from personal experience or the adventures of my children."<sup>38</sup> Not accepted as entirely German and having no connection with his Japanese family, Hartmann often referred to himself later in life as the son of *Madama Butterfly*, "an innocent haunted

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<sup>36</sup> Peter B. Hodges, "The Plays of Sadakichi Hartmann" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1991): 9 and 60.

<sup>37</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, *Critical Modernist: Collected Art Writings*, ed. Jean Calhoun Weaver (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 39.

<sup>38</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, *White Chrysanthemums: Literary Fragments and Pronouncements*, eds. George Knox and Harry Lawton (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971): 119.

by a tragedy he could not set right.”<sup>39</sup> This is significant, as Hartmann often identified with the narrative, even though he was born 30 years before the short story, *Madame Butterfly*, appeared in circulation.

His father’s marriage set the stage for *Osadda’s Revenge*. In Hartmann’s thirteenth year, his father married Helena Mayer, a widow with two daughters, who wanted nothing to do with her new husband’s half-breed sons. After the nuptials, Hartmann was disinherited and eventually sent to live with a grand uncle and aunt in Philadelphia. He arrived in America “on a hot June day” in 1882.<sup>40</sup> As a result of his banishment, his stepmother was able to secure an inheritance solely for her own daughters, Elsa and Rosa.<sup>41</sup> Hartmann later referred to his stepmother as Strindberg’s Laura.<sup>42</sup>

The acting profession intrigued Hartmann, who perhaps viewed it as the extension of a shape shifting tactic on which he could capitalize and employ in his everyday life. He eventually left his guardians in Philadelphia and moved to Boston, taking odd jobs, and voraciously continuing his education at public libraries. He read on a variety of topics, but mostly focused on the arts. He took voice lessons to prepare for an acting career and

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<sup>39</sup> Michelle Legro, “A Trip to Japan in Sixteen Minutes,” *The Believer*, May 2013, <[http://www.believermag.com/issues/201305/?read=article\\_legro](http://www.believermag.com/issues/201305/?read=article_legro)>.

<sup>40</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, *White Chrysanthemums: Literary Fragments and Pronouncements*, eds. George Knox and Harry Lawton (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971): 24.

<sup>41</sup> George Knox and Harry Lawton, introduction to *The Whitman-Hartmann Controversy: Including Conversations with Walt Whitman and Other Essays*, eds. George Knox and Harry Lawton (Frankfurt: Herbert Lang Bern, 1976): 13.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. In Strindberg’s *The Father*, the character Laura can push her own agenda by convincing authorities that her husband is mad, although the play can also be read as a woman trying to outwit a system that is intrinsically patriarchal. Hartmann translated the play in 1889. See Sadakichi Hartmann, “Aspirations of a Playwright,” 1920-1930, Box 5, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

frequented the theater. His favorite playwright was the controversial Norwegian naturalistic, Henrik Ibsen, whom Hartmann considered to be “the greatest dramatist of modern times.”<sup>43</sup> Hartmann was astounded that Ibsen was still virtually unknown in the United States when he first arrived.<sup>44</sup>

Hartmann used his racial ambiguity to his advantage and tactically engaged in shape shifting to create opportunities he might not otherwise have had. For instance, in 1884, Hartmann knocked on the door of American poet Walt Whitman in Camden, New Jersey, at the suggestion of a friend who disclosed where the writer lived. Hartmann was then just 16 years old. When the old poet opened the door, Hartmann simply said, “I would like to see Walt Whitman” to which Whitman responded, “And you are a Japanese boy are you not?” Hartmann explained his ethnic background, replying, “My father is German, but my mother was Japanese, and I was born in Japan.”<sup>45</sup> He would later remark that Whitman was “the only person who recognized my nationality at first glance.”<sup>46</sup> Hartmann was, of course, thoroughly German. He had a heavy German accent, and though his phenotypic characteristics marked him as an Asian, he had no cultural connection to Japan. Though he and Whitman talked about Japan and “the beautiful bay of Nagasaki,” Hartmann later

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<sup>43</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, “On the Lack of Culture,” in *Sadakichi Hartmann: Critical Modernist: Collected Art Writings*, ed. Jean Calhoun Weaver (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 168.

<sup>44</sup> Peter B. Hodges, “The Plays of Sadakichi Hartmann” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1991): 27-28. In September 1888, Hartmann proposed to mount a season of plays at Union Hall in Boston featuring *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll House*, and *Ghosts*. Hodges notes that the repertory was to be completed with Hartmann’s translations of *The Father* and Heyse’s *The Death of Don Juan*.

<sup>45</sup> George Knox and Harry Lawton, introduction to *The Whitman-Hartmann Controversy: Including Conversations with Walt Whitman and Other Essays*, eds. George Knox and Harry Lawton (Frankfurt: Herbert Lang Bern, 1976): 15.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

remarked, “I did not know much about it from personal recollection.”<sup>47</sup> While people saw Hartmann as authentically Japanese, and no doubt he was by birth, they read his visage as exotic rather than simply as European. This demonstrates white society’s tendency to see race as a determining factor in “othering” certain individuals, but one that Hartmann used to his advantage.

Whitman, though intrigued by Hartmann, also expressed confusion over his racial background and his desire to pursue a career in performance. During their first meeting, they spoke not of poetry but of theater. Hartmann introduced Whitman to the work of Ibsen. They spoke earnestly about Shakespeare’s fools and Hartmann asserted that he was “too tall” to play any of them, though he was committed to developing an acting career. Whitman discouraged Hartmann from pursuing this passion, citing Hartmann’s mixedness as a deterrent to his possible success:

I fear that won’t go. There are so many traits, characteristics, Americanisms, inborn with us, which you would never get at. One can do a great deal of propping. After all, one can’t grow roses on a peach tree.<sup>48</sup>

Over the course of their relationship, Whitman racialized Hartmann many times, often citing his Japanese heritage as the dominant, biological force driving Hartmann’s personality. When agreeable to him, Hartmann was his “old friend the German-Japanese.” When Whitman was enraged, Hartmann was simply, “that damned Japanee.”<sup>49</sup> Whitman’s struggle

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 48.

with classifying the racially ambiguous Hartmann further emphasizes the monoracial attitudes Hartmann encountered as a mixed-race figure in America in the late nineteenth century.

Despite Whitman's discouragement, Hartmann's forays into theater continued to pepper his everyday life. In each city where he lived, he engaged in theater. He had trained in technical theater in Germany during the age of *Gesamtkunswerk* or "the total work of art."<sup>50</sup> His experimental sensibilities reflected this training in Richard Wagner's total theater, which fused the artistic elements of music, drama, dance, light, and spectacle into a complete artistic vision. Hartmann spent eight months in 1885 as an apprentice in the court theater in Munich, learning set design from Kurt Lautenschläger, who designed the architecture for the innovative "Shakespearean stage."<sup>51</sup> He received acting training in Dresden.<sup>52</sup> He wrote extensively on theater for various arts magazines and gave acting and voice lessons in New York.<sup>53</sup> He turned to journalism as a means to make money, and he considered the myriad of lifestyle essays he wrote to make a living to be menial work. When he was twenty-three, he published 400 copies of his first symbolist drama, *Christ* (1893), which he dedicated to

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<sup>50</sup> Simon Williams, *Wagner and the Romantic Hero* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 165.

<sup>51</sup> Simon Williams, *Shakespeare on the German Stage: Volume 1, 1586-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 185-186.

<sup>52</sup> After moving to the United States, Hartmann returned to Europe three separate times in 1885, 1886, and 1888. See: George Knox and Harry Lawton, introduction to *The Whitman-Hartmann Controversy: Including Conversations with Walt Whitman and Other Essays*, eds. George Knox and Harry Lawton (Frankfurt: Herbert Lang Bern, 1976): 17-19.

<sup>53</sup> Linda Thinh Moser, "Sadakichi Hartmann (1867-1944)," *Asian American Poets: A Bio-Bibliography Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Guiyou Huang (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002): 126. Hartmann published a wealth of articles on acting and European dramatists and even ran advertisements for dance and acting lessons in *The Theatre: An Illustrated Weekly Magazine, Drama, Music, Art*. Vol. 6. ed. Deshler Welch (New York: Theatre Publishing Company, 1889-1891).

August Strindberg.<sup>54</sup> In the drama, Hartmann depicted Christ in scandalous scenes of sexual temptation. Of the play, the leading French symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, whom Hartmann had met in Paris in 1892, said

You painted . . . a vast fresco as I have dreamed of, decorating the popular palaces of this time and future times. The beauty of it is that its colors are those of the dream, delicate and powerful at the same time so that even a lonely soul amidst the acclaim of the masses has his exquisite share of beauty. In this manner, the book is human because of its expression as well as its artistic value.<sup>55</sup>

But, in Boston, the play was considered blasphemous. It was immediately banned and publicly burned. Theater critic James Gibbons Huneker described the play as “absolutely the most daring of all decadent productions.”<sup>56</sup> Hartmann was arrested for publishing and selling obscenity on December 21, 1893. He spent the subsequent Christmas Day in jail.

Hartmann, influenced by his European training, persisted in his exploration of symbolism in theater making. This was often misconstrued as eccentric behavior brought about by a weak mind and impure biology. In his next play, *Buddha* (1897), Hartmann included in its stage directions guidelines for the use of colors and various perfumes that

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<sup>54</sup> Elinor Fuchs, “Strindberg “Our Contemporary”: Constructing and Deconstructing *To Damascus* (I),” in *Strindberg’s Dramaturgy*, ed. Göran Stockenström (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988): 77. According to Fuchs, an unmarked copy of *Christ* can be found in Strindberg’s library.

<sup>55</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, “Letter to Sadakichi” 1893, Box 30, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

<sup>56</sup> George Knox and Harry Lawton, introduction to *White Chrysanthemums: Literary Fragments and Pronouncements*, eds. George Knox and Harry Lawton (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971): xix.

would extinguish “the illusion of reality” and ignite the raw emotions and pure imagination of the spectator.<sup>57</sup> In November 1902, he produced a perfume concert at the New York Theatre under the pseudonym, “Chrysanthemum,” a name he wielded when he wanted to assert his Japanese cultural identity.<sup>58</sup> The performance, called “A Trip to Japan in Sixteen Minutes, a Melody of Eight Odors,” reflected Hartmann’s desire to cultivate a performance for the senses that did not privilege sight. Symbolist theater had begun to employ the use of smells via perfume fountains, incense, and even scented programs to influence the mood of its audiences.<sup>59</sup> Hartmann’s creation of symbolist “olfactory art” also mirrored personal experiences. He had worked as a perfume peddler in his early years in Philadelphia and had perhaps been influenced by Whitman, who explored the connection between smell and memory in his poetry.<sup>60</sup> The perfume concert was billed as “the chief attraction”<sup>61</sup> in an evening of vaudevillian performances that included the Rossow Midgets and the Can-can kicking Meredith Sisters, who later assisted Hartmann costumed as “Japanese twin geisha girls.”<sup>62</sup> In the concert, Hartmann attempted to create the experience of traveling from New

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<sup>57</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, *Buddha* (New York: privately printed, 1897), 23. On the back of page 104 in the *Osaada’s Revenge* manuscript, Hartmann has similarly listed colors that seem to accompany the drama’s three different acts. See: C. Sadakichi Hartmann, “Osadda’s Revenge,” 104, 1890, Box 7, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

<sup>58</sup> Tia Anne Vasiliou, “‘The Power of Suggestiveness:’ Sadakichi Hartmann, Thomas Wilmer Dewing, and American Modernism” (Masters thesis, University of California, Riverside, 2011): 76.

<sup>59</sup> Christina Bradstreet, “A Trip to Japan in Sixteen Minutes: Sadakichi Hartmann’s Perfume Concert and the Aesthetics of Scent,” in *Art, History and the Senses: 1830 to the Present*, eds. Patricia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010): 53.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>61</sup> “Perfume Concert Fails,” *New York Times* (1902): 5.

<sup>62</sup> “Program of Rice’s Sunday ‘Pops’ 1902, Box 28, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

York to Japan by submerging large sheets of cheese cloth in various perfumed scents. Using industrial fans, Hartmann blew the aromas into the audience while delivering a travel monologue of the journey. He called the aromatic contraption, the “Hartmann Perfumator,” and *The New York Times* review provided the following description of his creation:

Two boxes about the size of beehives were placed on the stage. Behind them were powerful electric fans, and the conductor was going to put in the boxes linen saturated with perfumes, the extracts of flowers from different nations. The air currents were to drive the odors into the theatre.<sup>63</sup>

An announcement for the much-anticipated affair declared, “the Nose will be guaranteed arrival in Yokohama.”<sup>64</sup> The evening’s audience was filled with a menagerie of patrons that included those with hay-fever, who wanted to enjoy the pollen-free scent of flowers, as well as a group of “deaf-mutes,” who were attracted to a sensorial event they could experience with their noses.<sup>65</sup>

The early modernist performance of smellscapes, however, was largely a failure. Hartmann’s aromas failed to travel farther than the first few rows of the theater, which led to brutal heckling from the balcony. His perfumes also competed with the thick tobacco smoke that had filled the theater during the previous acts. After only two “travel stops” in New York and Germany, Hartmann “could not go on. He bowed and with his face filled with very real

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<sup>63</sup> “Perfume Concert Fails,” *New York Times* (1902): 5.

<sup>64</sup> “Comparisons Most Odorous,” *New York Times* (1902): 8.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

pain and left the stage, saying in a broken voice that he would have to be excused.”<sup>66</sup> The disappointed allergy-ridden spectators trickled out of the theater with the deaf-mutes, whose fingers rapidly proclaimed their horror at the audience’s treatment of the artist.

Publicly, Hartmann’s failed attempt at creating a concert of scents was largely attributed to his impure ethnic parentage, signaling a popular belief in the mentally weak and unstable psychological state of the mixed-race body.<sup>67</sup> As Christina Bradstreet observes, the *New York Times* announcement of the performance indirectly referred to Hartmann a “weakling and . . . a degenerate.”<sup>68</sup> Bradstreet notes that “his art, it was inferred, was as unhealthy as his exotic mixed-race persona . . . since olfactory imagination was linked to mental degeneracy.”<sup>69</sup> Hence, Hartmann’s impetus for creating a symbolist performance, typical of smaller theaters in Paris at the time,<sup>70</sup> was linked to the inferiority of his mixed-race biology. While this kind of exploration of the senses was on the rise in symbolist theaters in Europe, in America, Hartmann’s cutting-edge aesthetics became racialized. His European influences together with an ambiguous Asian countenance made him appear odd to American theater critics and audiences, but his strangeness was attributed not to his Europeanness but to his mixed Asianness.

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<sup>66</sup> “Perfume Concert Fails.” *New York Times* (1902): 5.

<sup>67</sup> Cynthia L. Nakashima, “An Invisible Monster: The Creation and Denial of Mixed-race People in America,” in *Racially Mixed People in America*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, Inc., 1992): 165-167.

<sup>68</sup> Christina Bradstreet, “A Trip to Japan in Sixteen Minutes: Sadakichi Hartmann’s Perfume Concert and the Aesthetics of Scent,” in *Art, History and the Senses: 1830 to the Present*, eds. Patricia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010): 62.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>70</sup> Simon Williams, (theater historian) in discussion with the author, March 2017.

Similar unfortunate failed attempts at experimental theater continued throughout Hartmann's life and were attributed to his eccentric character. In March 1917, he produced a controversial performance of Ibsen's *Ghosts* in the Russian Hill neighborhood of San Francisco. Hartmann rented the old Hanford Mansion and dubbed it "The House of Mystery."<sup>71</sup> The program for "The House of Mystery" performance series featured two performances of *Ghosts* and one presentation of Hartmann's plays *Buddha* and *Confucius* on subsequent nights. The performance of *Buddha* was billed as a "Color Drama of the Future" to be presented "with special color settings," while *Confucius* would be fully realized with Chinese dancing and music.<sup>72</sup> Hartmann played the role of Oswald in *Ghosts*, a performance he noted to be "twenty-eight years late," as the dramatist was fifty when he played the young adult.<sup>73</sup> During the show, Hartmann directed that fire be ignited in the yard to correspond with the burning orphanage in the play's second act. When the fire spread to the house and almost burned the audience inside alive, Hartmann was again arrested and banned from producing the play in San Francisco. In the timeline for his autobiography, Hartmann simply

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<sup>71</sup> Hartmann's financial ability to produce his theater projects is nebulous. To support himself and his family, he sold manuscripts, lectured on various topics, and asked acquaintances and friends for money, often receiving checks from contemporaries like Alfred Stieglitz and Ezra Pound. Hartmann's second wife, Lillian Bonham, wrote about their financial hardships in her diary in 1917 recalling, "It is hard for him to make up his mind to taking a steady job." A few months after the House of Mystery production, Hartmann was arrested in Redwood City, California for failure to adequately support his wife and children. He pled guilty and spent three days in jail after which he returned to the lecture circuit. See "Poet Arrested for Theft of L.A. Taxicab," *Oakland Tribune* (1933): C7; Lillian Bonham diary entry, July 24, 1917, Box 43, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside; and Peter B. Hodges, "The Plays of Sadakichi Hartmann" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1991): 2-3.

<sup>72</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, "Program: The House of Mystery" 1917, Box 30, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

<sup>73</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, *White Chrysanthemums: Literary Fragments and Pronouncements*, eds. George Knox and Harry Lawton (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971): 27.

referred to the incident only as “‘The House of Mystery’ episode.”<sup>74</sup> More than likely, Hartmann canceled the other two plays on the bill, although an ad for the remaining “House of Mystery” performances ran in the *San Francisco Chronicle* the following week.<sup>75</sup>

However eccentric his theatrical experiments were, theater remained central to Hartmann’s artistic aesthetic and seemed to facilitate his personal life as a shape shifter. To make a living, Hartmann was often found lecturing in Japanese *kimono*, capitalizing on his Asian visage and educating audiences on “authentic” Japanese perspectives. As he mused, “I personally never think of myself as a German or Asiatic. Others do it for me. I am supposed to be a Eurasian and all my early amazing success and enterprise is due to that fact. The first Eurasian in Boston, lecturing—how interesting! All doors opened!”<sup>76</sup> While he was often racialized for his multiethnic parentage, his Eurasian ancestry also granted him access to opportunities he might not otherwise have had.

Hartmann’s use of shape shifting as a tactic enabled him to further widen his access to employment on the lecture circuit. By 1898, Hartmann had created an alter ego named Sidney Allan as a pseudonym to write in Alfred Stieglitz’s photography magazine, *Camera Notes*.<sup>77</sup> Soon thereafter, Sidney Allan began appearing in public and lecturing throughout New England. The dignified Allan wore a three-piece suit and donned a derby hat and a monocle. He was far more sartorially put together, and, as a writer, more controlled and

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>75</sup> “Hartmann to Read Own Play Tuesday,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (1917): 24.

<sup>76</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, *White Chrysanthemums: Literary Fragments and Pronouncements*, eds. George Knox and Harry Lawton (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971): 115.

<sup>77</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, *Critical Modernist: Collected Art Writings*, eds. Jean Calhoun Weaver (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 39.

serious than the bombastic, Bohemian Hartmann.<sup>78</sup> Allan lectured on a variety of topics that seemed beyond Hartmann's personal code of ethics, such as his most famous lecture entitled "Good Taste and Common Sense," and by 1911, Allan's calendar was filled with national lecture tours.<sup>79</sup> Over the years, many newspaper reporters interviewed Sidney Allan, unaware that he was, in fact, Sadakichi Hartmann.<sup>80</sup> George Knox and Harry W. Lawton observed that the "mobility of Hartmann's features lent themselves to almost any treatment,"<sup>81</sup> which enabled Hartmann to shape shift into a variety of different personae of his creation. His use of shape shifting as a tactic enabled and empowered him to widen his access to employment on the lecture circuit. However, though the versatility and illegibility of Hartmann's visage often served him, in his personal essay, "In Search of My Likeness," Hartmann lamented his easily shifting countenance: "Can you imagine anything more embarrassing than offering your portrait to a friend and he answering . . . 'a very nice picture that, but who is it?'"<sup>82</sup> Each attempt to capture his physical likeness on film was, as he put it, "a pictorial transfiguration."<sup>83</sup> A favorite subject of photographers, Hartmann's ability to shape shift has been captured numerous times on film. Knox and Lawton have asserted that

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<sup>78</sup> Hartmann proclaimed himself the "King of Bohemia" when he lived in New York's Greenwich Village. See George Knox and Harry W. Lawton, introduction to in *The Valiant Knights of Daguerre*, eds. George Knox and Harry W. Lawton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978): 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>82</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, "In Search of My Likeness," Box 6, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

no other literary figure was photographed as much as Hartmann at the turn of the century.<sup>84</sup>

In *Osadda's Revenge*, Hartmann blends many aspects of his life: the loss of his mother, his anger towards his father, his dismay at being displaced by his stepsisters, and a longing for a family to which he could return. Like Hartmann, Hidetada in *Osadda's Revenge* moves through society as a Eurasian shape shifter and uses his racialized identity to his advantage. With it, he gains access to different social circles as he seeks to murder his father and avenge his mother's death. Hartmann writes his assessment of the play in his essay, "Aspirations of a Playwright," reflecting

A strictly amateurish, but by far, more serious effort than all of them is my Japanese romance, a lurid three act melodrama, one half tragedy, and the other pure caricature and horseplay. The hero was a young half-breed who falls in love with his step-sister. I wrote it for my first stage appearance and it was performed with me in the leading part in Patterson [New Jersey]. The serious part of the play contained much fervor and poetic imagery, and as far as plot and actor are concerned, it was well constructed."<sup>85</sup>

In *Osadda's Revenge*, Hartmann creates a theatrical romance that draws on his many European influences. Hartmann leans on his European training as a means of "making do" since he knew no Japanese dramatists. This is significant because he was considered Asian although he was raised as a European, demonstrating society's false belief in biology as the

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<sup>84</sup> George Knox and Harry Lawton, introduction to *White Chrysanthemums: Literary Fragments and Pronouncements*, eds. George Knox and Harry Lawton (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971): xxiv.

<sup>85</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, "Aspirations of a Playwright," 1920-1930, Box 5, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

determining factor in shaping an individual's character, rather than culture. Employing similar plot points and character relationships, Hartmann alludes to Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604) and to *Ghosts* (1881) by Ibsen. He produced the latter, a favorite play of his, multiple times, both in Boston and in San Francisco.<sup>86</sup> These plays, written by two European dramatists of Hartmann's admiration and respect, seem to have carried a special meaning for him.

In Winifred Eaton's short stories, Jolie A. Sheffer analyzes how incest serves to disrupt race and racial hierarchy and put mixed-race siblings and white family members on equal footing.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Eaton has a short story entitled, "The Father," whose plot closely resembles Hartmann's play.<sup>88</sup> When considering the character Clarissa, Hidetada's love interest, as a possible representation of Hartmann's stepsisters, this analysis of what Sheffer calls an "incest-recognition plot" proves useful here. According to descriptions filed with *Osadda's Revenge* in the archive at the University of California, Riverside,<sup>89</sup> Hartmann was disillusioned by the loss of his inheritance to his stepsisters. In his relationships with a series of mentors, replacements for his father, he constantly revisited the need for revenge that consumed his thoughts in Philadelphia.<sup>90</sup> Theater scholar Peter B. Hodges notes the "naked

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. Hartmann was well-versed in Shakespeare's plays. He also translated Wilhelm Hauff's *Othello*.

<sup>87</sup> Jolie A. Sheffer, *The Romance of Race: Incest, Miscegenation, and Multiculturalism in the United States, 1880-1930*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013): 56.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 61. Eaton's short story was written ten years later in 1900.

<sup>89</sup> C. Sadakichi Hartmann, "Osadda's Revenge," 1890, Box 7, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

<sup>90</sup> C. Sadakichi Hartmann, "Osadda's Revenge," 1890, Box 7, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

way he [Hartmann] exposes” his own personal demons within the narrative of the play.<sup>91</sup>

Hartmann's Hidetada asserts his desire to belong as he proclaims his whiteness and strives for equality in the multiracial landscape of the nineteenth century.

Hartmann's first task seems to be upending the tragic Eurasian trope by displaying an educated superiority over his white counterparts. *Osadda's Revenge* begins at a debutante ball at a hotel in Newport, which was widely regarded as a summer resort town for the New England upper class. Edith Dayton arrives with her merchant father, Mr. Dayton, anxious to see her beau, a medical student named George van Bos. Her sister, Clarissa Fulton, enters carrying a bouquet of chrysanthemums. Though married, she is smitten by a Japanese suitor named Hidetada. Dayton and his daughters are joined by a cast of characters who represent a privileged elite including an older, pretentious socialite named Helena Blueblood and Baron d'Epignol, who repeatedly tells his companions that he is a member of the Academie Francaise and a poet.

Blueblood is the first character to provide a description of Hidetada, the half-Japanese gentlemen with whom Clarissa is in love. After detailing his handsome physical aspects, she coos about his literary prowess, saying,

BLUEBLOOD. How well he is poised in literature. He made some very sagacious quotations, for instance he allowed himself to say “She loved me for the danger I had past, and I loved her that she did pity them.” I naturally knew at once that my favorite

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<sup>91</sup> Peter B. Hodges, “The Plays of Sadakichi Hartmann” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1991): 54-55.

poet Browning had written those lines.<sup>92</sup>

Blueblood, of course, mistakenly attributes these lines to the wrong writer. They are from Shakespeare's *Othello* and not the work of the American poet Robert Browning.

Through Blueblood, Hartmann potentially references *Othello* for a variety of reasons. Firstly, Hartmann foreshadows Hidetada's exchange with Clarissa and, through intertextuality, evokes the presence of the famous interracial couple, Othello and Desdemona, into the text. The interraciality of their relationship not only foreshadows the mixedness present in Hidetada's romantic relationship with Clarissa but it also conjures and reconstitutes another couple who haunt the text: Hartmann's own interracial, biological parents. Conversely, Blueblood's allusion to Shakespeare allows Hartmann to foreshadow Hidetada's exchange with Clarissa and creates a shorthand through which to experience their relationship. The nod to *Othello* is also meant to foreground the hypocrisy of the privileged American elite, whose ignorance of European writers and culture Hartmann found shocking. Hartmann's frustration here is obvious as the arrogant and pompous Miss Blueblood mistakes William Shakespeare for the more contemporary Robert Browning.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, Blueblood misquotes Shakespeare, saying "danger" instead of "dangers" as in the original text. In the play, Hartmann thumbs his nose at a high society who could not recognize Shakespeare and knew little of Ibsen. Hartmann claims his intellectual superiority over white mainstream culture to prove that he is far from, as Christina Bradstreet notes, the mentally defective offspring often thought to come from an impure, interracial union.

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<sup>92</sup> C. Sadakichi Hartmann, "Osadda's Revenge," 5, 1890, Box 7, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

<sup>93</sup> Browning died in December 1889, six months before the play was produced.

Hidetada's incestuous advances seems to be a way for Hartmann to make do in an effort to win back his inheritance, even in a fantastical realm like theater. When Hidetada and Clarissa finally meet alone, Hartmann directly references *Othello*, establishing Clarissa as Desdemona and Hidetada as Othello in the text. Clarissa speaks to Hidetada saying, "Therefore tell me what sorrowful story lies hidden in your heart. Be assured that I would appreciate your trust in me; it is not curiosity which prompts my tongue to speak, but a burning desire with my soul that is akin to yours."<sup>94</sup> Her words mirror Desdemona's show of adoration and devotion to Othello in Shakespeare's drama. Like Desdemona, Clarissa is drawn to her love interest's troubled past. Clarissa continues, imploring Hidetada to "speak to me. Let me be no longer ignorant of the great torturing passions of your existence,"<sup>95</sup> As Othello recounts in act 1, scene 3, "she loved me for the danger I had past, and I loved her that she did pity them,"<sup>96</sup> and Hidetada also loves having Clarissa as a devoted and empathetic confidante.

Within the dramatization of an incestuous relationship, Hartmann asserts himself as an equal to his own stepsisters. When Clarissa affirms that she and Hidetada are similar, describing her soul as "akin" to his, she foreshadows their blood ties as siblings.<sup>97</sup> Jolie A. Sheffer refers to this as an incest-recognition plot, in which a romantic relationship

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<sup>94</sup> C. Sadakichi Hartmann, "Osadda's Revenge," 13, 1890, Box 7, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>96</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. William Aldis Wright (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1936): 942.

<sup>97</sup> C. Sadakichi Hartmann, "Osadda's Revenge," 13, 1890, Box 7, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

establishes siblings as equals. The incest taboo cannot ignore that the lovers are related. Later in the play, this prevents Hidetada from consummating his romantic relationship with his sister, but it undeniably positions him as an equal member of the family and his father's son. Clarissa's affection further negates Hidetada's illegitimate status as her mixed-race brother.<sup>98</sup> When Hartmann hints that the lovers are "kin" in Clarissa's innocent declaration, he also proclaims himself an equal to his own stepsisters and, therefore, rightfully deserving of his inheritance.

Hartmann further displays his cultural and intellectual prowess through his creation of the character Clarissa. As a composite of many influences in Hartmann's life, she seems to be an amalgamation of Helene Alving and Regina Engstrand from Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Like Helene Alving, Clarissa is married to a philanderer. Clarissa's husband, Clay, is in prison for fraud during the course of the play, and he eventually dies there, also leaving Clarissa a widow like Helene. Yet Clarissa also resembles Regina Engstrand and enters into a romantic relationship with her brother, unaware that they are related.<sup>99</sup>

Hidetada's connection to Clarissa fulfills an emotional void for the protagonist, but the relationship also rectifies a financial discrepancy as well. The love interest is perhaps reminiscent of Clara, a young woman whom Hartmann was in love with in Boston in 1887. Despite their apparent devotion to each other, Hartmann recounted that the affair was "purely

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<sup>98</sup> Jolie A. Sheffer, *The Romance of Race: Incest, Miscegenation, and Multiculturalism in the United States, 1880-1930*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013): 56.

<sup>99</sup> The incestuous sibling relationship is found in many European dramatic plots, any of which could have also influenced Hartmann's play. Most notably: John Ford, *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999), and Richard Wagner, *Die Walküre*, Edited and translated by Rudolph Sabor (London: Phaidon Press, 1997).

osculation,” much like the relationship between Hidetada and Clarissa.<sup>100</sup> The relationship ended abruptly and seemingly irreparably later that year to Hartmann’s dismay after he returned from another trip to Europe in the fall of 1887. It is no coincidence, however, that Hartmann's first love in the United States was named Clara. The character Clarissa may be inspired by her, but the name's meaning also serves another purpose in the text. Clarissa is a related form of Clara or Clare, meaning “clear” and “bright.” Later in the narrative, it is Clarissa who tries to talk some reason into Hidetada, vehemently denying her approval of their incestuous relationship. However, for Hidetada his choice for a romantic partner is clear. She is the only spot of clarity and brightness in his life. As the white legitimate sister, she is guaranteed financial security and belonging. As partners, however, Hidetada finds a way to be equal to his rival heir by demanding recognition as the forgotten, abandoned half-breed son. When Clarissa tries to reason with him, she offers her love as a sister. Hidetada counters, “I want a nearer tie!”<sup>101</sup> as he knows he will not receive the equality he deserves if he settles simply for being her sibling. Eventually in this exchange, Clarissa relents, replying, "Take me. I am yours," signaling her acceptance of him as an equal.<sup>102</sup>

In *Osadda's Revenge*, the mixed-race child, now an adult, speaks, penned by author who lived through an experience not unlike Trouble or Sorrow in *Madama/e Butterfly*.<sup>103</sup> Yet

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<sup>100</sup> George Knox and Harry Lawton, introduction to *The Whitman-Hartmann Controversy: Including Conversations with Walt Whitman and Other Essays*, eds. George Knox and Harry Lawton (Frankfurt: Herbert Lang Bern, 1976): 18.

<sup>101</sup> C. Sadakichi Hartmann, "Osadda's Revenge," 94, 1890, Box 7, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-102.

<sup>103</sup> In Belasco’s play, the mixed-race child is named Trouble. See David Belasco, *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan, Representative American Plays* (New York: The Century Company, 1917).

in *Butterfly* the mixed-race subject has remained silenced, a dismissed object, peripheral to a story undergirded by Orientalism and essentialism in race in America. In *Osadda's Revenge*, however, Hidetada admonishes the white imperialist privilege that has led to his abandonment:

The great crime which so many foreigners committed who settled there. Women were good enough for them while staying in Japan, but when they returned, their children were forgotten. How many . . . hearts have been forsaken? How many tears were shed for them? . . . How many a child had to suffer for this—father's wrong?<sup>104</sup>

In his lifetime, Hartmann was critical of the white imperialist project. He referred to white colonizers as “devils [who] claim that they come as benefactors as they relieve the natives of the tsetse fly, when they themselves are worse than any plague of flies.”<sup>105</sup> While both Blueblood and Clarissa identify Hidetada as a “foreigner” earlier in the text, the protagonist also uses the word when referring to his white father and other Europeans like him who refuse to claim their mixed children.<sup>106</sup> Dayton feebly replies that he is not the only one to have ever committed such a crime, but Hidetada refuses to accept that as an excuse:

DAYTON. That is happening every day all over the world.

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<sup>104</sup> C. Sadakichi Hartmann, “Osadda's Revenge,” 70, 1890, Box 7, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

<sup>105</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, *White Chrysanthemums: Literary Fragments and Pronouncements*, eds., George Knox and Harry Lawton (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971): 117.

<sup>106</sup> Early in the play, Miss Blueblood enjoins her party that “to speak about the foreigner to everyone we meet.” Later Clarissa confesses “I love this foreigner with all my heart and soul.” C. Sadakichi Hartmann, “Osadda's Revenge,” 6 and 9, 1890, Box 7, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

HIDETADA. Sad if it is true. But no man can defend such villainy . . .<sup>107</sup>

Speaking not from the margins, therefore, Hidetada's use of the word foreigner decenters the West's positionality in the text. Through *Osadda's Revenge*, and with the aid of the European dramatists who raised him, Sadakichi Hartmann confronts his father's rejection and claims Japan and Europe together as the center from which he speaks.

In the final moments of the play, Hartmann's desires to reconcile his relationships with his father and his stepsisters begin to coalesce. At the play's end, it is Clarissa's maid, Cora, whose name invokes the "core," "center," or "heart," who dissuades Hidetada from carrying out his plans for revenge. In her *cri de coeur*, she reasons that killing his father would dishonor the love his mother had for both of them.

CORA. . . .if your mother has ever cherished the memory of your father with all the tenderness a woman has, then she has forgiven him long, long ago.

HIDETADA. It is true, she never blamed him for his crime, she pardoned him and loved him still.

CORA. And then her son will kill that man who she so loved, who was the greatest joy of all her life? That can never be right.<sup>108</sup>

Cora acts as a mother-surrogate and as the final arbiter in Hidetada's quest for revenge. Hidetada's ultimate refusal to destroy the only man his mother loved, along with his father's long-awaited recognition, eventually eases his need for vengeance. He addresses Dayton and

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 101-102.

Clarissa as his father and sister, having finally gained acceptance into the family that he had lost. Then, perhaps as a final olive branch to Clara, Hartmann speaks through Hidetada in his last lines to his sister: “Clarissa, our love has not been in vain, it taught me some great lesson . . . to find life worth living.”<sup>109</sup> This lesson learned is what Hartmann consistently, fearlessly endeavored to do: to pursue a life worth living.

Of his stepsisters’ inheritance Hartmann closes his personal essay “Erbschleicherei,” saying

Now in 1933 it is all a dead issue—the world’s war and the shift of mundane possessions—I do not know what has become of them and do not particularly care. I stop here abruptly as all this really does not belong to the part of my career which I endeavored to describe, only that it played such an important influence and intangible force in the development of my early life.<sup>110</sup>

Whether or not Hartmann had truly forgiven them by 1933, perhaps in those early years in Boston and Philadelphia, he desired to bury his thoughts of revenge and dreamt of reconciliation. At end of *Osadda’s Revenge*, Hidetada relinquishes his dagger to Cora’s outstretched hands and pledges to begin a new life.

Very little exists of the original production other than the 1890 “New York Clipper Annual,” which reported that the author made “a stellar debut.”<sup>111</sup> Peter Hodges notes that

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>110</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, “Erbschleicherei,” 3, Box 6, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

<sup>111</sup> “Theatrical Chronology 1890,” *New York Clipper Annual* (1891): 5, <[http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/cul/texts/ldpd\\_5655288\\_003/pages/ldpd\\_5655288\\_003\\_](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/cul/texts/ldpd_5655288_003/pages/ldpd_5655288_003_)

Hartmann assembled a cast of amateur actors in New York for the show and opened the performance at the Apollo Hall in Paterson, New Jersey, a city often remembered as the place where East Coast actors received their first big break.<sup>112</sup> Hartmann's leading ingenue, a night watchman's daughter, was "naivete personified" with an abundance of wavy hair for which Hartmann would forgive anything.<sup>113</sup> Though apparently well-received in surviving newspaper accounts, the production seems to have had a predictable outcome since Hartmann made do with an amateur cast and a leading lady whom he cast for his own self-interests rather than for her acting ability.

Newspaper descriptions of the production illuminate the racialized landscape that perhaps led Hartmann to capitalize on his Japanese phenotype. Hartmann is identified in a review in *America: A Journal for the Americas* as a "gentleman," who is encouraged as a Japanese foreigner who writes in English: "As long as these foreigners do not insist in writing plays in their native lingos they are welcome to scribble as much as they please. After all a play written in English by a Japanese is far better than a paper printed in German in this country."<sup>114</sup> The article further describes Germans, perhaps ironically, as "imported citizens who have wit enough to dispense beer but not enough to learn the language of the country

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00000014.html?toggle=image&menu=maximize&top=&lef t=>.

<sup>112</sup> Peter B. Hodges, "The Plays of Sadakichi Hartmann" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1991): 55-56 and Craig Morrison, *Theaters* (New York: Library of Congress, 2006): 130. Built in 1887, Apollo Hall was rebuilt as the Lyceum Theatre and reopened in 1905. Harry Houdini performed at the same theater in 1926, less than two months before he died in Detroit.

<sup>113</sup> Peter B. Hodges, "The Plays of Sadakichi Hartmann" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1991): 55-56. Hodges quotes Hartmann's biographers Harry Lawton and George Knox.

<sup>114</sup> "Theatrical Chronology 1890," *New York Clipper Annual* (1891): 5, <[http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/cul/texts/ldpd\\_5655288\\_003/pages/ldpd\\_5655288\\_003\\_00000014.html?toggle=image&menu=maximize&top=&lef t=>](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/cul/texts/ldpd_5655288_003/pages/ldpd_5655288_003_00000014.html?toggle=image&menu=maximize&top=&lef t=>).

they fatten upon.”<sup>115</sup> Hartmann’s decision to fully shape shift into a “Japanese Gentleman” seems to be in reaction to the American negative sentiment toward Germans and to capitalize upon the admiration and attention poured upon Japanese people in the late nineteenth century. As Sheffer notes, Japanese success in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) spurred a widespread fascination with Japanese culture. The Japanese were embraced as far more appealing and exotic than the sinister and menacing Chinese.<sup>116</sup> No doubt the audience’s encounter with the mixed-race body of Sadakichi Hartmann onstage aroused a burgeoning attraction to Japanese people and cultural products. Hartmann’s Germanness lent itself to the project of making Hartmann seem more exotic and, in a subversive move on Hartmann’s part, assisted in making him more Japanese.

### **The Most Affectionate Creature: The Mixed-race Body of Patsy O’Wang**

Nineteenth-century mixed-race drama often dramatized and reified coolie-era stereotypes. Unlike the admiration enjoyed by the Japanese, Chinese laborers were the recipients of popular resentment and widespread fear of the “Yellow Peril.”<sup>117</sup> In 1895, American playwright Thomas Stewart Denison published a one-act play, *Patsy O’Wang*, which underscored the public’s opinion regarding Chinese immigrants, the Irish underclass,

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Jolie A. Sheffer, *The Romance of Race: Incest, Miscegenation, and Multiculturalism in the United States, 1880-1930* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013): 57. This brief period of fascination with the Japanese culture was short-lived. The Japanese military success during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) cultivated anxiety about Japanese expansion and turned popular opinion against the Japanese.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 57 and Robert G. Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999): 10.

and miscegenation. The farce featured a protagonist with “a remarkable dual nature.”<sup>118</sup> Chin Sum, a half-Chinese, half-Irish cook, has the uncanny ability to transform himself into a “true Irishman” named Patsy O’Wang.<sup>119</sup> This metamorphosis occurs whenever Sum consumes whiskey, “the drink of his father.”<sup>120</sup> Tea, “the beverage of his mother,” can restore him to his docile, Chinese temperament, the state preferred by his employer, Dr. Fluke.<sup>121</sup> When Sum’s excessive drinking releases the “spirit of Hibernia,” Fluke endeavors to recover Sum’s obedient Chinese personality by continuously feeding him tea. A struggle between Sum’s Chinese persona and his Irish character creates chaos for Fluke and the rest of the household. This chaos is emblematic of the confusion and anxiety produced by the mixed-race body in nineteenth-century society. The play foregrounded popular ethnic stereotypes ascribed to the Chinese at the turn of the century and tracks the Irish community’s transformation from poor, working class to full-fledged members of white American society with substantial political power.

A prolific publisher and playwright, Denison wrote vaudeville scripts and commercial plays as well as one-acts for amateur, school, and church groups. As Hsin-yun Ou notes, the absence of a sufficient performance history of Denison’s *Patsy O’Wang* hints at the

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<sup>118</sup> T.S. Denison, *Patsy O’Wang*, in *The Chinese Other 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams (Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997): 126.

<sup>119</sup> In the analysis that follows, I use the name Patsy when referring to the mixed-race main character. In the play, Chin Sum refers to the Chinese cook before he transforms into the Irish Patsy O’Wang. It is understood from the beginning that the character is mixed, but his cultural selves are never embodied at the same time.

<sup>120</sup> T.S. Denison, *Patsy O’Wang*, in *The Chinese Other 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams (Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997): 126.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

possibility that the script was not intended for commercial use.<sup>122</sup> One amateur production of the play is detailed in the “Clubs and Women’s Societies” column in *The Washington Post* in February 1908, which asserted that the show was “one of the best performances given this winter.”<sup>123</sup> Performed by St. Mark’s Sunday school at Pythian Temple in the District of Columbia, the show “won much applause,” and John E. Tyler, the yellowface actor in the title role impressively “kept everybody laughing.” The performance of the farce seems to align with amateur school productions typical of the era that served as a white middle- and upper-class form of entertainment. These performances often satirized various immigrant and ethnic groups and, in a display of Eurocentrism, highlighted white superiority.<sup>124</sup> Additionally, yellowface roles like Chin Sum gave white audiences a “sanctioned space through which to view the unknowable:” the immoral, contaminated Chinese body<sup>125</sup> and the “unnatural” result of an interracial union. In *Patsy O’Wang*, the mixed-race Chinese body is contained and put on display for viewing pleasure.

Although Denison penned *Patsy O’Wang* as a comedy intended for a white audience, the play underscores the existence of the mixed-Asian body in nineteenth-century America. The character, which made its way onstage and into performance, evinces the presence of white-Asian interracial relationships and their resulting offspring, serving as a reflection of

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<sup>122</sup> Hsin-yun Ou, "Ethnic Presentations and Cultural Constructs: The Chinese/Irish Servant in Patsy O’Wang." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, no. 43.3 (2013): 481.

<sup>123</sup> “Clubs and Societies,” *The Washington Post* (1908): E3.

<sup>124</sup> Hsin-yun Ou, "Ethnic Presentations and Cultural Constructs: The Chinese/Irish Servant in Patsy O’Wang." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, no. 43.3 (2013): 482.

<sup>125</sup> Robert G. Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999): 43. The yellow-face role is reminiscent of the minstrel character John Chinaman. See: *Ibid.*, 34-35.

the zeitgeist and, like *Osadda's Revenge*, as an archive of the mixed-race body. Specifically, *Patsy O'Wang* assures us of the prevalence of Chinese-Irish unions like those found in significant numbers in urban centers such as New York and San Francisco. Historian Robert Lee notes that Chinese-Irish marriages were more commonplace on the East Coast and that “Chinese-Chinese households in New York were so *rare* that, in 1875, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly reported on the *first* such marriage in the city.”<sup>126</sup> Historian Jack Kuo Wei Tchen further reports that “at least one quarter of all Chinese men who lived in New York between 1820 and 1870 were married to, or lived with, Irish women”<sup>127</sup> as opposed to only a dozen Chinese-white interracial couples residing in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Asian interracial marriages and mixed-race children did not suddenly occur in the twentieth century.

While one dozen Chinese interracial relationships in San Francisco may not appear demographically significant, the existence of these relationships demonstrates that they were more common than contemporary discourse has led us to believe. Furthermore, these unions took place with enough frequency to be a concern for California delegates, who, in 1878, proposed an amendment to the California constitution that would restrict Chinese and white marriages. As Historian Rachel F. Moran notes, in 1901 California legislators attempted to deem Chinese-white intermarriage illegal in California, though the law was later considered unconstitutional.<sup>128</sup> However, the statute was revisited in 1905, and California’s

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>127</sup> As quoted in Ibid., 75-76.

<sup>128</sup> Rachel F. Moran, *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 31.

anti-miscegenation law went into effect four years later. Specifically, the law was a response to public concerns about the interracial relationships between whites and the Japanese, who were, at the time, the new Asian immigrant population in California.<sup>129</sup>

*Patsy O'Wang* also dramatizes SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs' observation that the mixed-race body houses competing histories of oppression within the same corporeal subjectivity. As Kwan and Speirs remind us, no mixed-race body is the same as another, and she challenges the cultural tendency to relegate mixed individuals into one all-encompassing group.<sup>130</sup> Within Patsy's body wages a war between the docile Chinese servant and a loud-mouthed, drunken Irishman. Though undoubtedly stereotypes, Patsy's character displays a mixed-Asian experience quite different from that of Hidetada in *Osadda's Revenge* and actualizes the negative assumptions attributed to the Chinese and Irish immigrant communities, magnifying the social belief that miscegenation was a travesty.

These competing histories are what make mixed-race individuals doubly liminal, or racially separate, from each other. While Hartmann's Japanese-white character, Hidetada, and Denison's Chinese-Irish Patsy are both half-Asian and half-white, they do not share a common personal experience other than the marginalization of their mixed-race status. Hidetada, abandoned by his father for being half-Asian, chooses to shape shift into a Japanese persona. This enables him to walk through elite social circles with a certain kind of agency and freedom that allows him to hunt for his mother's supposed murderer. Patsy's

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 31. Additionally, the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) further amplified a new anxiety over the Japanese presence. See Jolie A. Sheffer, *The Romance of Race: Incest, Miscegenation, and Multiculturalism in the United States, 1880-1930* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013): 57.

<sup>130</sup> SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs, introduction to *Mixing It Up: Multiracial Subjects*, eds. SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004): 3.

lower socioeconomic status as a Chinese man relegates him to domestic labor often sought after by the Chinese immigrant population in the mid- to late nineteenth century. In response, Patsy shape shifts into whiteness, which ultimately affords him the agency and power he desires.

While *Patsy O'Wang* provides us with evidence of a mixed-Asian role in the 1890s, the Patsy character does not have a mixed-race subjectivity of his own. Unlike *Osadda's Revenge*, the play was written by a white playwright, who uses mixed-race identity as a comedic gag rather than a serious dramatization about multiraciality. In the character of Patsy O'Wang, we observe a forerunner of mixed-Asian characters like Trouble or Sorrow in iterations of *Madame Butterfly* or of The Engineer and Tam in *Miss Saigon*. Like Patsy, these successors are creations of white playwrights who use them as objects or devices in the theatrical narratives in which they appear. Apart from The Engineer, these other hapa characters are objects that have no voice. I would argue that the point of view emanating from The Engineer does not reflect a mixed-race subjectivity, either, but that of the European theater artists who created him.<sup>131</sup> In Patsy's case, the Chinese-Irish role serves to entertain a white audience in a racialized fantasy and perpetuates coolie-era stereotypes that have relentlessly persisted into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

The racialization is first apparent in Denison's descriptions of his characters' accents. At the top of the script, the playwright carefully outlines how the white characters intonate, and he differentiates between the conventionally Irish Mike and Norah, who speak with "a

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<sup>131</sup> See Alain Boublil, *Miss Saigon: a Musical* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1990) and Claude-Michel Schonberg and Alain Boublil, *Miss Saigon* (Milwaukee: Alain Boublil Music, 1991).

thick brogue,” and the Irish Patsy, who, having interacted with British officers in Hong Kong, has “acquired the language of gentleman.”<sup>132</sup> Of Chinese character Chin Sum, however, Denison asserts that

no instructions can be given here concerning the Chinese part except that the timbre and ones of the Chinese voice are very peculiar, and can be heard only by listening to Chinamen. The Chinese dialect as written here is . . . good enough to be funny, which is the only object in view.<sup>133</sup>

Denison’s treatment of the Chinese pidgin is perhaps no surprise. Besides his many plays, his life’s work and self-proclaimed masterpiece was an etymological history of the Nahuatl language and its supposed links (in Denison’s mind) to Aryan roots, belying a lack of linguistic scholarship that seems to be prevalent in Denison’s work. His unsubstantiated philological study has been largely debunked, and Denison himself was admittedly not a trained linguist.<sup>134</sup> His dismissal of an accurate portrayal of the Chinese accent, save for its ability to garner a comedic response from a white audience, illustrates his objectification of the character and his use of Patsy as a device within the narrative.

Historians Gregory T. Carter and Hsin-yun Ou argue that Patsy has the freedom to choose whiteness, a luxury that many mixed-race subjects do not have.<sup>135</sup> However, Patsy’s

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<sup>132</sup> T.S. Denison, Patsy O’Wang. *Lively Plays for Live People* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Company, 1895): 79.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>134</sup> Thomas Stewart Denison, *Mexican Linguistics: Including Nahatl or Mexican in Aryan Phonology, The Primitive Aryans of America* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Company, 1913).

<sup>135</sup> Gregory T. Carter, “‘A Shplit Ticket, Half Irish, Half Chinay’: Representations of Mixed-Race and Hybridity in Turn-of-the-Century Theater,” *Ethnic Studies Review*, no. 31 (2008): 32-54 and Hsin-yun Ou, “Ethnic Presentations and Cultural Constructs: The Chinese/Irish Servant in Patsy O’Wang.” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, no. 43.3 (2013): 480-501. I would contend otherwise. Hartmann successfully shape shifted

assertion of whiteness does not necessarily ensure that he will be accepted as white. After all, Fluke's Irish assistant Mike has not forgotten that Patsy is mixed. When Patsy announces his plans to run for a municipal office, Mike retorts, "I'll niver vote for a shplit ticket, half Irish half Chinay."<sup>136</sup> Patsy, like Hidetada, may lay claim to his whiteness, but his Chinese heritage poses a threat to his best laid plans.<sup>137</sup>

Patsy seems to use his ability to shape shift into whiteness to serve as a larger metaphor for a burgeoning Irish political ascent in American politics. I argue that rather than merely foregrounding the tensions that existed between the Irish and Chinese working classes, Patsy's character also dramatizes the entire transformation of the Irish immigrant population from that of a poor, oppressed class to one of the most powerful, ethnically white groups in America. Both Carter and Ou elucidate the ways the play dramatizes the tensions that existed between the Chinese and the Irish populations. As the Irish struggled to find their place in American society, they found themselves in competition with Chinese immigrants for working class jobs. Norah and Mike's hostility towards Patsy evinces the Irish disdain and mistrust of the Chinese. In the play's opening, the Irish domestics balk at the idea of sharing the household with a Chinese cook. When Patsy later transforms into an Irishman vis-à-vis the transformative effects of whiskey, Norah and Mike still remain skeptical. It is

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into whiteness when it suit him. He effectively portrayed his alter ego, Sidney Allan, in public and duped newspaper reporters during copious interviews. See George Knox and Harry W. Lawton, introduction to in *The Valiant Knights of Daguerre*, eds. George Knox and Harry W. Lawton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978): 18.

<sup>136</sup> T.S. Denison, *Patsy O'Wang*, in *The Chinese Other 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams (Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997).

<sup>137</sup> Hsin-yun Ou, "Ethnic Presentations and Cultural Constructs: The Chinese/Irish Servant in Patsy O'Wang." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, no. 43.3 (2013): 495.

interesting to note that although Patsy has morphed into a “full-fledged Irishman,” losing his Chinese accent and his docile manner, Mike and Norah still refuse to accept him. Unlike Mike and Norah, Patsy has no Irish accent, either. He is a different “creature,” a term Dr. Fluke uses to describe the cook multiple times in the play. Instead, Patsy speaks in proper, standard English, which elevates him above the rough and obstinate Mike. Even Mrs. Fluke, who refuses to be alone with the Chinese Patsy earlier in the play, seems taken with this new, Irish persona, remarking, “He’s very polite at any rate,” which is one of his many qualities she failed to recognize earlier when he was Chinese.<sup>138</sup>

The contrast between the Irish servants, Norah and Mike, and the polished, ambitious Patsy demonstrates the political rise of the Irish from the early to the late nineteenth century. In contemporary popular imagination, the Irish are still remembered as a destitute, agrarian underclass that immigrated to the United States to escape famine in the 1840s and 50s. Though their origins were as farmers when they arrived in America, their poverty confined them to urban centers on the East Coast. Desperate for work, these Irish immigrants took a myriad of menial jobs, including domestic employment in middle-class, white households like the Flukes’. Mike and Norah embody this first wave of Irish immigrants. For many Irish-Americans, as well as the American cultural imaginary at large, this mass exodus from Ireland persists as a “self-defining collective diasporic memory”<sup>139</sup> regardless of when one’s particular Irish ancestors arrived.

In the character Patsy O’Wang and in his assertion of whiteness, we see the

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<sup>138</sup> T.S. Denison, *Patsy O’Wang*, in *The Chinese Other 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams (Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997): 138.

<sup>139</sup> Paul Spickard, *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity*

emergence of a strong, politically connected middle-class that characterized the latter wave of Irish American immigrants in the years between 1870 and 1930. Like Hidetada, Patsy capitalizes on his mixedness and makes do, shape shifting beyond two ethnically inferior options. Ou acknowledges that towards the end of the nineteenth century the Irish people had attained a social and political status not enjoyed by the Irish who came to America in the mid-1800s. However, Ou asserts that Patsy embraces his Irish identity during a period when the “whiteness” of Irish immigrants was still being contested.<sup>140</sup> She maintains that “[d]espite the rights granted to the Irish . . . there was still, at this point and for years to come, a clear conception of the Irish as not white, and Patsy’s efforts to assimilate accentuate that situation.”<sup>141</sup> But, the period in which *Patsy O’ Wang* was written, the 1890s, reveals a different story. Beginning in 1870, the Irish were no longer poor, rural farmers turned menial laborers, but rather an influential middle class. As historian Paul Spickard observes, “by the late nineteenth century, the Irish Americans were poor no more, whether they were immigrants or born in America. They were mainly middle-class people with property. As a group, Irish Americans had risen to a position of influence in the Catholic church, the ranks of labor, and the Democratic party.”<sup>142</sup> Patsy’s physical differences from Mike and Norah, both in speech and demeanor, emphasize this transformation. He behaves more English than Irish. In other words, he has solidified his whiteness.

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(New York: Routledge, 2007): 108.

<sup>140</sup> Hsin-yun Ou, "Ethnic Presentations and Cultural Constructs: The Chinese/Irish Servant in Patsy O’Wang." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, no. 43.3 (2013): 494.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 494-495.

<sup>142</sup> Paul Spickard, *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007): 181.

The Chinese decision to fill the domestic needs of a male-dominated Gold Rush contributed to the feminization of Asian men, a stereotype that has persisted in the white American imaginary in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *Patsy O'Wang* foregrounds a variety of Chinese stereotypes of the 1890s and illuminates the early immigrant history of Chinese immigrants. Approximately 250,000 Chinese immigrated to the United States West Coast in the 1800s. The majority came in the mid-century, lured by California's Gold Rush beginning in 1848. Spickard observes that though gold production had decreased by 1870, nearly 9,000 of the still remaining California miners were Chinese. While many Chinese turned to railroad construction for work, significant numbers of Chinese men sought employment in domestic professions, opening laundries and serving in white, middle-class households as servants, cooks, and nannies. These domestic tasks were most commonly considered to be feminine labor.<sup>143</sup>

Dr. Fluke's attitude toward Patsy highlights the emasculation of Chinese men in domestic service. The play opens with Fluke announcing that he has hired Patsy O'Wang to be the family's new cook. The doctor reads a letter of referral from his friend, Major Barker, who glowingly recommends Patsy by characterizing him as feminine and childlike. Barker describes Patsy as a "most obedient servant" and "the most affectionate creature."<sup>144</sup> Fluke refers to Patsy in this same vein, calling him "a treasure" and "as peaceful as a lamb."<sup>145</sup> Later in the farce, Fluke adopts Barker's sentiments and frequently refers to Patsy as a "most

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>144</sup> T.S. Denison, *Patsy O'Wang*, in *The Chinese Other 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams (Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997): 128.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 127 and 140.

affectionate creature,” which others the mixed-Chinese masculine body as oddly and unconventionally feminine.

Patsy’s impure status as a mixed-race creature challenges the white hegemonic normative in which a “full-blooded” Chinese subject could be contained. Fluke recognizes that Patsy is not an ideal find. He has a “flaw in his [Chinese] pedigree,” which is tainted with barbarous Irish blood.<sup>146</sup> This strange combination produces a not-quite-human “creature.” Dave Williams contends that the character Patsy and his ability to shift between two opposing personas was most likely inspired by the title character in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).<sup>147</sup> Wildly popular at the end of the century, Stevenson’s novella was published just nine years before Denison’s play was written.

In *Patsy O’Wang*, Chinese character flaws are directly related to paganism, which can only be cured by Western imperialist intervention. Christian conversion alone can save the heathen Chinese, according to Miss Simper, the local Sunday school teacher. She confesses to Dr. Fluke that her “heart bleeds for all the millions of Asia who sit in outer darkness.”<sup>148</sup> Simper’s sentiments highlight the Western, orientalist conflation of the many people of Asia into one irreligious, uncivilized populace.<sup>149</sup> Her attitude also exposes the belief that Asian

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>149</sup> A similar account can be seen in Clara A.N. Whitney, *Clara’s Diary: An American Girl in Meiji Japan*, eds. William Steele and Tamiko Ichimata (Tokyo: Kodansha International Limited, 1979): 25. Clara Whitney was fourteen years-old when she arrived in Meiji-era Japan with her American missionary parents in 1875. The first section of her diary, in which she recounts her life in Asia, is entitled, “In the Land for Which We Have So Often Prayed,” mirroring Simper’s sentiments in Denison’s play. Whitney later married a Japanese man and had

cultures need protection and salvation by their white, Christian neighbors. Cultural theorist Edward Said contends that the Western imperialist desire to dominate distant lands, which seemingly have no valid cultural history, is sustained and reified in objects of culture, specifically in literature where imperialism becomes normalized in fiction.<sup>150</sup> Denison's play reinforces this imperialistic vision, which justifies its actions in the proselytization of lesser, colonized peoples. The acceptance of Western dress is often seen as evidence of a complete conversion. Simper continues, asking Fluke if Patsy has "doffed the Chinese garb . . . and donned the raiment of civilization?"<sup>151</sup> There is a clear differentiation between "Chinese garb" and Western attire, which makes physical the distinction between the cultured, educated Christian West and the Asians "who sit in outer darkness."<sup>152</sup> Simper believes, however, that all subalterns are worthy of salvation and benevolence, especially the Chinese, whom she later describes as having "such lovely dispositions."<sup>153</sup> Denison's play contributes to the notion of empire through Simper's evangelical mission as a backdrop in his work of dramatic fiction.

The Chinese conversion to Christianity was also thought to ensure a reprogramming of the Chinese, who would adopt a respectable, normative domesticity, reinforced by white Christian ideals. As Spickard observes, Chinese economic decisions revolved around simply

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six Japanese English children.

<sup>150</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993): xix.

<sup>151</sup> T.S. Denison, *Patsy O'Wang*, in *The Chinese Other 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams (Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997): 129.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

saving money. Bachelors chose to share lodgings and live together in single-family dwellings.<sup>154</sup> Because women were prohibited from immigrating to the United States, common living spaces were the norm for a single-male population with limited economic resources and opportunities for marriage. These unconventional circumstances created an acute anxiety for the white middle class, who found the behavior non-normative and threatening to middle class values.<sup>155</sup> The popular nineteenth-century belief among white government officials argued that the Chinese immigrant population lived in abnormal conditions, intensified by opium addiction, gambling, and prostitution.<sup>156</sup> In the play, Mrs. Fluke exposes this middle-class anxiety and distrust of the Chinese. Before Patsy's transformation into an Irish gentleman, Mrs. Fluke condemns her husband's decision, retorting, "Well, Dr. Fluke, I shan't take the responsibility of having a Chinaman in the house. . . . Who knows but he may poison us all."<sup>157</sup> She later confesses her fear that Patsy will bring opium into the household.<sup>158</sup>

The white middle-class also believed that Chinese immigrants were unhygienic and therefore, inferior. After Simper attempts to assure Mrs. Fluke that the "poor boy" is nothing to be afraid of, the doctor's wife reminds Simper of "those horrid stories of rats and

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<sup>154</sup> Paul Spickard, *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007): 160.

<sup>155</sup> Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 79.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>157</sup> T.S. Denison, *Patsy O'Wang*, in *The Chinese Other 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams (Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997): 127-128.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 130. Mrs. Fluke says, "I hope the wretch doesn't smoke opium."

opium.”<sup>159</sup> The Irish servants, Mike and Norah, echo Mrs. Fluke’s sentiments and express their disdain and mistrust of Chin Sum.

NORAH. It’s a disgrace, I’ll give notice, I will --

MIKE. I’ll not ate a bit o’ his dirty cookin’, faith I’ll not.<sup>160</sup>

As Nayan Shah notes, local authorities in San Francisco equated the Chinese with animals and, by extension, poor hygiene due to their unfortunate circumstances with overcrowding. This, in turn, fed a perception that the Chinese were inhumane and inferior to white communities.<sup>161</sup> Racist comparisons particularly linked the community to rats and pigs, underscored by the animals’ association with filth and waste. Chinese domestic spaces, like those in Chinatown, were often under sanitary inspection and thought to need constant regulation from lurking disease. Government officials also believed that the Chinese were harbingers of drug addiction and sexual depravity, luring white women into “dens” or “joints,”<sup>162</sup> where opium addiction would compromise their sexual morals. Domestic workers who provided childcare were particularly suspect, since they were thought to be vessels of contamination and disease.<sup>163</sup> As Shah asserts, “the living densities of Chinese “dens”

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>161</sup> Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 27.

<sup>162</sup> T.S. Denison, *Patsy O’Wang*, in *The Chinese Other 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams (Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997): 130.

<sup>163</sup> Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 89.

demonstrated Chinese indifference to human comforts.”<sup>164</sup> Like farm animals crowded into small spaces, the Chinese capacity to attract disease seemed to triple according to health officials.

The mixed-race Patsy’s desire to shape shift into an Irish persona demonstrates the way he uses his transformative ability to his advantage. As an Irishman, he, too, affirms the negative stereotypes heaped on the Chinese, further illustrating the Irish community’s need (and his own) to separate from the imagined lesser Chinese population. In an attempt to disassociate himself from the indecency of his Chinese identity, Patsy conflates assumptions about Chinese immorality and depravity with a tale of cannibalism. He admits that, as the Chinese Patsy, he engaged in cooking human flesh. Recounting his ocean voyage from Hong Kong to America, Irish Patsy confesses that seasickness forced him to take green tea as a curative, completely turning him into his Chinese persona, Chin Sum. Patsy refers to Chin Sum as a “haythen Chinaman,” who assumed the role of cook, made pudding, and boiled the “captain’s mate” during the sea-crossing.<sup>165</sup> In Patsy’s completion rejection of his Chinese identity, we see Denison’s use of the multiracial condition as a device to elevate whiteness above other racial classes.

By extension, Patsy’s assertion of whiteness also challenges the rule of hypodescent. In the narrative, Chin Sum comes across a bottle of whiskey in the Fluke household. After he consumes the liquor, he becomes briefly confused. In Denison’s rendering, he physically shape shifts into a different persona onstage. Like Dr. Henry Jekyll, he completes a

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>165</sup> T.S. Denison, *Patsy O’Wang*, in *The Chinese Other 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams (Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997): 148.

transformation into his alter ego, Patsy O'Wang. He embodies the shift to whiteness linguistically. No longer speaking in a Chinese "pidgin," Patsy speaks with no accent. He has no Irish brogue like Mike and Norah, for he has bypassed their lower social status, which he demonstrates by speaking in an elevated Anglo-American dialect. He could perhaps be English, but it is clear from the text that he is and remains Irish. His transformation dramatizes the Irish trajectory from poor working class to the influential, white middle-class.

As the newly-minted Irish version of Patsy, his transformation is so complete that the shape shifter even effectively fools the anxious Mrs. Fluke. After Patsy's transmutation is complete, she is the first person to encounter him. Though the performer has not physically changed, Mrs. Fluke's character does not recognize Patsy as the Chinese Chin Sum. He effectively "passes" into whiteness, and Mrs. Fluke initially mistakes him for a patient of her husband. When he identifies himself as Patsy O' Wang, even Mrs. Fluke cannot deny that he has changed, remarking, "He's very polite, at any rate."<sup>166</sup> Patsy notices her alarm and graciously gestures for her to sit and rest. The scene remarkably dramatizes the ability of the hapa figure to shape shift onstage. Unlike racial passing, which denotes a singular shift to whiteness, shape shifting connotes a multi-faceted passing, like the many racial embodiments performed by Sadakichi Hartmann. The Patsy O'Wang audience understands that if the shape shifting Patsy were to consume tea, he would morph again into his Chinese persona, a choice available to him if it were in his best interests to do so.

Sadakichi Hartmann's *Osadda's Revenge* and T.S. Denison's *Patsy O'Wang* illuminate the polyvalent landscape occupied by the mixed-race Asian figure in

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 138.

nineteenth-century America. Together, the protagonist of each play demonstrates the hapa figure's ability to shape shift as a tactical means of making do, each challenging the myth of the monumental and using racial fluidity to reclaim power. Additionally, *Patsy O'Wang* demonstrates how the mixed-race body is often manipulated by monoracial writers to reify stereotypes and to assert white superiority for Eurocentric audiences. By contrast, *Osadda's Revenge* reveals a poignant and sensitive portrayal from a mixed-race author attempting to reconcile with his circumstances and personal history as a multiethnic subject. The drama and, more broadly, the practice of theater also foreground Hartmann's decisions to perform shape shifting across multiple racial categories. These function as tactical responses to the acceptance and abandonment that he experienced simultaneously. In both plays, Patsy and Hidetada's shape shifting performances defy the normative discourses that fail to contain their mixed-race bodies and serve as dramatic traces of the multiracial America from which twentieth-century mixed-race Asian writers would begin.

## Chapter 3

### Hapa Identity in Mixed Dramatic Forms: The Work of Velina Hasu Houston

He sits on the porch dejected. His forearms rest on his thighs, hands hanging limply from his wrists. In a khaki shirt and pants, Joseph is clean-shaven with short brown hair. The edge of a white t-shirt peaks out from the collar of his button-down shirt. Though he is a farmer, Joseph's attire in the 1986 Asian America Theatre Company's production of *Thirst* (1985), makes him look more like Christopher Scott, the G.I. protagonist from *Miss Saigon* (1989), who would not appear onstage for four more years. Joseph's physical form conveys his disillusionment following the rejection of his former lover, his half-Japanese neighbor, Plinka. In contrast, the self-assured Plinka is not interested in reconciling. She sits on the porch step next to him, her eyes contemplating the ground at their feet. He wrings his hands slowly. She puts her hand on his shoulder and encourages him to cry.

Plinka, the mixed-race Japanese protagonist of Velina Hasu Houston's play, *Thirst*, emerges from the Asian American theatrical canon as a formidable force, an early voice in the mixed-race social movement of the late twentieth century. Plinka, the main character, is not a political activist, but her mere presence onstage in the mid-1980s marks an early rupture in the contemporary racial discourse about the mixed-race individual's place in a monoracial hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> This is because she lends credence to the notion that a half-Asian subject is, in fact, wholly Asian. Furthermore, Plinka's mixed-race positionality arms her with an agency that interrogates the Asian femme fatale lotus blossom trope that reemerges

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<sup>1</sup> Houston told me that Plinka's unusual name was inspired by music. Houston attended a "home concert," which featured Spanish guitar music, and she felt that the music captured the essence of who Plinka is. The sounds she heard were integrated into her main character. Velina Hasu Houston, Interview with author, Los Angeles, CA, 24 January 2018.

in the 1980s with the popularity of the musical *Miss Saigon*.<sup>2</sup> Plinka is not like Christopher Scott's lover, Kim, who is in need of a white man's affection and salvation. Rather, she is the jilter, and her white male lover, Joseph, is the jilted. *Thirst* displays Houston's bold portrayals of mixed-race identity and the empowered feminist critique of society that is characteristic of her work.

In this chapter, I argue that the plays of internationally-acclaimed, Japanese-African American playwright Velina Hasu Houston dramatize mixedness not only in the content and embodiment of characters but also in the theatrical form of her work. Houston's plays differ from the dramas of other mixed-race playwrights of the 1980s and 90s in that they do not merely explore mixed identity as a circumstance to be understood, the reconciliation of two "halves," nor as a vehicle for self-expression. Rather, Houston depicts the hapa figure as an integrated subject who has seamlessly blended a myriad of social, cultural, and political experiences into one whole identity. This is significant, as mixed-race identity was still an anomaly in a monoracial society emerging from the equal rights movements of the late 1960s and 1970s. Minority groups, in asserting their solidarity, were galvanizing their identities as cohesive populations of color. Mixed-race scholar Maria P.P. Root also notes that the oppressed groups' "insistence on singular ethnic or racial loyalties" stemmed from an internalization of the hegemonic racial system.<sup>3</sup> The mixed-race subject presented a conundrum in this landscape as a figure who could lay claim to multiple ethnic backgrounds.

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<sup>2</sup> Alain Boublil, *Miss Saigon: a Musical* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1990) and Celine Parreñas Shimizu, "The Bind of Representation: Performing and Consuming Sexuality in *Miss Saigon*," in *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 30-57.

<sup>3</sup> Maria P.P. Root, "A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People," *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996): 5.

Furthermore, public discourse had wavered little in its attitude since the early twentieth century, when the mixed-race figure was viewed as a tragic outsider. The representation of the mixed-race Asian body was simultaneously whitewashed and erased from public viewing during the mid-century.<sup>4</sup> Houston's work marks the beginning of a shift in the visibility of the mixed-race hapa figure, which begins to embrace multiracial Asian characters in twentieth-century performance.

The work of Velina Hasu Houston examines shifting cultural boundaries, feminist perspectives, and histories of transnational migration. She is most widely known for her 1985 drama, *Tea*, which illuminates the struggles of Japanese war brides transplanted to the American Midwest after World War II.<sup>5</sup> Of mixed heritage, Houston is herself a product of the postwar migration. The daughters of a Japanese international bride and an African-Native American serviceman, Houston and her sister grew up in a small Kansas town, listening to the rich, cultural stories of her mother's life. These early experiences helped to shape a cosmopolitan sensibility through which Houston writes about the Asian American and mixed-race experiences in her plays. This double lens, coupled with a predominantly Japanese cultural upbringing, caused Houston to turn to literature and drama to escape the "alienating monoracial perspective of the U.S. society" and to find worlds that more closely matched her own spaces where Japanese and American cultures seamlessly coexisted the

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<sup>4</sup> For examples of hapa characters played by white actors in the mid-century, see: *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, directed by Jack Gelber (1972; New York, NY: American Place Theatre, 1972), Performance; *The King and I*, directed by John Van Druten (1951; New York, NY: St. James Theatre, 1951), Performance; *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing*, directed by Henry King (1955; Century City, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1955): Film.

<sup>5</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Playwright's Note," in *Tea* (New York: Theatre Communications Groups, Inc., 1985): n.p. Houston states that many Japanese women prefer the term "international brides" to "war brides," which is considered a derogatory term. Following Houston's lead, I use the term international bride/s in this chapter.

way they did in her childhood home.<sup>6</sup> As Houston recounts, “Initially, I believed that becoming involved in the theater would allow me to create a public space that could be parallel to that private space—a sphere in which I could navigate, at least in certain ways and at certain times, without thought to race or gender.”<sup>7</sup> Houston’s theater not only explores questions of cultural identity and conflict but, through her own unique lens as a mixed-race “cosmopolite,” she also creates theater that fuses different theatrical traditions. Her manipulation of dramatic forms and conventions reflects this sensibility, blending her “own unique brand of magic realism,” with Western realism and Japanese Noh drama.<sup>8</sup>

bell hooks notes that for oppressed people of color, living at the margins is, in reality, living in centralized space. For the oppressed, this “center” serves as a “site of resistance.”<sup>9</sup> Taking hooks’s cue, I apply her observations to the mixed-Asian experience and extend her “centered” marginality to include the integration of two cultural and racial “centers” from which the hapa subject operates, a locus I call double liminality. Houston is perhaps the first hapa playwright to claim this centralized, integrated space and dramatize it in theater. In her plays, she demonstrates how two racialized states of being give way to each other, continuously calling on the multiracial subject to culturally code-switch in different social contexts. By carving out theatrical space for the mixed-race subject in the 1980s, Houston has evoked a need for the theatrical landscape to *recast* its perception of mixed-race persons

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<sup>6</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, “Notes from a Cosmopolite,” in *The Color of Theater: Race, Culture, and Contemporary Performance*, eds. Roberta Uno and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns (New York: Continuum, 2002): 88.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>9</sup> bell hooks, “marginality as site of resistance,” *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Min-ha, and Cornell West (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990): 341-343.

and to reconsider the future performers who would fill these roles. Performance theorist Christina S. McMahon reminds us that recasting denotes multiple meanings. The term signifies both a transformation and an interruption of grand narratives, where old notions can be *cast again* and re-forged in a new way.<sup>10</sup> Recasting in theater also denotes changing the living, breathing performer who will be hired to portray a role. As McMahon keenly elucidates, if a particular actor no longer serves a performance or if the needs of the production change, the performing body may need to be recast.<sup>11</sup> In this way, Houston's work recasts the nineteenth-century assumption that multiracial people have splintered identities due to incompatible mixed blood.<sup>12</sup> Her insistence on reformulating hapa characters as wholly integrated subjects, demands that the theater community reconsider casting monoracial actors in mixed-race roles. As the visibility of hapa figures continues to rise, due in part to Houston's early contributions in theater, monoracial actors no longer serve these narratives.

While Houston's plays increase the visibility of the mixed-race Asian portrayals, she also combines a variety of theatrical traditions into the architecture of her plays to create a hybrid dramatic form. Unlike her mixed-race predecessor of an earlier era, Sadakichi Hartmann, Houston is a transnational artist and culturally ambidextrous, having been equally raised with Japanese and American worldviews. Hartmann and Houston both seem to employ

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<sup>10</sup> Christina S. McMahon, *Recasting Transnationalism Through Performance: Theatre Festivals in Cape Verde, Mozambique, and Brazil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982): 9 and Paul Spickard with Jeffrey Moniz and Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly, "What Must I Be? Asian Americans and the Question of Multiethnic Identity" in *Race in Mind: Critical Essays*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015): 185.

theater as a tactic, which Michel de Certeau defines as a means to navigate society's dominant myths and structures of power, including racial hierarchy.<sup>13</sup> However, Houston does this not to process the angst created by abandonment and misunderstood multiraciality as Hartmann does. Rather, she transforms theater through a fully acculturated sense of vision and self. In her plays, her mixed-race characters embrace all of their racial and cultural backgrounds which, I argue, comes from Houston's own integrated hapa identity.<sup>14</sup>

The groundbreaking play *Thirst* also exposes the existence of the subdominant discourse, or the discrimination multiracials encounter from other monoracially-identified groups of color.<sup>15</sup> In the play, Houston rejects the notion that a mixed-race person is a fragmented, half-racial self, and, therefore, inadmissible in a world of monoracial categories. Nineteenth-century notions of the mixed-race figure as biologically impure and mentally unstable have also persisted into twentieth-century subdominant discourses and lead intraracial discrimination against mixed-race subjects by people of color such as the distancing that takes place between main characters Plinka and her "full" sisters in *Thirst*.<sup>16</sup> Houston elucidates this phenomenon this not only in the journeys of her characters but also

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<sup>13</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 37.

<sup>14</sup> In Sadakichi Hartmann's play *Osadda's Revenge*, Hartmann's protagonist, Hidetada, identifies (and is identified) as Japanese, even though he has a white father. See: C. Sadakichi Hartmann, "Osadda's Revenge," 1890, Box 7, Sadakichi Hartmann Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Spickard with Jeffrey Moniz and Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly, "What Must I Be? Asian Americans and the Question of Multiethnic Identity" in *Race in Mind: Critical Essays*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015): 182. Different than the dominant discourse, the subdominant discourse often does not fully recognize mixed-Asians as members of the Asian American racial group due to a lack of blood purity.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 109. For this author's take on this, see: Rena M. Heinrich, in "The White Wilderness," *The Beiging of America: Being Mixed-Race in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Sean Frederick Forbes, and Tara Betts (New York: 2Leaf Press, 2017): 99-101.

in the dramatic form itself, creating works that are inherently and inextricably intercultural and multiethnic. In short, she creates plays that are themselves “hapa.” Her plays explore mixed-race hapa identity and themes, even while her hapa subjectivity reveals itself in the dramatic form. They create what Julia Kristeva has called a “laboratory of new discourse.” Houston achieves this by blending a myriad of conventions and texts that are representative of different traditions into her plays. That she does this in the context of America, means that she creates her own brand of Asian American drama, shedding light on a unique, and continually emerging, corpus of Asian American plays, those of the Asian American hapa experience.

Furthermore, Houston invokes classical Japanese drama in her work in addition to weaving Western plot structures and characters into other plays, thus revealing her ability to work seamlessly in both genres. This is perhaps indicative of her transnational ability to work easily in both cultural traditions, demonstrating that she does not favor one over the other. That she is, in fact, both.<sup>17</sup> In *Thirst*, Houston pens a drama about an Asian American family of farmers coming to grips with the death of a matriarch and the loss of their land within a Chekhovian framework. The Japanese American cultural narrative unfolds inside the familiar, iconic plot patterns from Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* (1900) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1903). In the 1994 play *Kokoro (True Heart)*, Houston depicts a Japanese *shin-*

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<sup>17</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, *Calling Aphrodite, Green Tea Girl in Orange Pekoe Country: Selected Plays of Velina Hasu Houston* (South Gate, CA; NoPassport Press, 2007): 197-258; Velina Hasu Houston, “The American Women” (unpublished manuscript, 2015): Portable Document File; and Velina Hasu Houston. *Kokoro (True Heart)*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc. 2011. Houston writes in the manuscript that *The American Women* is “inspired” by *The Trojan Women* by Euripides. In *Calling Aphrodite* Houston invokes the Greek goddess Aphrodite into the space-time of performance in a play about the Japanese Hiroshima maidens. In *Kokoro (True Heart)* Houston references *Medea* in the text, noting that the circumstances of the protagonists Medea and Yasako are similar.

*issei* family desperately trying to acculturate to American life.<sup>18</sup> Houston mixes their desires to navigate life in America with elements from Noh theater, flipping her source material from the Western canon to classical Japanese drama. By not privileging one canon over the other, we see how, in theater, Houston effortlessly moves from one parent culture to another. This is significant because unlike Sadakichi Hartmann, who was only able to lean on his Western influences, Houston's transnational sensibility enables her to draw on both Japanese and Western drama to build a theatrical canon that reflects her own unique multicultural, multiracial, and transnational voice.

Both *Thirst* and *Kokoro (True Heart)* are important as early dramatic works that foreground mixedness at the beginning of the multiracial movement in the late twentieth century. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the American cultural current saw an emergence of mixed-race or interracial community organizations, print media, and political activism in public discourse and academia.<sup>19</sup> Houston's plays, developed during the height of the multicultural education movement, pushed the zeitgeist to embrace multiraciality as an extension of multiculturalism by chronicling the mixed-race experience and depicting it in theater.<sup>20</sup> Beliefs in mental and physical multiracial impurity, splintered mixed-race identity,

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<sup>18</sup> Literally translated as "new first generation," *shin-issei* refers to the Japanese immigrants who migrated to the United States in the postwar era. They are differentiated from the *issei* generation who arrived before WWII. The *shin-issei* were typically entrepreneurs, students, or corporate employees, who had been transferred to Japanese companies in the U.S. See Hirosuke Hyodo, "The Era of Dual Life: The Shin-Issei, the Japanese Contemporary Migrants to the U.S.," *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies (EJCJS)* 13.1 (2013) and Tritia Toyota, "The New Nikkei: Transpacific Shin-Issei and Shifting Borders of Community in Southern California." *Ameriasia Journal* 38.3 (2012): 1-27.

<sup>19</sup> Cynthia L. Nakashima, "Voices from the Movement: Approaches to Multiraciality," in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996): 80.

<sup>20</sup> Maria N. Heinrich, "Bilingual Education: A Misconception" (presentation, National Association for the Advancement of Asians and Pacific Islanders in Education Conference, New Orleans, LA, 1984). Heinrich chronicles the events that lead to the multicultural and bilingual movement in education including the passing of

the naturalization of hypodescent, and the mixed-race body as novel are all explored in these plays, much like the dramas penned one hundred years earlier in the late nineteenth century. Houston's work in theater paralleled that of seminal mixed-race scholars like Maria P.P. Root, who had just begun to write about the notion of mixed-race subjectivity in the 1980s. Together, these early interventions paved the way for the grass roots multiracial movement to eventually change the racial categorization and enumeration on the U.S. census in 2000 and to change the consciousness of most of the public.<sup>21</sup> Specifically, Houston's dramas opened the doors for playwrights in the new millennium to carve out space in the theatrical landscape for a new kind of racial discourse.

### **The Desire for Wholeness in *Thirst***

Although critic Bernard Weiner characterized Houston's 1985 play *Thirst* as an Asian American story, he also equated her narrative with the work of Russian dramatist Anton Chekhov, whose principles revolutionized the drama and the short story at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> While other American writers have also emulated Chekhov's oeuvre,<sup>23</sup> Houston's canon is not limited to adaptations or likenesses, which revise narratives in contemporary settings; she pens "mutations" of Chekhov's work through her use of intertextuality, creating new forms. French theorist Julia Kristeva observes "that the literary

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the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 and the landmark 1974 Lau vs. Nichols case, which determined that the lack of supplementary language instruction violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

<sup>21</sup> Kimberly McClain DaCosta, *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in Redrawing of the Color Line* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 1-20.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Weiner, "Plays About Strangers in a Strange Land," *San Francisco Chronicle* (Jan. 22, 1986): 56.

<sup>23</sup> Verna A. Foster, "After Chekhov: The Three Sisters of Beth Henley, Wendy Wasserstein, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and Blake Morrison," *Comparative Drama*, 47, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 451-472.

avant-garde experience, by virtue of its very characteristics, is slated to become the laboratory of a new discourse . . . thus bringing about a mutation."<sup>24</sup> In creating this work, Houston contributes to the "literary avant-garde" both in the transformation of the Chekhovian text and through direct references to Chekhov's plays within her own, thus creating a variant form of neo-Chekhovian Asian American work. However, rather than a "mutation" as Kristeva asserts, I offer instead Houston's theatrical work as a "literary metamorphosis," one that points to Houston's hapa sensibility at the core of its dramatic structure. This amalgamation on the architectural level of the play assists Houston in recasting how a reader or spectator might perceive hapa characters. Additionally, mixed-race or monoracially Asian characters "recast" in familiar Chekhovian roles serves an underwriting that gives the observer an accessible frame for receiving a new narrative. Houston's use of Anton Chekhov on a personal level is perhaps no surprise, as he was the first Western playwright she read as a girl in Kansas, and his work left an indelible impression on her. As she told me, she did not set out to follow the plot of *Three Sisters*, per se but was drawn to the chemistry of the three siblings.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, her own experiences as a mixed-race subject have led her to reconsider issues of mixedness and feminism in many of her plays: "as a hapa—the daughter of a Japanese immigrant and an African American and Blackfoot Indian father—the very nature of my earlier work was informed by my background, as has been the case with many playwrights."<sup>26</sup> Houston's intertextual references to the Russian

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<sup>24</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980): 92-93.

<sup>25</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, Interview with author, Los Angeles, CA, 24 January 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Notes from a Cosmopolite," in *The Color of Theater: Race, Culture, and Contemporary Performance*, eds. Roberta Uno and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns (New York: Continuum, 2002): 87.

dramatist coupled with her own cosmopolitan vision as a mixed-race subject have coalesced to create a new literary metamorphosis in drama.

Through this amalgamation, Houston is able to illuminate the experiences of the mixed-race subject to interrogate rigid racial codes and challenge subdominant and dominant discourses. The linear, chronological narrative of *Thirst* revolves around the Tada family children, now adults, who gather in their mother's home following her death. In attendance are her daughters, Plinka, Calista, and Marina; Calista's husband, Jimmy; and their mother's neighbors, siblings Samantha and Joseph McBride, with whom the Tada sisters grew up.<sup>27</sup> Their Japanese mother, portrayed by a disembodied voice, speaks over the world of the play at the beginning and the end, bookending the narrative. Oldest sister Plinka is mixed-race, specifically half white and half Japanese, having been fathered by a white American soldier during the American occupation in Japan. Her half-sisters Marina and Calista share a different father, who was of Japanese American descent.<sup>28</sup> The dramatic action opens as the sisters attempt to settle their mother's estate in the days following her funeral. The refined Plinka and her loose-talking brother-in-law, Jimmy, are at odds over what to do with the property. Plinka longs to sell the farm and return to Tokyo. Jimmy wants to take possession of the estate and move in with Calista until he learns that half of the land does not belong to the Tada women. It is owned by the McBrides, whose father loaned the Tada patriarch the

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<sup>27</sup> In the 1985 Asian American Theater Company production script of the play, the neighbors' last name is Zweigenbaum. The version of the play analyzed for this chapter is the revised 1990 manuscript unless otherwise noted. See: Velina Hasu Houston, "Thirst," 1, 1985, Series VII, Folder 12, Asian American Theater Company Archives 1973-1993, University of California, Santa Barbara Special Collections, University of California, Santa Barbara.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Weiner, "Plays About Strangers in a Strange Land," *San Francisco Chronicle* (Jan. 22, 1986): 56 and Velina Hasu Houston, "Thirst" (unpublished manuscript, February 1, 1990), private collection of Velina Hasu Houston.

money to buy the land before the second world war.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the most noteworthy element of *Thirst*, is Houston's use of *Three Sisters* to dramatize a story that foregrounds the hapa experience. This is especially significant, considering that the drama is one of the earliest plays in the twentieth-century multiracial movement to depict hapa identity and subjectivity. Houston utilizes the differences in the beliefs and lifestyles of the two older Prozorov women to juxtapose the Tada sisters' varying relationships with their Japanese culture. The philosophical debates the Russians engage in about truth, freedom, and the future transform into Plinka's culturally Japanese outlook on life in *Thirst*. Her Japanese-centric view seems useless to the other Asian characters who seek to shed their maternal culture. It is also significant that Plinka, who would be considered "half" Japanese in a monoracial framework, is more culturally Japanese than her supposed "full" sisters.

Through Plinka, Houston recasts the notion that Hapas are less Asian because of their mixed-race identity. Plinka's sisters, who struggle to assert their Americanness, continuously question the need to keep their Japanese ancestry alive. In fact, all of the Japanese characters in the play find fault in Plinka's whiteness and continuously refer to her as a "half-breed," even as they simultaneously attempt to shed their Japanese identity and assert their claim as Americans. Yet "half-breed" Plinka, who proudly claims her white parentage, culturally identifies as Japanese, while her sisters, in reality, are the ones fragmented by their "half-Japanese" selves.

The family's disdain for Plinka's multiethnic identity also underscores a nineteenth-

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 21.

century belief in degeneracy as a characteristic of miscegenation. Calista suggests that Plinka's mental activities are impractical, while Jimmy conflates Plinka's mixed-race body with abnormality.

JIMMY. Your sister.

CALISTA. Which one?

JIMMY. The half-breed.

CALISTA. She's different than us . . . always dreaming and all the time thinking.

JIMMY. Hey, ain't normal.<sup>30</sup>

Calista and Jimmy's exchange is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century suspicion that the "biologically impure" mixed-race subject was mentally unstable and indicates that this idea persisted until the end of the twentieth century. Later in the play, even Marina admits, "I don't love you anymore, Pinky. You're too *strange*. . . . I won't be your sister."<sup>31</sup> In the same way that Caryl Churchill's play *Cloud Nine* (1979) interrogates the Victorian ideals of gender that still linger in the late twentieth century, so, too, Houston's play reveals and interrogates enduring turn-of-the-century opinions about mixed-race people as mentally weak and impaired.<sup>32</sup> Cynthia L. Nakashima refers to this belief as the theory of "hybrid degeneracy,"

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<sup>30</sup> Video of performance of *Thirst* by Velina Hasu Houston, January 1986, Database V0061/UM, Asian American Theater Company Archives 1973-1993, University of California, Santa Barbara Special Collections, University of California, Santa Barbara. I reference the production as these lines were transcribed from the video of one of the performances and differ slightly from the playscript.

<sup>31</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Thirst" (unpublished manuscript, February 1, 1990), private collection of Velina Hasu Houston. 39. This author's emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> Caryl Churchill, *Cloud Nine* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1979).

which asserts that mixed-race offspring are genetically inferior to the purity of their racial parentage and, as a result, are seen as deviant and strange. Nakashima maintains that the theory of hybrid degeneracy undergirds the othering that characterizes mixed-race people as “mythological multiracial monster[s].”<sup>33</sup> Hybrid degeneracy as a concept took root in popular culture toward the end of the Civil War and continued through the first few decades of the twentieth century, where, I contend, traces of its potency still circulated in cultural discourse till the end of the millennium.

*Thirst* also questions the cultural attachment to naturalized hypodescent, further demonstrating how the white dominant discourse marginalizes mixed-race people through the application of the one-drop rule. Plinka’s white neighbor Samantha contends that she sees Plinka “as whole. . . . They see you as fragmented—half breed, half-sister. They’ve always resented you.”<sup>34</sup> Even though Samantha identifies Plinka as a “whole” Japanese, this assertion could also convey her inability to recognize Plinka’s whiteness, reifying the dominant Western belief in hypodescent.<sup>35</sup> In the text, Samantha does not seem to make this distinction, but her brother, who is also Plinka’s former lover, does, referencing the tragic Eurasian trope that assumes all mixed-race persons struggle with warring half selves.<sup>36</sup> In act

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<sup>33</sup> Cynthia L. Nakashima, “An Invisible Monster: The Creation and Denial of Mixed-race People in America,” in *Racially Mixed People in America*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, Inc., 1992): 174.

<sup>34</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, “Thirst” (unpublished manuscript, February 1, 1990), private collection of Velina Hasu Houston. 5.

<sup>35</sup> The term hypodescent refers to the assignment of a mixed-race individual to the race of the parent deemed socially subordinate.

<sup>36</sup> Carole DeSouza, “Against Erasure: The Multiracial Voice in Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*,” in *Mixing It Up: Multiracial Subjects*, eds. SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004): 182.

two, he cites her mixedness as the reason for their break-up:

JOSEPH. I mean, I never quite got the gist of why you left me. I figured it was because I was white, right? And I reminded you of *what you didn't want to be?*

PLINKA. I like being Japanese and I like being white.<sup>37</sup>

In the 1986 production, this scene is a moment of confrontation between Plinka and Joseph. The performers Nadja Kennedy and Michael O'Brien are staged opposite each other on the farthest edges of the proscenium in a distance that garners a palpable tension between them. As O'Brien delivers the accusation: "I figured it was because I was white," he vocally punches the word "white" for emphasis. Kennedy coolly levels her response at him. It is in this blocking that she proclaims to O'Brien's Joseph: "I like being Japanese and I like being white." It is not a challenge, but a confident assertion that comes from the actor's core. Plinka does not differentiate between being half-Japanese or half-white. In Kennedy's performance, Plinka is not confused nor fragmented, and she certainly does not need this white man to understand her or her motivations. She asserts a wholeness that encompasses both a white and an Asian subjectivity. That her assertion of identity is made, as Houston describes in the play's setting, "too late in the 1980s," is nothing short of revolutionary, considering the play predates the beginning of the multiracial movement.<sup>38</sup> Houston seems to suggest that this declaration of mixedness and its public acceptance is long overdue.

Perhaps the most striking theatrical intervention accomplished by the *Thirst*

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<sup>37</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Thirst" (unpublished manuscript, February 1, 1990), private collection of Velina Hasu Houston. 25. This author's emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

production is the way it demonstrates Plinka's ability to shapeshift physically onstage before spectators. Visually, the hapa actress, Kennedy, becomes phenotypically white when she is in the presence of her "full" Asian American sisters and then transforms into an Asian body when she's with her white lover, Joseph. Her racially ambiguous face shapeshifts into its white European visage again when her sisters return to the stage because next to her "full" Japanese sisters, one can see that she is mixed-Asian. The transformation is arresting and undeniable. Her ambiguity enables her to shape shift before the spectators' eyes. The vision of hapa corporeality contrasted with monoracial bodies is immediate. Monoracial audience members may tend to assign mixed-race bodies to fixed racial categories. However, when the mixed-race body is juxtaposed with monoracial figures, in this case with performers of Asian American or white descent, it prevents easy classification and challenges notions of racial categorization as immutable and accomplished through the perception of visual markers.

The use of staging in the production also emphasizes Plinka's othered status as a mixed-race figure. In act two, the three sisters sit on the porch steps, grappling over what to do with their mother's things. When Plinka and Calista accuse Marina of flippantly disrespecting their mother's memory, Marina justifies her actions by jealously retorting that their mother "loved Plinka first."<sup>39</sup> Sharon Iwai's Marina sits on the top step, and Fay Kawabata, who plays Calista, pauses on the second step. Nadja Kennedy perches uncomfortably on the *bottom* step, which seems to be symbolic of her precarious status in the family as the half-breed, half-sister. Furthermore, even though Kennedy is situated in the

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<sup>39</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Thirst," 47, 1985, Series VII, Folder 12, Asian American Theater Company Archives 1973-1993, University of California, Santa Barbara Special Collections, University of California, Santa Barbara.

lowest position of the three bodies, this moment is one of the few times that the sisters are placed physically close together. In most tableaux, Marina and Calista are staged in close proximity of each other while Plinka maintains a recognizable distance from them, no matter how small. The blocking seems to reinforce Marina's belief that they are "always divided. Calista, me and Papa on one side, and Mama and Plinka on the other. America versus Japan."<sup>40</sup> Kennedy's Plinka is often placed on the porch steps opposite of her sisters while they lean on each other, or she is sent to the bench in the yard at the opposite end of the stage.

Like Plinka, Houston also felt racially distanced from the rest of the production team during the rehearsals for *Thirst*. As she recounted to Esther Kim Lee and to me in two different interviews, her status as a "half" Asian artist seemed to diminish the value of her artistic voice during the process.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the Asian American Theater Company never paid her royalty fees for the production of the play. Though she wrote multiple letters asking for payment, her status not only as an Asian American woman but also as a mixed-race Afro-Asian playwright, seemed to push her to the bottom of the intraracial hierarchy in an organization that privileged gender and monoraciality. This meant, in the end, that Houston did not get paid at all. Lee contends that "the discrimination against her [Houston] was obvious," although Lee also notes that 1986 was a difficult year for the company, whose management was in transition, which also may have contributed to their failure to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>41</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, Interview with the author, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, 24 January 2018 and Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 149.

compensate the dramatist.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Houston reasons that the discrimination she felt extended into rehearsals, where she was treated as if she were both artistically and racially inferior. The lack of value placed on her contributions as the playwright and artist was, Houston contends, due to a “deep-seated anti-Blackness” she uncovered that dominated her encounters with the production team, including in rehearsals, where the director and production staff treated her as if she were a racially “inferior creature.”<sup>43</sup> According to Houston, the staging of Plinka was not so much a statement about her sisters treating her as their subordinate but about the director revealing her attitudes toward mixedness in the blocking of the character. However, perhaps without intending to, the director’s staging also illuminated the social discrimination Plinka was forced to confront and endure in her own Asian American “family.”

Houston has been critical of this lack of acceptance specifically within the Asian American theater community. The mistreatment and skepticism made physical in the blocking in *Thirst* was not uncommon to her, and she, too, has contended with the same “issues troubling that character.”<sup>44</sup> Houston asserts that Asian American theater companies “must be as equitable as they want the white community to be” and must recognize the “diversity within their [own] community.”<sup>45</sup> Lee observes that Houston’s successes as a produced playwright have often come from mainstream regional companies, rather than ethnic

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>43</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, Interview with the author, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, 24 January 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

theaters,<sup>46</sup> which might affirm the lack of acceptance Houston felt from Asian American companies as a mixed-race playwright in the 1980s and 90s.

At the end of *Thirst*, Calista loses her baby in a late-term miscarriage. As Plinka tells Jimmy about the loss of the child, the tragedy becomes symbolic of the family's cultural loss. In the 1990 revision of the play, Plinka intones: "I think we're all hemorrhaging. Some things are gone and we can't ever get them back. Like Mama. Like our culture, whatever that means to any of us anymore."<sup>47</sup> Plinka, though half-white, is most connected to the family's Japanese culture, and her recognition of the collective bleeding that has taken place perhaps underscores her understanding that the cultural identification of the family has begun to fracture. In the 1985 draft of the script, the version used for the 1986 production, Plinka continues, "It may never rain here until winter. Maybe come December a few drops will fall. But we'll be gone."<sup>48</sup> Earlier in the play, Marina also expresses this same resignation and finality to Plinka:

MARINA. It's gone. Everything that defined us is gone.

PLINKA. Really, so who are we then? Maybe we really aren't Japanese. Anymore.

MARINA. We're Americans.

PLINKA. Is that all? It's sad.

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<sup>46</sup> Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 149.

<sup>47</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Thirst" (unpublished manuscript, February 1, 1990), private collection of Velina Hasu Houston. 50.

<sup>48</sup> Hasu Houston, "Thirst," 61-62, 1985, Series VII, Folder 12, Asian American Theater Company Archives 1973-1993, University of California, Santa Barbara Special Collections, University of California, Santa Barbara.

MARINA. It's inevitable. Fight or die.<sup>49</sup>

Plinka's distress and fear that the women's cultural identity will disappear sounds similar to Olga's lamentations at the end of *Three Sisters*. In the play, Olga contends, "The day will come when we'll go away forever, too. People will forget all about us, they'll forget what we looked like and how many of us there were."<sup>50</sup> Yet as Verna A. Foster has astutely noted, future theatergoers have not forgotten that there are three Chekhovian sisters, no matter what their future names have become.<sup>51</sup> Houston's insightful choice to tap into the powerful image of three sisters, orphaned as adults who struggle with uncertain futures, becomes a powerful vehicle through which to explore bicultural and multiracial identity and to question the assumptions of monoracial cultural logic. A classical drama from Chekhov's canon seems perhaps an unlikely place to explore themes of mixedness and acculturation, but Houston's mixed-race subjectivity, grounded firmly in two theatrical traditions, easily constructs a theatrically intercultural play that utilizes a Chekhovian process plot to explore mixed-race identity in the late twentieth century.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Houston's use of intertextuality in direct and indirect references to various Chekhovian plays creates a literary metamorphosis of *Three Sisters* reimagined in contemporary Asian America.

Houston's use of intertextuality allows the audience to engage more fully with the

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<sup>49</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Thirst" (unpublished manuscript, February 1, 1990), private collection of Velina Hasu Houston. 42.

<sup>50</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, in *The Plays of Anton Chekhov*, trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997): 319.

<sup>51</sup> Verna A. Foster, "After Chekhov: The Three Sisters of Beth Henley, Wendy Wasserstein, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and Blake Morrison," *Comparative Drama* 47, no. 4, (2013): 451.

<sup>52</sup> Leon Katz calls this type of dramatic structure a "process plot," where an outside circumstance, such as the *process* of dissolving a familial estate, provides the frame for the narrative. See: Leon Katz, *Cleaning Augean Stables: Examining Drama's Strategies* (Encino: Create Space Publishing, 2012): 92.

dramatic narrative, making meaning through the recognition of familiar elements while also being surprised by their differences. This use of intertextuality enacts what J. Douglas Clayton and Yana Meerzon call a “dramatic palimpsest,” which enables an audience to experience two dramatic texts at once.<sup>53</sup> Much like a literal palimpsest, in which the original material bleeds through a new image on reused parchment, the use of Chekhov’s dramas becomes a kind of underwriting for Houston’s play. This double reception brings the memory of the first text to the second and creates a richer experience where the mood and tone of *Three Sisters* enhances *Thirst*, fully fleshing out each nuance as the story unfolds. It also provides the spectator or reader with a familiar backdrop against which to encounter the mixed-race subject. Houston's drama is an ideal site to explore the cultural intervention conducted in this literary metamorphosis, especially when considered through the lens of Chekhov's plays *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*.

*Thirst* bears striking similarities to *Three Sisters*, in which the siblings pine for a better life as they grapple with a relative’s disruption in their home. In *Three Sisters*, Prozorov sisters Olga and Irina share their provincial domicile with their brother, Andrei, and welcome frequent visits from married, middle sister Masha, and the army doctor, Chebutykin, who is an uncle-figure to the siblings. The dramatic action opens with Olga recounting their father's death the prior year. During the course of the narrative, Andrei marries the sharp-tongued Natasha, who moves into the home and eventually strips the responsibilities of the household away from Olga. Rebellious Masha begins an affair, and Irina's jealous suitors, the Baron and Solyony, fight in a duel, leaving the Baron dead.

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<sup>53</sup> J. Douglas Clayton and Yana Meerzon, *Adapting Chekhov: The Text and Its Mutations* (New York: Routledge, 2013): 5.

*Thirst* also is reminiscent of *The Cherry Orchard*, where a family struggles with the loss of their family estate and squabble with a family friend over the stewardship of the land in the face of mounting debt. While famous cherry orchards dot the landscape of the Gaev estate in *The Cherry Orchard*, orchards of almonds and peaches populate the Tadas' farm. The Japanese American estate is also inspired by the persimmon orchards owned by Houston's maternal grandfather in Japan, a place which was also a site of contention in her mother's family.<sup>54</sup> The process of selling a family estate in *The Cherry Orchard* or in *Thirst*, serves as a backdrop against which the spectator may witness the characters' underlying subtexts, which are revealed in their actions and reactions.

Houston succeeds in deconstructing the familial relationships and patterns in the Chekhov dramas and recasts the Prozorovs as an Asian American family in California in the 1980s. *Three Sisters*, like the other three major plays in the Russian dramatist's canon, begins with an arrival. After recounting their father's death, or, in the case of *Thirst*, after the actual death of the mother, guests begin to arrive. In *Three Sisters*, the siblings welcome visitors for a dinner party to celebrate Irina's name day; in *Thirst*, the "guests" are the siblings themselves—who arrive from various cities—as well as the local neighbors. All convene in the Tada farmhouse in Central California for their mother's funeral and to celebrate O-bon festival, the Japanese festival of the dead.<sup>55</sup> At the opening of *Thirst*, oldest sister Plinka, a teacher, writes in her journal, an image that echoes the oldest Russian sister, Olga, who begins *Three Sisters* bent over schoolwork, grading papers. While the Prozorov sisters long

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<sup>54</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, Interview with author, Los Angeles, CA, 24 January 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Thirst" (unpublished manuscript, February 1, 1990), private collection of Velina Hasu Houston. 12-13.

to return to the city, Moscow; in *Thirst*, some of the Tada children have already “arrived.” Marina and Calista have traveled from urban centers like Manhattan and San Francisco to return home to rural California. The new life they hoped to find, as their Chekhovian counterparts do, is rife with the same alienation and unhappy fate they experienced before. As youngest sister Calista remarks to middle sister Marina, “Since you’ve been living in New York, it’s like someone rubbed your tongue with pumice.”<sup>56</sup> In Marina’s case, she is perhaps more acerbic than when she first left.

In *Thirst*, Plinka’s cultural connection to Japan is contrasted by her sisters’ desires to return to the urban centers they now call home. The sisters’ preferences for American city life differs from Plinka’s need to return to Japan. She has not yet experienced an escape from “the country.” Like her Russian alter ego, Olga, who pines for Moscow, Plinka dreams about traveling to Tokyo where she once lived as a child. Plinka tells her neighbor, Samantha: “growing up in Tokyo was the favorite time of my life,”<sup>57</sup> and she later reiterates her desire to return to Tokyo, asserting, “Maybe we would have gone back . . . to the house in Shinagawa, instead of staying here.” Plinka expresses her desire to sell the farm, take the money, and move back, which precisely mirrors the Prozorov sisters’ nostalgia and intentions to sell their provincial home and return to Moscow in act one.<sup>58</sup>

Houston’s narrative reflects the contemporary period in which it was written by making the mother the parent whom the siblings mourn in *Thirst*. The Tada sisters constantly

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>58</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, in *The Plays of Anton Chekhov*, trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997): 259-260.

talk about their mother, the way the Russians talk about their deceased father. While Houston, like Plinka, also feels intimately connected to her own Japanese mother, this change of parent as the backbone of the narrative is also reflective of the mid-1980s. Not only does Houston write about mixed race during the advent of multiculturalism in the United States, but, as playwright David Edgar observes, “Many female playwrights who emerged in the 1980s wrote about what they saw as the invisible relationship of mother and daughter,” where the daughter attempts to not fall prey to the mistakes of an earlier generation.<sup>59</sup> This is certainly the case with Houston’s earlier play, *Tea* (1985), during which a group of Japanese war bride mothers embody and perform each of their daughters, who are otherwise absent from the play. Physically “invisible” except in this embodied moment, they question their mothers’ decisions and motivations in American life.<sup>60</sup> In *Thirst*, the same is true for the daughters, whose former relationships with their deceased mother exists only in their recollections. Like the daughters in *Tea*, the sisters struggle to find reasons to keep their mother’s culture alive and question the ways that the Japanese culture might serve them in adulthood, if at all.

Consequently, Houston reimagines *Three Sisters* in a contemporary American cultural landscape. Unlike Chekhov’s drama, *Thirst* is unencumbered by limitations of early twentieth-century propriety. Houston makes the Russian characters’ subtexts apparent in *Thirst* through her characters’ bold choices and behaviors. These desires are only suggested in the character exchanges in *Three Sisters*. The relationship between the Tada sisters, and

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<sup>59</sup> David Edgar, *How Plays Work* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009): 93.

<sup>60</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, “Playwright’s Note,” in *Tea* (New York: Theatre Communications groups, Inc., 1985): 37-39.

Calista's husband, Jimmy, parallels the strife present between the Prozorov sisters, their brother Andrei, and his wife Natasha.

Houston transforms the early-twentieth-century relationship between sisters and sister-in-law into a plausible modern-day equivalent to further illustrate the separation Plinka feels from her family as a mixed-race subject. In *Three Sisters*, Andrei marries Natasha, a woman deemed beneath his station, who moves into the Prozorov house and, to his sisters' disgust, gradually begins to dictate the daily operations of the home. She wields her power through her control of Andrei. In *Thirst*, Tada sisters Plinka and Marina detest their sibling's spouse and openly declare the disgust that their Russian counterparts silently imply.

Youngest sister Calista, who serves as a composite of Andrei and the last Prozorov sister, Irina, is married to the crude, lower-class Jimmy, who, like Natasha, uses his influence over Calista to push his own agenda. Just as Natasha begins to take control of the household, so, too, Jimmy exercises this same influence. In a twist on Chekhov's rendering of lowly-born Natasha, her modern-day equivalent, Jimmy, emerges onstage as a working-class farmer. In the stage directions, Houston describes Jimmy as having "been working on the farm all day in the heat" and looking it.<sup>61</sup> Mirroring Natasha's class and "country" origins, Jimmy, like Natasha, detests the way the sisters look down on him. As he explains to the neighbor, Joseph, "Don't you see? I didn't marry Calista. The Tada family "allowed" me to become one of them, like it was some kind of fucking honor."<sup>62</sup> Jimmy's disdain for Plinka seems particularly acute, however. He continuously refers to her as both a "half-breed" and a

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<sup>61</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Thirst" (unpublished manuscript, February 1, 1990), private collection of Velina Hasu Houston. 7.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

“princess,” reifying the confusion and jealousy that Calista and Marina already feel for their older sister.

Houston also explores the physical and emotional loss of land as a metaphor for family memory in Chekhov. Like Natasha, Jimmy announces his plans to take over the familial house and dictate the fate of its contents. For Plinka, this begins the act of “cultural hemorrhaging” that culminates with the loss of Calista’s child at the end of the play. In act four of *Three Sisters*, Natasha surveys the family property and declares: “First thing I’m going to do is have them cut down all the old trees, especially that dead one. . . . And then I’m going to have them plant lots and lots of flowers, all over the place, so it’ll smell nice and pretty.”<sup>63</sup> Likewise, Natasha’s modern-day counterpart, Jimmy, echoes her sentiments: “I’m going to get a few other things out. We can move some of your Mama’s Japanese crap into the cellar. We don’t have any need for all those fancy dishes and chopsticks.”<sup>64</sup> However, Jimmy continues by voicing what seems to be Natasha’s unspoken thoughts to Andrei: “You gotta plant a stake, Calista, or your sisters are going to take everything. Is that what you want?”<sup>65</sup> By contrast, while Natasha only alludes to “planting” her stake, Jimmy directly states his intentions. His desire to move into the family farmhouse and strip it of its Japanese cultural artifacts, represented by their mother’s things, is reminiscent of Natasha’s plans to erase the Prozorovs’ particular cultural aesthetic from the home.

In Houston’s drama, the hapa character is not mentally weak but, in fact, possesses

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<sup>63</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, in *The Plays of Anton Chekhov*, trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997): 317.

<sup>64</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, “Thirst” (unpublished manuscript, February 1, 1990), private collection of Velina Hasu Houston. 8.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

the most resolve in the family. Plinka confronts Calista about Jimmy's desire to keep the farm, since she, like Chekhov's Olga, wants to sell the house and return to the city of her childhood:

PLINKA. Callie, you know Jimmy wants to keep the farm, don't you?

CALISTA. So? Don't you think we have a right to it? If he wants to stay here, we'll stay here, even if we have to build a new house on whatever part of the farm I own.

PLINKA. Why don't you decide what you want to do, Calista? Why don't you make it your decision? You've never made a decision about anything. Even being pregnant. That's why sometimes I look at you funny. It's not because I think you're stupid. I just want you to be brave. Because I love you, don't you understand?<sup>66</sup>

Houston repurposes Olga's distress over her brother's lack of courage as an opportunity to demonstrate Plinka's mental and emotional fortitude. In this way, Plinka expresses Olga's frustration regarding Andrei's inability to stand up to Natasha, further explaining Olga's treatment of her brother. Andrei insists that he loves and respects Natasha and wants his sisters to respect her as well. He berates his siblings for their attitude towards his wife and refers to her as "lovely," "honest," and "good." In similar scenes in *Thirst*, Calista defends Jimmy to her sisters. In the same way that Andrei paints a picture of Natasha as being honest and kind, so, too, Houston renders Jimmy as having a sensitive side that only Calista understands or, like Andrei, at least clings to in order to make the marriage work.<sup>67</sup> Because Calista is a composite character, she retains the hope Irina has about her life and her future.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 8.

But, in this exchange above, Plinka expresses her strength by articulating Olga's dissatisfaction with Andrei's resignation and its consequences on the family and their future relationships.

Like Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, *Thirst* ends with the dissolution of the family home. The Tada family knows that they must ultimately decide how to divide their mother's possessions. Both *Three Sisters* and *Thirst* are bookended with death and culminate with a departure at the summer's end, leaving the sisters to contemplate their fates in a provincial home. In *Three Sisters*, the women mournfully watch the army leave their post, marching towards a new life while the military band plays. In *Thirst*, the women watch their lanterns lead the dead, their mother among them, back to heaven, marking the end of O-bon festival. According to Japanese Buddhist tradition, O-bon festival is the one time of the year when the dead return to the earthly plane be reunited with their families.<sup>68</sup> Like the military officers that attended Irina's name-day celebration at the beginning of *Three Sisters*, the dead relatives, along with the Tada mother, celebrate O-bon festival at the beginning of *Thirst*.<sup>69</sup> This extended family leaves the three sisters at the end, as in Chekhov's play, to figure out how to continue on in an uncertain future. In *Thirst*, the sisters must also make sense of the shifting monoracial landscape in America as it approaches the

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<sup>68</sup> Masami Usui, "Creating a Feminist Transnational Drama: *Oyako-Shinju* (Parent-Child Suicide) in Velina Hasu Houston's *Kokoro* (*True Heart*)," *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, 11 (2000): 181 and Zvika Serper, "Between Two Worlds: 'The Dybbuk' and the Japanese Noh and Kabuki Ghost Plays," *Comparative Drama*, 35.3/4 (2001-02): 346-347. Obon festival is "one of the most important events in the Buddhist calendar." It would be unthinkable to miss this celebration much like it would be unthinkable to miss a name-day in the Russian tradition. The name-day celebration is the equivalent of a birthday party in contemporary American culture. See: Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, in *The Plays of Anton Chekhov*, trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997): 319.

<sup>69</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Thirst" (unpublished manuscript, February 1, 1990), private collection of Velina Hasu Houston. 12-13. Plinka reminds Marina of the significance of the Obon festival: "Marina, it's O-bon! . . . The festival of the dead. Our holiday to visit with ancestral spirits and dance."

end of the century. As with *Three Sisters*, additional references run throughout the play: character occupations, similar familial relationships, and an overwhelming desire to return to city life, all elements displaced and reassembled into landscapes tonally Chekhovian, but penned in Houston's unique dramatic voice.

### **Kokoro (True Heart): Presence and Absence in the Mixed-race Dilemma**

In 1997, the U.S. Census Bureau changed its racial categorization policy, allowing United States residents to identify with more than one racial box on the 2000 census. Simultaneously, theater saw an emergence of mixed-race playwrights in the 1990s whose work challenged the fixity of race and the ever-shifting boundaries of cultural identity.<sup>70</sup> These narratives capture the historical moments in which they were written as their mixed-race characters explore multiraciality in a culture that was and perhaps continues to be dominated the one-drop rule.<sup>71</sup> However, the casting of these dramas also reflects the dominant racial associations still held by many Americans into the new millennium. This is evident in productions of Velina Hasu Houston's 1997 drama, *Kokoro (True Heart)*, which depicts a Japanese woman's choice to commit *oyako-shinju* or parent-child suicide—a Japanese cultural practice that saw a recurrence in the context of the immigration of the *shin-issei* population in the postwar era—and the Amerasian neighbor who ultimately convinces

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<sup>70</sup> See: Dmae Roberts, "Breaking Glass," in *But Still, Like Air, I'll Rise*, ed. Velina Hasu Houston (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997): 271-330; Sandra Tsing Loh, *Aliens in America* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997); Amy Hill, "Tokyo Bound," *Asian American Drama: 9 Plays for the Multiethnic Landscape*, ed. Brian Nelson (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1997): 43-70; and Brenda Wong Aoki, "The Queen's Garden," *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color: An Anthology*, eds. Kathy A. Perkins and Roberta Uno (New York: Routledge, 1996): 14-31.

<sup>71</sup> Kimberly McClain DaCosta, *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in Redrawing of the Color Line* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 5.

her to choose life without her daughter.<sup>72</sup> Productions of *Kokoro (True Heart)* explore a shift in the social acceptance of multiracial individuals. At the same time, the casting of mixed-race people in productions of the play concretizes the racial assumptions embedded in the word, "American." Like *Thirst*, *Kokoro (True Heart)* also highlights hapa subjectivity in a dramatic narrative that blends two different theatrical forms together in one *mise en scène*. In *Kokoro*, Houston foregrounds elements of classical Japanese Noh with Western realism in a play about an isolated Japanese national who has failed to acculturate to American society. The amalgamation of Noh and Western realism produces another example of Houston's brand of magical realism and creates, as in *Thirst*, a mixed dramatic form, demonstrating a hapa sensibility in the structure of the play and in its content.

*Kokoro (True Heart)* was written initially in 1994. The two-act, non-illusionistic play follows protagonist Yasako Yamashita, a Japanese woman living in San Diego with her restaurateur husband, Hiro, and their seven-year-old daughter, Kuniko. Isolated and unable to acculturate, Yasako wades into the Pacific Ocean and attempts *oyako-shinju* after discovering that Hiro is having an affair. Yasako succeeds in drowning her daughter before she is pulled from the surf and rescued. Though Yasako's cultural beliefs dictate that the "honorable" decision to commit parent-child suicide would have saved her daughter from a lifetime of shame as an orphan, she nonetheless finds herself charged with one count of first degree murder in act 2.

Houston is able to communicate the complexity of *oyako-shinju* by blending

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<sup>72</sup> The term "Amerasian" refers specifically to a person of mixed race, who is half-Asian and was born in the United States. This term differs from "Asian American," which frequently implies an individual who was born in the United States but has Asian parentage on both sides.

theatrical elements of Japanese Noh in a text grounded in Western psychological realism. Through her use of the *shite* as a madwoman and the mixing of phantasmal and actual Noh from the form's fourth category,<sup>73</sup> Houston can examine the dichotomy between presence and absence and the real and the unreal in the drama. *Kokoro*, which translates as "inside of the heart" or "mind, heart, spirit,"<sup>74</sup> explores the realms of the living and the dead more overtly than in *Thirst*. Through the contrast between presence and absence, Houston depicts the mental and emotional plight of the main character Yasako Yamashita, who functions as the *shite* in the neo-Noh play.

The examination of the real and the unreal also serves to explore authenticity in mixed-race identity. As Houston has observed, "Although I am comfortable with and confident about my hapa identity, perhaps the world has such strict definitions of what is a Real Something (a real playwright, a real African American, a real Asian, etc.) that, in the perceptions of others in society . . . I am never seen as a Real anything."<sup>75</sup> Through an exploration of the real/unreal dichotomy in Noh, Houston interrogates monoracial cultural logic and also champions hapa subjectivity as a whole authentic self rather than an unreal, fragmented identity in *Kokoro*.

Houston synthesizes characteristics and plot points from classical Noh drama with

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<sup>73</sup> Noh plays arranged into five different groups or "categories," depending on the identity of the protagonist, also known as the *shite*. See: Zvika Serper, "Between Two Worlds: "The Dybbuk" and the Japanese Noh and Kabuki Ghost Plays," *Comparative Drama*, 35.3/4 (2001-02): 349.

<sup>74</sup> Masami Usui, "Creating a Feminist Transnational Drama: *Oyako-Shinju* (Parent-Child Suicide) in Velina Hasu Houston's *Kokoro* (*True Heart*)," *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, 11 (2000): 178 and Velina Hasu Houston, *Kokoro* (*True Heart*) (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc. 2011): 10.

<sup>75</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Notes from a Cosmopolite," in *The Color of Theater: Race, Culture, and Contemporary Performance*, eds. Roberta Uno and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns (New York: Continuum, 2002): 84.

elements of Western dramatic structure in *Kokoro*. Noh drama finds its origins in Shinto rituals. In these religious ceremonies, the *shite*, or "possessed medium," historically reenacted stories of the gods and communicated with a *waki*, or the representative of the community. This same terminology is used in Noh drama, where the protagonist is known as the *shite* and the *waki*, who is often staged to the side of the playing space, narrates the drama for the audience. By the 14th century, under the influence of Noh pioneers Kan'ami (1333-1384) and his son, Zeami (1363-1443), the drama became codified as the theatrical form witnessed today.

According to Noh scholar, Zvika Serper, Japanese Noh seeks to bring together elements that appear contradictory into a unified whole.<sup>76</sup> This theatrical form, therefore, seems to be an ideal medium through which Houston can explore hapa consciousness. The concept of the harmonious whole originates in Chinese philosophy and is often expressed through the contrasting poles of *yin* and *yang* or *in* and *yo* in Japanese. Similarly, Noh functions through and investigates a myriad of dichotomies, most notably *kyo*, or that which is fiction, emptiness, absence, and *jitsu*, or reality, fullness, and presence.<sup>77</sup> As Serper notes, "Kyo and jitsu form the basis of the theatrical medium—the coexistence and dynamic interaction of two alternate worlds."<sup>78</sup> This exploration of the essence of the real and unreal is reflected in Noh's two major categories of plays: *mugen no* (or "phantasmal Noh") and *genzai no* ("actual Noh").<sup>79</sup> Typically, the phantasmal Noh play is comprised of two acts, and

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<sup>76</sup> Zvika Serper, "Japanese Noh and Kyogen Plays: Staging Dichotomy," *Comparative Drama*, 39.3/4 (2005-06): 308.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

the *shite* is an apparition who is revealed as a dead spirit in act two. Time is fluid, and the main action often takes place in a dream. In the actual Noh play, time moves chronologically, and the main character is a live human being. Comprising only one act, actual Noh plays focus on the inhabitants of the real world rather than those who occupy realms of the dead.<sup>80</sup> These two separate categories of plays together serve as their own dichotomy, the representation of *kyo* and *jitsu*, or the harmonious presence-absence in Noh.

Noh can be further divided into five categories that are based on the persona of the *shite*. These include gods, ghosts, and women in love, which comprise the first through third categories and demons, who occupy the fifth. I focus on the miscellaneous characters of the fourth category. These characters range from priests and goddesses to madmen and madwomen, the last often driven to insanity because of the loss of a child. Plays of this grouping belong primarily to the actual Noh category, although phantasmal beings often make an appearance in these narratives.

Houston summons Noh spirits into the space-time of performance in *Kokoro (True Heart)* and blends a fourth-category *shite* with actual events (*genzai no*) and fictional elements (*mugen no*). Houston affirms that *Kokoro* is not based on any single incident,<sup>81</sup> but the play has an uncanny resemblance to the true-life events of Fumiko Kimura, who in 1985, drowned her two young children before attempting and failing to kill herself. A Japanese *shin-issei* woman, Kimura was resentful of the rescuers who pulled her from the water

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>81</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Re: Kokoro at the Morgan-Wixson Theatre," email, 2003.

saying, "They must have been Caucasians. . . . Otherwise, they would have let me die."<sup>82</sup> In the 1985 case of the *People v. Fumiko Kimura*, the defendant admitted that she waded into the Pacific Ocean in Santa Monica, California and drowned her children, ages four and six months, after learning that her restaurateur husband had been having an affair for three years. She was unsuccessful in her attempt to drown herself.<sup>83</sup>

*Kokoro (True Heart)* is not solely about mixed-race identity. Rather, the play explores the plight of different types of marginalized Asian subjects. As Houston asserts, "I'm always fascinated with the state of 'otherness,' not fitting in, being in a strange place or emotional situation."<sup>84</sup> Like Fumiko Kimura, Yasako maintains a traditional Japanese household and longs to return to Japan. The Yamashita family are *shin-issei* or the "new first generation" to immigrate to the United States following World War II. Yasako's husband, Hiro, disappears to life outside the home, and their daughter, seven-year-old Kuniko, attends school and balances American culture with her Japanese life within the home. Yasako entertains only one frequent visitor, the ghost of her dead mother, Fuyo, who, through her visits, keeps Yasako's connection with Japan alive.

America is an unseen place that exists beyond the boundaries of Yasako's sheltered life. In the play's opening, she recounts a typical day:

YASAKO. August third. Seven to eight: make breakfast. Eight to nine: wash

Kuniko's clothing. Nine to ten: piano. My world. America is outside, a place to visit

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<sup>82</sup> William Wetherall, "The Trial of Fumiko Kimura," *PHP Intersect Tokyo*, 2 (1986): 6-9.

<sup>83</sup> Masami Usui, "Creating a Feminist Transnational Drama: *Oyako-Shinju* (Parent-Child Suicide) in Velina Hasu Houston's *Kokoro (True Heart)*," *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, 11 (2000): 173.

<sup>84</sup> Cynthia M. Wetzler, "Survival and off-off Broadway," *The Pound Ridge Review* (Pound Ridge, NY: 1995).

when I take Kuniko to school. My husband buys the groceries, pays the bills. Once I had to take Kuniko to the doctor. That was hard. (Puts book away and calls out.)  
Kuniko! Kuniko-chan! Come, my child. Time for music. (Reacts as if a child has run in. . . . The child's entrance is always marked by wind chimes or the tinkling of bells.<sup>85</sup>

Ironically, her own child is unseen, physically absent as the role is not portrayed by an actor onstage but only indicated by lights, sound, and in the mother's reactions in performance. In a voiceover, a child participates with Yasako in the dialogue. The theatrical conventions employed in the place of the child's body onstage foreground Yasako's unwillingness to see the American influence already present in home and in her life. This plot point and the theatrical conventions employed to indicate the child's presence assist Houston in crafting a *shite* that will tread between the phantasmal and actual realms of Noh drama. Consequently, she begins the construction of a mixed dramatic form that will be fully illuminated in act two.

Paradoxically, it is her mother's ghost, Fuyo, who materializes. Physically "real" to both Yasako and the audience, Fuyo is portrayed by an actor onstage. Though dead, her ghost is an embodied presence, and though she never speaks, her influence has a direct impact on Yasako's decision-making.

These circumstances reveal Yasako to be the madwoman *shite* from Noh. In the absence of a child present and the presence of a deceased mother, we see Yasako's confusion and her entrapment between two worlds: the real and the unreal. In the juxtaposition between living absence and dead presence, Yasako finds herself in the present in a foreign land with

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<sup>85</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, *Kokoro (True Heart)* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc. 2011): 9.

an absent husband and no extended family. As a result, her mental state becomes compromised. Her need for stability strengthens Yasako's dependence on the child and makes the family system more vulnerable to the *oyako-shinju* practice.

Houston transforms Yasako into a phantasm from the fourth Noh category by blending actual Noh and phantasmal Noh into one dramatic narrative, which serves as a larger metaphor for cultural mixing within the play. When Yasako learns that Hiro, her husband, has been having an affair for the past three years, her world begins to unravel. Remarking on her inability to sleep, Hiro asks, "What's bothering you every single night, walking the floors like a ghost."<sup>86</sup> Houston's *shite* is a spirit present, but moving outside of reality. By blending characteristics from different categories of Noh plays, Houston constructs a play with "mixed" dramatic elements even within a Japanese theatrical sensibility.

Noh plays in the fourth category contain a group that depicts deranged parents grieving their lost children. Most end happily. However, one play, *Sumidagawa* or "The Sumida River," most closely resembles *Kokoro*.<sup>87</sup> In *Sumidagawa*, a mother, known only as Madwoman, learns of the death of her kidnapped son after having searched for him for a year. While praying over his grave, the boy's ghost appears to her, but he slips from her grasp as she tries to embrace him. *Sumdagawa* was written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Zeami's son Kanze Jūrō Motomasa, who maintained that the play would not be effective without the physical appearance of the boys' ghost. He insisted on the use of a *kokata* or "juvenile actor"

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>87</sup> Kanze Jūrō Motomasa, *Sumidagawa*, *The Noh*, accessed June 8, 2018. 1-16. <[http://www.the-noh.com/en/plays/data/program\\_012.html](http://www.the-noh.com/en/plays/data/program_012.html)>.

onstage. Zeami, on the other hand, believed that the ghost should be portrayed as a voice and through the reaction of the mother alone. Though there were two different sets of stage directions in their time, one which used a *kokata* and one that did not, today the role is performed by a child actor.

The portrayal of the child in *Kokoro* in voiceover serves two functions. While it fulfills Zeami's original direction in *Sumidagawa*, it also prevents a young actor from having to perform the act of being drowned. In *Kokoro*, the shame felt by Yasako's failure as a wife far outweighs her husband's infidelity. But divorce is not an option. Yasako seeks to commit suicide to join her mother, her only connection to Japan via the netherworld. Rather than cursing her child to a life with only one parent or burdening relatives with Kuniko's upbringing, Yasako sees no other honorable choice but to "take her child with her" by drowning her.<sup>88</sup> In this way, *oyako-shinju*, which is scripted stylistically in the play's text, is meant to release the entire family of shame.

The traditional practice of parent-child suicide, though illegal in Japan, is rarely prosecuted because of strong cultural beliefs in honorable suicide and the parent-child bond embedded in Japanese culture, a tradition that reaches as far back as the Tokugawa shogunate. The Confucian notion that children are conjoined with their parents has persisted in the Japanese cultural consciousness into modernity.<sup>89</sup> Known as *bun shin*, the belief implies that until a certain age mother and child are inseparable.<sup>90</sup> So engrained is this

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<sup>88</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, *Kokoro (True Heart)* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc. 2011): 36.

<sup>89</sup> Masami Usui, "Creating a Feminist Transnational Drama: *Oyako-Shinju* (Parent-Child Suicide) in Velina Hasu Houston's *Kokoro (True Heart)*," *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, 11 (2000): 179.

<sup>90</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, *Kokoro (True Heart)* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc. 2011): 36. *Bun* means "divide" and *shin* means "of the body."

mindset that it can manifest in modern society as *oyako-shinju* if the parent chooses suicide as a solution to trauma.

Failed *oyako-shinju*, in which the child dies but the parent lives, results in a “half-death” as the mother successfully kills only part of herself. At the end of act one, following Fuyo’s bidding, Yasako wades into the Pacific Ocean, drowning seven-year-old Kuniko before she is pulled from the surf and rescued by onlookers. She finds herself charged with one count of first degree murder in act two. Yasako is not interested in living and only desires to follow the daughter whom she has essentially sent to the netherworld without her. Already emotionally “dead,” Yasako is a ghost. As she explains to her attorney in act two:

YASAKO. Bun shin is like a tree. The child is the branch that needs to stay connected to grow. So, if you – the tree – dies, the branch dies.

ANGELA. But if the branch dies, can’t the tree continue to live, grow new branches and leaves?

YASAKO. (Without self-pity) Who cares about the tree? No one needs the tree.<sup>91</sup>

Likewise, this cultural sentiment is also iterated in the *Sumidagawa*. In the play, the chorus observes that while the “child’s meaningful life was quickly ended . . . the *worthless life* of his mother still goes on.”<sup>92</sup> This further illustrates the lesser status of the mother in the wake of a child’s death.

Houston’s blending of Western and Noh dramatic structure is most apparent in the

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>92</sup> Kanze Jūrō Motomasa, *Sumidagawa*, The Noh, accessed June 8, 2018. 11. <[http://www.the-noh.com/en/plays/data/program\\_012.html](http://www.the-noh.com/en/plays/data/program_012.html)>. This author’s emphasis.

transition from the first to the second act. She employs the pattern of phantasmal Noh by revealing her dead *shite* in act two, but by this mid-point, the play shifts from the non-linear, space-time of Noh and more closely resembles a procedural drama in act two. Yasako awakens in jail and is confronted with a series of visits from her defense attorney, her husband, Hiro, and her neighbor, Evelyn. When Hiro visits Yasako, he begs for forgiveness and reconciliation. He is grateful to not have lost her, but Yasako only says, “You did lose me, Hiro. I disappeared that day at the beach and I’m not coming back...you are looking at a ghost.”<sup>93</sup> Yasako’s presence as a ghost foregrounds her utter sense of abandonment, her loss of homeland, her culture, her inability to read American cultural cues, and her sense of self. Her true heart. Her presence is merely absence.

In *Kokoro*’s final moments, Yasako has another chance at death, having obtained “special tea,” which will allow her to “travel” to the spirit world by committing suicide. The tea is brought surreptitiously to the prison by her former neighbor, Evelyn Lauderdale. Fuyo, her mother’s spirit, hovers near as Yasako contemplates death over life without Kuniko. Then, the child appears, this time as a ghost, but she is only heard, not seen, reinstating Zeami's original direction in this fourth category play.

KUNIKO. Mommy?

YASAKO. Kuniko?

KUNIKO. Where’s Papa? Make him walk on the beach with you, Mommy. Make him sing like this: Down the river, oh down the river, oh down the river we go-o-o!

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<sup>93</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, *Kokoro (True Heart)* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc. 2011): 43.

Come on, Mommy, you can do it. Bye, Mommy!<sup>94</sup>

Upon hearing her child, Yasako makes a herculean effort to put down the tea cup and bow to her mother, sending the ghost away.

This exploration of the contrast between *kyo* (presence and realness) and *jitsu* (absence and the unreal) in *Kokoro* provides Houston a powerful vehicle for illustrating the complexity of Yasako's dilemma. Kuniko, though "real," also represents a culture that is, in many ways, absent to Yasako, while her own mother's culture is kept very much alive in her home. Assisted by apparitions, traditions still linger like ghosts. In this way, we see how the blending of cultures is investigated not only in content but also in the theatrical form.

While the play explores mixedness in its dramatic form, it also follows the journey of hapa subjectivity through mixed-race character Evelyn Lauderdale. Early in the play, comfort for Yasako comes from her neighbor, a half-Japanese mixed-race woman named Evelyn, who befriends Yasako and her daughter prior to the suicide attempt. Evelyn bakes peach cobbler, babysits Kuniko, and shows Yasako how to take the bus. Though friendly, Evelyn never reveals her cultural background to Yasako, and her ethnicity is nebulous. Evelyn, described only as "faintly exotic looking, warm," and "tomboyish,"<sup>95</sup> finally discloses her mixed-race Japanese heritage to Yasako in act two when she says, "My father was American, but my mother was from Japan."<sup>96</sup> *Kyo* and *jitsu* are also employed to explore mixedness in the hapa character Evelyn Lauderdale.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 34.

In the exchanges between Yasako and Evelyn, Houston reveals how people of color also fail to recognize mixed-race subjects. Yasako's surprised and admonishing "You never told me" conveys her inability to perceive Evelyn's ethnic background. Later in the act when Yasako seeks Evelyn's empathy regarding her decision and reminds her that she is Japanese, Evelyn reiterates her shape shifting ethnic ambiguity, asserting "But, I don't look Japanese, so it's easier for me. Sometimes."<sup>97</sup> Evelyn's response reflects a particular cultural reality that she may sometimes sidestep, but ultimately must confront as must Yasako.

Though the specificity of Evelyn's "American" heritage remains vague, it is highly possible that Evelyn, though half-Japanese, is also of myriad other ethnic backgrounds. At the very least, there is no overt reason to suspect that Evelyn is specifically half-white, as is precisely stated in the character descriptions in Houston's earlier play *Thirst*. Furthermore, in her other work, Houston clearly delineates the ethnic backgrounds of her other mixed-race characters. In the drama, *As Sometimes in a Dead Man's Face* (1994), about the relationship of a Japanese and African American woman and her adopted brother, the character's racial backgrounds are specifically stated. *Tea*, based on Houston's mother's life, is part of a trilogy that includes loosely *American Dreams* (1984) and *Asa Ga Kimashita* (1981), which clearly follows the interracial marriage of an African-Native American soldier and his Japanese wife as they confront the disapproval of their respective families and communities. Houston's more recent play, *Calligraphy* (2008), is also semi-autobiographical, inspired by her aging mother, who, in the play, imagines that her African American husband visits her from beyond the grave as well as *A Spot of Bother* (2008), which specifies that the protagonist,

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 35.

Maya, is English and Asian Indian.<sup>98</sup>

In light of this body of work, it seems plausible that Houston intended for Evelyn's heritage to be much more diverse and to open up casting possibilities for the character. However, as of yet, no Afro-Asian (or other ethnic combination) actor has ever played the role. In its twenty-year production history, from the 1994 world premiere to its most recent production in 2014, the actors playing Evelyn have all been Japanese and white.<sup>99</sup> This decision to continuously cast Evelyn as a half-Japanese and half-white woman demonstrates a prevalent assumption that marks the word "American" as white, revealing a nation-based concept of race embedded in the term. As sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant point out:

Since the imperial dawn, the ideas of race and nation have been deeply connected through concepts of *peoplehood*. Both as North American colonies of European empires, and then as a nation-state of its own, the United States identified as white. This identification as a white nation remains visible in the associations with whiteness that are visible . . . in such concepts as "the American people."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Velina Hasu Houston. *As Sometimes in a Dead Man's Face. Asian American Drama: 9 Plays from the Multiethnic Landscape*. ed. Brian Nelson (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1997): 71-125; Velina Hasu Houston, *Asa Ga Kimashita (Morning Has Broken)*, in *The Politics of Life: Four Plays by Asian American Women*. ed. Velina Hasu Houston (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993): 219-274; Velina Hasu Houston, *Calligraphy*, in *Green Tea Girl in Orange Pekoe Country: Selected Plays of Velina Hasu Houston* (South Gate: NoPassport Press, 2014): 315-377; and Velina Hasu Houston, *A Spot of Bother*, in *Green Tea Girl in Orange Pekoe Country: Selected Plays of Velina Hasu Houston* (South Gate: NoPassport Press, 2014): 378-420.

<sup>99</sup> *Kokoro (True Heart)* by Velina Hasu Houston, Perf. Kyungseo Min, Brandon Wong, and Katie Peabody, USC Scene Dock Theatre, April 24, 2014. In this educational production at the University of Southern California, Evelyn was portrayed by a white student actor.

<sup>100</sup> Omi, Michael and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014): 12.

Thus, Evelyn's self-identifying term "American" has been interpreted by directors and casting directors as "white." Though "American" can clearly refer to American citizens of all races, the term is imbricated with whiteness, as elucidated by the embodiment of the role by half-white women, which erases all other ethnic possibilities from view.

In his article on mixed-race representation in literature, Sheng-mei Ma also differentiates not between Asianness and whiteness but between Asianness and "Americanness." Ma, who criticized Houston's portrayal of mixedness in her drama *As Sometimes in a Dead Man's Face* as reifying the trope of the monstrous and tragic Eurasian, repeatedly points to the instability and impossibility of a mixed-race category where the multiracial subject is immediately "converted" to a stable "American" or "Asian" monoracial designation. The nebulous use of the term American, which denotes citizenship, in a false comparison with the word Asian, which denotes race, exposes Ma's assumptions about the word. He conflates citizenship with race when American becomes synonymous with whiteness. Ma goes so far as to hypothetically interrogate an Amerasian's facial features, noting, for instance, the "Americanness of the nose and skin tone."<sup>101</sup> It seems improbable that Ma means anything but American as synonymous with whiteness here, especially since he differentiates between Asians and Caucasians or whites and minorities in plays that deal specifically with American citizens (with the exception of *Kokoro*). It feels doubtful that he means to discuss the "Americanness" of a subject who is both African American and Asian American, thus foreclosing the term American to other ethnic groups.

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<sup>101</sup> Sheng-mei Ma, "The Necessity and Impossibility of Being Mixed-Race in Asian American Literature," in *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies*, eds. Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman (New York: Rodopi, 2007): 164. This author's emphasis.

The only mixed-race portrayal Ma does mention favorably is that of Evelyn in *Kokoro*.<sup>102</sup> Ma still finds the depiction problematic, however, because Evelyn “passes” as non-Asian in the play. For Ma, her passing indicates her inability to truly be mixed because she can be assigned to a monoracial category. However, Ma fails to recognize that the assignment to a monoracial category reveals the systemic need to classify bodies in various groups. Furthermore, Ma’s superficial analysis of the character overlooks Evelyn’s agency in her own self-identification. Rather than being force to “pass,” Evelyn enacts what Maria Root calls “situational ethnicity,” in which a multiracial subject will disclose as little or as much of her ethnic background as she feels the situation warrants.<sup>103</sup> Evelyn deploys situational identity to complete the shape shifting process. Ma asserts that “the mixed race is elusive and intangible” and these “occasional and problematic ‘sightings’ on stage” cannot embody the theoretical picture of resilient mixed-race subjects who can exist outside of monoracial culture logic and categorization.<sup>104</sup> However, the portrayal of Evelyn’s ability to shape shift between racial designations illustrates a resilience that defies categorization and serves her in different contexts in the play, especially as she serves as a cultural translator for Yasako and her defense attorney, Angela Rossetti.

This desire to cast a "half-American" as a half-white subject also illustrates what Angela C. Pao refers to as the "regime of verisimilitude." This belief in a logical match

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>103</sup> Maria P.P. Root, “A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People,” *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996): 11-12.

<sup>104</sup> Sheng-mei Ma, “The Necessity and Impossibility of Being Mixed-Race in Asian American Literature,” in *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies*, eds. Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman (New York: Rodopi, 2007): 187.

between the character's biological ancestry and the actor's phenotype continues to dominate Western realism.<sup>105</sup> The concept also reveals assumptions about what has been accepted as historically and culturally accurate about people of color in theater. Evelyn continues to be portrayed by a half-white actor because "American" is popularly synonymous with whiteness. This casting choice props up an "illusion of reality," which galvanizes the public misconception that Americans are predominantly white. Thus, the interpretation of an unspecified mixed-Asian "American" character as half-white, in effect, reifies a racial hierarchy that privileges whiteness and keeps multiethnic people of color in marginalized states.

The role's casting history also demonstrates a failure to acknowledge that the play grapples with the differences between Japanese and American *culture*, not race. Evelyn's admission about her ethnic background is in response to Yasako's surprise upon receiving Evelyn's gift of homemade *o-manju* or Japanese red bean cake:

YASAKO. You made this o-manju? I have never known Americans to even eat these.

EVELYN. My father was American, but my mother was from Japan.

YASAKO. You never told me.

EVELYN. I never told you she was Japanese because, well, it seemed unnecessary to point it out. Unless you had asked.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Angela C. Pao, *No Space Spaces: Recasting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan P, 2010): 176.

<sup>106</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, *Kokoro (True Heart)*, in *But Still Like Air I'll Rise*. ed. Velina Hasu Houston (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997):116.

In the dialogue above, taken from a 1997 version of the script, Evelyn's refusal to divulge her cultural background illustrates what multiethnic writer Heidi Durrow calls "mulatto fatigue," an exhaustion or state of disillusionment, which stems from continuously having to explain and advocate for one's ethnic make-up.<sup>107</sup> As sociologist Kimberly McClain DaCosta notes, being "aware of the shifting meaning of one's parents for negotiating ethnic belonging, many multiracial respondents reported at times going out of their way to make known their kin ties to their parents in public and at other times, downplaying those connections."<sup>108</sup> Evelyn demonstrates a common dilemma that multiracial individuals face—the myopic categorization of mixedness as either a novel state of existence or as not ethnically enough to be fully Asian. Evelyn opts not to disclose her ethnic background to Yasako either from a fear of objectification or fear of rejection<sup>109</sup>—two positions she has no doubt experienced before.

Evelyn's development as a character mirrors a political shift in the zeitgeist from the mid-1990s to early 2000s. This can be seen in Houston's changing of these lines from the 1997 published version to the 2011 Dramatist version and provides insight into Evelyn's motivation and source of anxiety. The metamorphosis also reflects the growing recognition of the racial multiplicity present in the U.S. population, as demonstrated by the change of policy on the 2000 U.S. Census. Houston's lines, ". . . well, it seemed unnecessary to point it

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<sup>107</sup> Heidi Durrow (class discussion, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, March 5, 2015).

<sup>108</sup> Kimberly McClain DaCosta, *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in Redrawing of the Color Line* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 130.

<sup>109</sup> Paul Spickard, "What Must I Be? Asian Americans and the Question of Multiethnic Identity," *Race in Mind* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015): 182. Paul Spickard discusses the rejection that many multiracials experience from the "minority" culture of their ethnic background as a reaction from the subdominant discourse.

out. Unless you had asked," becomes bolder in 2011. Evelyn now responds, "Well, I guess I wanted you to like me for me and not just because I'm half Japanese." Her revised response indicates not a fear of rejection but a fear of objectification, whereby her mixedness would be marked as novel or exotic. The line is more pointed, direct, unapologetic, and it asserts a desire to be acknowledged outside of ethnic and racial ties or "boxes," regardless of whatever privileges those memberships might afford. The exchange also illustrates the shape shifting quality of multiraciality, which defies society's notions of race. Through the instability of its porous boundaries, multiraciality exposes the slippage that occurs when forcing these bodies into monoracial designations, revealing the fallacy in classifying bodies according to racial phenotype.

In her understanding of two different cultural perspectives, Evelyn illustrates her empowered position as a doubly-liminal, mixed-race subject. During one of the visits to Yasako in jail, it is Evelyn who encourages Yasako to embrace the possibility of life, dissuading her from suicide and convincing her that Kuniko would have wanted her to live. Evelyn stands squarely in the center of the narrative, having successfully navigated both cultures in her own upbringing. As Masami Usui asserts, through the exploration of a Japanese woman's trauma and difficulty in readjusting to the cultural disparities she encounters, Evelyn is also a representation of Houston acting as intermediary between two different countries and their cultures.<sup>110</sup> Evelyn becomes a kind of *waki*, a translator for the audience—most likely a mainstream American audience—who may not understand the

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<sup>110</sup> Masami Usui, "Creating a Feminist Transnational Drama: *Oyako-Shinju* (Parent-Child Suicide) in Velina Hasu Houston's *Kokoro* (True Heart)," *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, 11 (2000): 193. Usui contends that the exploration of the plight of transplanted Japanese women was personal for Houston. The notion of *oyako-shinju* haunted Houston for years as her mother admitted to Houston that she contemplated committing practice after Houston's father's suicide.

cultural circumstances that would drive a mother to kill her own child. This mixed perspective is demonstrated through Evelyn's double liminality, on the micro level. On a macro level, it is demonstrated in the body of the play's narrative and in the architecture of the dramatic form, which blends Japanese and Western theatrical traditions. The work itself represents Houston's mixed cultural perspective and creates a play with a mixed identity.

Through a supporting character, Evelyn Lauderdale, Houston develops the complexity of being mixed race in a play that is ultimately about a Japanese woman's journey to survive in a foreign land. It is through her friendship with a mixed-race woman that she is able to see possibility in such a transition. Yet the hope-inspiring role of Evelyn Lauderdale remains fraught with assumptions about race, both as evinced in the character's words and historically, in the embodiment of the character through casting choices that have consistently perceived the role as half-Asian and half-white.

Houston wrote *Thirst* and *Kokoro (True Heart)* at a time when seminal mixed-race scholars like psychologist Maria P.P. Root had just begun to write about mixed-race subjectivity. Houston's dramas illustrate the ways in which theater not only followed the social movements of the 1980s and 90s but more importantly the way it helped shape these movements. The plays of Velina Hasu Houston, the first Asian American woman to be produced in New York, thrust the issues of transnationalism and mixed-race subjectivity into the national discourse and contributed to the shifting cultural tide that paved the way for mixed-race grass roots movement to change the racial categorization of the U.S. census in 2000. Her work opened the doors for playwrights in the new millennium to prime the theatrical landscape for a new kind of racial discourse.

## Chapter 4

### Multiraciality in the Post-racial Era

In January 2016, Stage Left Theatre, together with Red Tape Theatre, produced the political satire *Mutt* (2014) by Christopher Chen in a North side neighborhood of Chicago. The dark comedy revolves around an Asian mixed-race presidential candidate who garners enough support to be elected to the White House. He accomplishes this despite having murdered his opponent on national television. In an uncanny instance of life imitating art, within ten days of the play's opening, 2016 presidential candidate Donald J. Trump told supporters at a political rally in Sioux Center, Iowa that he could "stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody" and still get elected.<sup>1</sup> More than a macabre coincidence, the play illuminated Chen's chilling observation that political and racial perception can eclipse even the most egregious of crimes. It also exposed how race, a central issue both in Chen's fictional and the real 2016 presidential election, becomes powerful fodder for American political rhetoric. Considered together, the play and the real-life incident illuminate how whiteness, the master monoracial category, is held to different standards of unhampered privilege. In *Mutt's* mixed-race candidate, Chen shows us how the supposed acceptance of all races under the guise of colorblindness perpetuates a racially divisive system and furthers the interests of the white hegemony.

Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig's play, *Lidless* (2011), also demonstrates how the hands of the state manipulate race. The play follows Bashir, a political detainee at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp, and his torturer, Alice, who uses "invasion of space by a female," or

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Diamond, "Trump: I Could Shoot Somebody and I Wouldn't Lose Voters," *CNN*, January 24, 2016, <<http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/23/politics/donald-trump-shoot-somebody-support/>>.

rape, as a means of extracting information from her prisoner. The assault results in a pregnancy that Alice sees to term. Their mixed-race child, although different from the presidential candidate in *Mutt*, highlights another facet of political discourse—the erasure of the mixed-race body in contemporary American culture.

Together, these two plays foreground the ways that the fluidity of multiraciality becomes clouded by polarizing monoracial designations. The mixed-race characters of *Lidless* and *Mutt* become absorbed by whiteness in different ways, whether by disappearing into the monoracial category or by upholding the hegemonic ideals of white patriarchy. The plays elucidate the ways that mixed-race identity also becomes co-opted to further the problematic rhetoric of colorblindness. Both projects expose the underpinnings of the persisting cultural amnesia that fail to recognize and valorize the prevalence of mixed-race heritage and identity.

In this chapter, I examine how contemporary performances of hapa, or mixed-Asian, characters complicate the identity narratives of the twenty-first century and highlight the ability of mixed-race individuals to shape shift, or sidestep predetermined racial categories, due to their ethnic ambiguity. This shape shifting ability is what enables hapa figures to slip into monoracial categories—a shift they must perform to gain subjectivity in American social, cultural, and political frameworks.

At first glance, the mixed characters in *Mutt* and *Lidless* seem to reify archaic, Jim Crow era tropes, such as the "half-breed" as a troubled pathological figure, rather than a malleable shape shifter. Yet these dramatic narratives surreptitiously work to reveal larger mechanisms of racial discourse by illuminating how multiculturalism and colorblindness

work within political and legal structures that only grant subjectivity on their own terms. I contend that mixed-race identity is dependent on the performance of historical and genealogical knowledge. Without this crucial understanding, multiracial bodies slip into reified categories of race, leaving their mixed histories inevitably behind. The plays work in tandem to demonstrate how political policies succeed in erasing mixedness and how the ability of the mixed-race body to shape shift across racial lines then becomes contingent on social and historical context and the reception of the individual.

Significantly, reading the plays also reveals a drastic departure from the mixed-race dramas of the late twentieth century. The mixed characters of *Mutt* and *Lidless* do not actively work to reconcile their angst about conflicting cultural values, nor do they wrestle with a desire to belong. Rather, the dramatizations reflect the growing awareness of mixed-race identity in the twenty-first century, a complex, yet perhaps hopeful political period marked by a change in the racial self-identification policies of the 2000 United States census. For the first time in the census enumeration, mixed-race individuals were permitted to identify with more than one racial category. This subtle change in the zeitgeist has slowly seeped into theatrical discourse, as evident in these post-millennial plays.

The Midwest production of play opened in Chicago on January 13, 2016. With the title shortened simply to *Mutt*, the performance was presented as a co-production between Stage Left Theater and Red Tape Theater. My examination of the play will include a close semiotic reading complemented by my observations recorded from a short-term ethnographic study of the production. I was lucky enough to attend one combined technical and dress rehearsal, three previews, and the first two performances of the Chicago run. My research methodology combined participant observation and co-performer witnessing. I participated in

production meetings, helped clear set pieces from the stage, interviewed various members of the cast, and conducted audience surveys. The entire production team was warm and welcoming, especially the director, Vanessa Stalling, with whom I developed a special affinity. These observations are also complemented by two interviews with playwright Christopher Chen, conducted before and after the ethnographic research and a follow-up interview with Stalling. Additionally, I will conclude with a close reading of *Lidless*, supported by archival research of the play's productions and an interview with Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig.

### **Double Liminality and Racial Transgression**

When junior Illinois Senator Barack Obama became the first African American to be elected president, his campaign and election signaled to a vast majority of Americans that a post-racial society had finally dawned. Upon hearing President Obama's 2010 State of the Union speech, television pundit Chris Matthews declared, "He is post-racial, by all appearances. I forgot he was black tonight for an hour."<sup>2</sup> Matthews' comment, of course, tellingly contradicts its own sentiment, since it implies that after an hour, even Matthews remembered that the president was black. It was a clear indication that quite the opposite had occurred. The post-racial era had failed to arrive.

In light of this false premise about a post-race society, this chapter investigates how multiracial subjectivity can be understood by performance theorists to interrogate and challenge the desired belief in racial transcendence that some people desire. Taking into account Brandi Wilkins Catanese's notion of racial transgression, I explore the ways that

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Calderone, "Matthews: 'I Forgot He Was Black Tonight for an Hour,'" *Politico*, January 27, 2010, <[http://www.politico.com/blogs/michaelcalderone/0110/Matthews\\_I\\_forgot\\_he\\_was\\_black\\_tonight\\_](http://www.politico.com/blogs/michaelcalderone/0110/Matthews_I_forgot_he_was_black_tonight_)

mixed-race figures transform and clarify our understanding of the racial scaffolding in contemporary America. I advance the notion that what I call "double liminality," or the fluidity of mixed identity, illustrates how the mixed body slips between the boundaries of race in *Mutt* and *Lidless*.

Brandi Wilkins Catanese astutely observes that the term "transcendence" is often called upon in racial discourse as a means of celebrating cultural triumph over the ugliness of race. Racial transcendence or "colorblindness" purports to not only look beyond the physical markers of race but naively to not see race at all. Cultural theorists SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs similarly call this racial transcendence the "egalitarian multicultural paradigm," which evades racial complexities through a belief in a "brownwashed," raceless society.<sup>3</sup> All three scholars note that the desire of many white people for racial transcendence becomes a political maneuver and a revered cultural objective with the underlying message that people of color should simply "get over it."<sup>4</sup> These scholars further argue that the more humane pursuit is not to ignore race but to acknowledge the division and destruction that racialization has caused. Through acknowledgment, we can instead interrogate and dismantle the violence of race. Catanese calls this approach racial transgression. She advocates for performances that defy racial frameworks to expose the "limitations of transcendence as a viable strategy for social change" and to acknowledge the histories that racial hierarchies have inscribed on individual bodies.<sup>5</sup> She contends that the antidote to "transcendence" is an

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for\_an\_hour.html>.

<sup>3</sup> SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs, introduction to *Mixing It Up: Multiracial Subjects*, eds. SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004): 3.

<sup>4</sup> Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011): 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

awareness of the divisions put in place by race, rather than a denial of their existence.

The moral limits of transcendence are apparent in Catanese's analysis of the film performances of black actor/director Denzel Washington. Catanese affirms that an audience will read the “surplus meanings his presence as a black actor will or will not introduce into the film.”<sup>6</sup> That is, the idea that the audience never sees Washington's race is a fallacy. His racialized materiality may not be relevant to the character he portrays, but nonetheless his skin color and the assumptions ascribed to his racial physiognomy are always present. Washington does not stop being black, but rather the audience presumes not to notice his blackness.

Catanese also observes the way that hip-hop artist Ice Cube's 2006 reality television show, *Black. White.*, purported to give members of different racial groups a glimpse into one another's everyday life. White participants were “made up” to appear black through the use of cosmetics, costumes, and “raced” performances, while black individuals were made to look white by the same means. In this way, black and white bodies superficially switched one racialized state for another. But interculturalist Leo Cabranes-Grant has keenly noted that Ice Cube's transracial experiment “actualized” an experience “that was neither white nor black: *Black. White.* performed a mixing of colors that still remains underrepresented in our visual repertoire.”<sup>7</sup> Cabranes-Grant acknowledges this unlikely nod toward miscegenation and points out a lack of representation of mixed-race bodies that Catanese perhaps misses.

Building on Catanese's argument and continuing Cabranes-Grant's observation

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>7</sup> Leo Cabranes-Grant, “An Essay on Racial Understanding: Toward a Post-Obama State of Mind,” *Theatre Survey* 55, no. 2 (May 2014): 254.

regarding a lack of multiracial performances in general, I wonder how mixed-race bodies, which embody two or more sets of difference, negotiate multiple racial states in performance? In our cultural conditioning, are they allowed to inhabit more than one? How does the material presence of the mixed-race body expose the limitations of the racial hierarchy and our misguided belief in the possibility of a colorblind utopia in this current moment?

I contend that the very portrayal and embodiment of mixed-race characters are performances of racial transgression. Their racially ambiguous physiognomy defies prescribed racial codes and foregrounds the process by which we see and assign racial difference. When we encounter a mixed-race body, far from "not seeing race," often we vigorously pursue the "mystery" of its racial identity. The racially nebulous body troubles our ability to organize individuals into accepted racial groups and, in doing so, dismantles the fixity of monoracial categories. For example, individuals of mixed-Asian descent cannot easily fit into a single Asian category. The mixed-race body makes apparent how disparate the Amerasian experience is. Mixed-Asians are *doubly liminal*. They exist on the margins, at the thresholds, of both the categories of whiteness and of Asianness. While they are often not quite white enough to be fully accepted as white, neither are they fully accepted as Asian.

Yet the mixed-race body is perhaps a conundrum, as it is not two "halves" of a cultural experience fused together but rather two "wholes" experienced simultaneously. While racial expectation assumes that a perceived phenotype ensures an assignment to the most superficially correct racial category, mixed-race bodies shape shift and slip into many different racial designations, including some that are not part of those individuals' ethnic histories. This process is contingent on many things such as an observer's reception,

geographical location, the subject's personal genealogical knowledge, and the performance of self.

Plays like *Mutt* and *Lidless* can take Catanese's theory one step further by acknowledging the myriad histories that make up the mixed-race body. As Kwan and Speirs keenly note, the various racial histories inscribed on individual bodies carry with them different lineages of power and oppression.<sup>8</sup> Rather than insisting that multiracial bodies identify as one specific race, they advocate that individuals embrace the multitude of ethnic experiences that make up the mixed identity and acknowledge the vastly different tensions that a multiethnic body possesses.

And yet, these various historical lineages also separate mixed individuals from each other. I call this varying mixed-race experience "double liminality," as a multiethnic person cannot entirely fit into a monoracial group, but neither can she neatly fit into a mixed-race category. For example, the Chinese-white character, Nick, in *Mutt* has a vastly different experience in his multiethnic upbringing than that of his political rival, Len Smith, who claims to know every ethnic ancestor in his mixed-race lineage. Both characters, however, are identified in *Mutt* as hapa, although neither of them shares a similar Asian or mixed cultural experience.

This demonstrates a particular conundrum of mixed-race. Although the experience of mixedness may be a commonality among multiracials, a subject's particular ethnic background and exposure to those cultures varies drastically between individuals. This further distances them from each other. Nonetheless, contemporary racial politics force the

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<sup>8</sup> SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs, introduction to *Mixing It Up: Multiracial Subjects*, eds. SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004): 4.

mixed-race body into monoracial categories in an attempt to systematically organize individuals into easily legible racial codes. While this is shifting in the new millennium with the ability to self-identity on the census, the rule of hypodescent still governs hegemonic perceptions of race. While many multiracials no longer have to choose between two or more different parental lineages, the persisting paradigm in society still organizes them into dominant racial groups. This denial of the mixed-race body produces its own kind of violence, as mixed individuals are often not fully accepted into the racialized group to which they are assigned.

As theater scholar Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson notes, American legal structures only grant subjectivity to those who are racialized. Chambers-Letson's analysis of Bashir's subjectivity in *Lidless* is useful here. Bashir, a political prisoner at the Guantánamo Bay detention center, only becomes a subject in the eyes of the state because of his race.<sup>9</sup> His interrogator, Alice Jones, finally recognizes him years later *only* after he performs his previously assigned role as a prisoner of Middle Eastern Asian descent. In this way, as Chambers-Letson contends, the law is “structured by acts of performance.”<sup>10</sup> Chambers-Letson's observations about the legal creation of racialized personhood shed light on the mixed-race individual's desire to yield to the rule of hypodescent and to allow oneself to be absorbed into monoraciality. Racialization as a means of becoming a subject also clarifies the subdominant's hesitation, even refusal, to recognize mixed-race subjectivity, which reveals an anxiety over losing members who may claim mixedness. Even though multiracial individuals must endure some erasures that accompany belonging to a specific racialized

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<sup>9</sup> Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013): 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

group, such as identifying solely as African American, those who do not subscribe to an established racial category run the risk of not existing at all. In *Lidless*, Bashir's mixed-race daughter, Rhiannon, avoids this invisibility by shape shifting into whiteness. Her mixed-race ability to morph across multiple racial lines, in conjunction with her lack of personal genealogical knowledge, is what, in fact, causes the erasure of her mixed self.

### **Sublime Superhapa: Optics, Representation, and the American Presidency**

The work of international award-winning, mixed-race playwright Christopher Chen features dramatic narratives in which racial transgression interrogates transcendence. His plays explore the instability of cultural perception and the dynamics of transracial relationships. His postmodern sensibilities play with disruptions in time, alluding to surrealistic spheres where his characters grapple with real-world problems in the theatrical realm. In 2014, he was commissioned by Impact Theater and Ferocious Lotus Theater Companies in San Francisco to write a play about mixed-Asian identity. His response was a political satire originally entitled *Mutt: Let's All Talk about Race!* that first premiered in San Francisco in May of the same year.

Chen's stylized comedy is the first millennial play to use the Hawaiian word *hapa*, meaning "half-foreigner," to identify Amerasians, or individuals of mixed-Asian descent. He thus introduces the word to mainstream American theatrical audiences. The play examines shifting racial perceptions in a fictitious 2016 presidential election. It focuses on the depiction and commodification of multiraciality as envisioned by Chen, who exposes the absurd tenacity with which society clings to tenuous racial scaffolding. In *Mutt*, Chen not

only interrogates racial politics in contemporary America but also examines how mixed-race sensibility navigates the often perplexing and treacherous terrain of what Evelyn Alsultany calls "monoracial cultural logic."<sup>11</sup> In the play, party leaders are on the lookout for a "superhapa," a multiethnic candidate who can morph into any race, in the hopes of appealing to all racial groups and securing every "race" vote possible. Through this premise, Chen imagines the dire and darkly humorous consequences that only a relentless search for the "perfect mix" can bring.

*Mutt* performs in two acts and is written in the vein of episodic, non-linear sketch comedy. Rather than following an inevitable linear plot, the chronological narrative progresses in what playwright David Edgar refers to as "disconnected time," where a collection of stories unfold that do not at first seem to be related.<sup>12</sup> In the stylized staging, the actors employ indirect audience address and projected titles of scenes provide mile markers for the audience along the way. The show's non-illusionistic requirements transform the set into many locales: a therapist's office, a D.C. bar, and a Thai-Mexican restaurant, among others.

Central to the narrative are the journeys of three hapa characters. Hanna, a "race management consultant," introduces the idea of a mixed-race presidential candidate to white Republican Party leaders, Miriam and Zach. She sees a multiracial candidate as a solution to the problems stemming from the party's refusal to see race. Hanna asserts that an Amerasian, an "appealing" amalgamation of whiteness and the model minority, would be safer than

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<sup>11</sup> Evelyn Alsultany, "Toward a Multiethnic Cartography: Multiethnic Identity, Monoracial Cultural Logic, and Popular Culture," in *Mixing It Up: Multiracial Subjects*, eds. SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004): 143.

<sup>12</sup> David Edgar, *How Plays Work* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009): 113.

someone like Obama, whose "presidency proved that the country isn't ready for an African American president."<sup>13</sup> Hanna coaxes the truth from Miriam and Zach, crooning, "Let's be honest . . . you're still scared of black people. Aren't you?"<sup>14</sup> Swayed by Hanna, the Republican leaders admit that their party's unpopularity is due to its fear of minorities and their wish that the race issue didn't exist.<sup>15</sup> Hanna then proposes that they embrace a half-Asian, half-white figure as a safer candidate and reminds them that "optics" and public perception are crucial to winning the election.

Enter two potential contenders: Nick Wong, a congressman of mixed-Asian descent with little connection to his Chinese heritage, and Len Smith, a decorated war hero, who has just returned home from a tour in Afghanistan. Len is introduced as a mix of every major race in the world.<sup>16</sup> He is what the Republicans refer to as a "superhapa," someone who can "optically appeal" to any voter. Quite frankly, he's the party's wildest dreams come true.

For Chen, *Mutt* becomes a study in the behavior of the political machine and its encounters with the physical bodies of others. In his astute vision, these interactions range from the hyperbolic to the ephemeral to the invisible as characters fail to physically see some bodies while wildly misperceiving others. For instance, in a keenly crafted sight gag, the cleaning lady at the Democratic national headquarters, a Latina, is corporeally non-existent. Not actually played by an actor onstage, the character is embodied by a voiceover alone and neither the other characters nor the audience can see her. She is only discovered to be in the

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<sup>13</sup> Christopher Chen, "Mutt" (unpublished manuscript, December 8, 2015), Portable Document Format file. 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

room when the Democratic Party leader supposedly trips over her. After a brief verbal exchange with the confounded group of politicians, the door to the room seemingly opens by itself, and the "invisible minority" makes an exit. As this invisible Latina reminds us, in this system the only body that can ultimately be seen is one that fits the hegemonic ideal.

Amidst eye-opening exchanges like these, the playwright creates a mixed-genre style that parallels the mixed-race subjectivity underscoring the play. He initiates a subplot written as a procedural drama with neo-noir characteristics in which a character known only as the "Inspector" is on the hunt for a serial killer. The quick jumps between a procedural drama, political talking heads, and comedic sketches mirror the act of surfing television channels where viewers receive their information in snippets. As the Inspector interviews witnesses at various crime scenes, the suspect's race keeps morphing. The witnesses are not quite sure they can actually identify the race of the killer whose descriptions range from Korean to black to "Aztec." (The last one is, in fact, a complete conundrum to them since they cannot decide if Aztec is Native American or not.) Nevertheless, the Inspector is confident in the accuracy of all their testimonies and sends all of them to his sketch artist to craft a composite that will combine each racialized account.

Ironically, it is this uncertainty that is exactly what the hegemony counts on in the narrative's main plot. Enamored by his stories of multiculturalism, the Republicans select superhapa Len to be their nominee. In his preliminary interview, he confidently assures Hanna, Miriam, and Zach: "I am all people, so I can literally be whoever you want me to be."<sup>17</sup> In a climate dependent on the rigidity of racial codes, Len's shape shifting abilities

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 33.

become an asset in securing the nomination. He promises a transcendent society that superficially acknowledges racial difference even as it holds the racial hierarchy in place.

By contrast, Nick is interested in exploring the disparities created by race. Disillusioned by the colorblind Republicans, he has switched parties and begins to self-identify as a mutt. He vehemently asserts that the United States is a mutt, too, and that collectively, Americans need to "get out of the pound."<sup>18</sup> Upon hearing Len's stump speeches about a new utopian society, Hanna echoes Nick's unnerved frustration, declaring, "He's not *saying* anything! He's letting people see whatever they want to see in him."<sup>19</sup> Nick's passion and her own disgust prompt Hanna to join him in his bid for the Democratic nomination, which he eventually wins.

Through these prisms of mixedness, Chen examines the instability of racial perception. By unhinging the "pure" categories of monoraciality, he reveals how the multiplicity of ethnicities and experiences are subsumed within these fixed designations. All three of these hapa characters—Hanna, Nick, and Len—are identified as Asian, even though none of them share similar ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, Chen demonstrates the separation experienced by multiracial figures, who not only fail to fit into a monoracial category but also cannot neatly fit into a mixed-race group. While Len knows his entire ancestral lineage, Nick barely relates to his own Chinese father and knows nothing about his father's upbringing. Hanna never reveals her ethnic background in the play. She only self-identifies as "hapa." Individually, they each occupy a liminal space of mixedness. They are separate from each other in spaces that call monoracial designations into question. The

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 46, author's emphasis.

mutability of perception and the ambiguity of their phenotypes allow them to shape shift, a skill Len relies on for the success of his campaign. While mixed-race labels seemingly reinforce fixed racial codes by suggesting a mix of "stable" races, the doubly liminal bodies of multiraciality simultaneously dismantle them. This double liminality is the center from which Chen, a Chinese and white American playwright, pens *Mutt*. His bifurcated positionality fuels his writing, becoming the driving force behind the play's narrative.<sup>20</sup>

Rather than reifying the trope of the tragic Eurasian, *Mutt* legitimizes mixed-race bodies by empowering and foregrounding them in the play. Hanna, Len, and Nick are all in positions of political power. Indeed, Len and Nick are vying for perhaps the most powerful office in the free world, and Hanna is the mastermind behind their ascent. The rise of the mixed-race character to presidential candidate is significant, considering that multiracials have historically been depicted in white mainstream theater as slaves, servants, prostitutes, and criminals.<sup>21</sup> While newer works written by mixed-race playwrights have slowly begun to feature multiethnic characters in a variety of professions, typically the mixed-race character has no known profession at all, such as the unemployed Amerasian woman Lee in Frank Chin's seminal play *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972). This is significant since, in works like Chin's play, mixed-race subjects cannot even aspire to a disenfranchised place in the

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<sup>20</sup> Christopher Chen, (playwright) in discussion with the author, May, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> George Aiken, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2008); Alain Boublil, *Miss Saigon: a Musical* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1990); Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon* (London: Broadview Press, 2014); William Wells Brown, *The Escape; Or, a Leap for Freedom, Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans, The Early Period 1847-1938*, ed. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 35-60; T.S. Denison, *Patsy O'Wang, The Chinese Other 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams (Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 1997), 125-148; Timothy J. Gilfoyle, "In the Tenderloin," *A Pickpocket's Tale: The Underworld of Nineteenth-Century* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2006), 260-270; Jessica Hagedorn, *Dogeaters* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2003); Langston Hughes, *The Mulatto, Five Plays*, ed. Webster Smalley (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1963).

community—they simply have no place at all. The inability of the mixed-race body to be racialized, therefore, bars the subject from achieving a kind of personhood, even one as an outcast in a tenuous social position. If in 1895, Patsy O'Wang aspires to be the alderman of his district in a white playwright's vision, it is not until 2014 that Len and Nick finally fulfill and surpass his dreams 119 years later. At the very least, it is a strong suggestion that multiracials may finally have found their place.

Beyond the sublation of the tragic Eurasian figure, the racial transgression of shape shifting bodies enables Chen to interrogate another multiracial trope: the messianic "Face of the Future" imaginary. This hope that a futuristic multiethnic society will end racism has been written about extensively since the appearance of "The New Face of America" on the cover of Time magazine in 1993.<sup>22</sup> The image featured the face of a woman who was purportedly a mix of several races and sought to demonstrate what society would look like in the future. While critical scholars have problematized its use as a symbol for the advent of a post-racial era, its rhetoric still circulates in popular culture in television and films like the popular Wachowski sisters' *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003).<sup>23</sup> Through Len's nebulous shape shifting character, Chen challenges the trope's pernicious embrace of a transcendent, colorblind society in order to demonstrate how the system has failed to acknowledge the

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<sup>22</sup> Ted Thai, "The New Face of America," *Time Magazine*, November 1993; Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, "Introduction: Rethinking 'Mixed Race' Studies," *Mixed Race Studies: A Reader*, ed. Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe (New York: Routledge, 2004): 1-3; Maria P.P. Root, "The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as a Significant Frontier in Race Relations," in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996): xiv; Roberta Uno, "The Color of Theater" in *The Color of Theater: Race, Culture, and Contemporary Performance*, eds. Roberta Uno and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns (New York: Continuum, 2002): 10; and Jan R. Weisman, "An 'Other' Way of Life: The Empowerment of Alterity in the Interracial Individual," in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks: Sage Productions, Inc. 1996): 159.

<sup>23</sup> For a further discussion of the "Face of the Future" trope in the *Matrix* trilogy see: Leilani Nishime, "The *Matrix* Trilogy and Multiraciality at the End of Time," in *Undercover Asian: Multiracial Asian Americans in Visual Culture*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014): 85-106.

presence of multiethnic bodies.

In the play, Chen charges Hanna with introducing and reinforcing the idea of the Face of the Future. Her reference to the trope demonstrates the insidious ways that bodies of color become complicit in their own straitjacketing. Midway through the play, a despondent Hanna anticipates a mixed-race future, but Nick dismisses this as an excuse to be complacent in the present.

HANNA. . . by 2050 every race will have screwed every other race so the political machine will just move on finding other ways of dividing us.

NICK. So you're saying we just have to wait it out for the population to interbreed its way out of racial issues? . . . Isn't that passing the buck?<sup>24</sup>

What is ironic about this exchange is that according to Len, every race has already "screwed every other race." When television pundit Dave Matthews asks Len what contributed to his multiethnic heritage, Len replies, "A lot of screwing, Dave."<sup>25</sup> In fact, Hanna has unknowingly described the present—a multiracial society that the political machine has found a way to divide. Chen dispels the notion that a mixed-race utopia is on the horizon by revealing the existence of the Face of the Future now. Superhapa Len knows his entire ethnic make-up. Like the computer-generated Time image, he, too, is Asian, white, Middle Eastern, and African. Far from being a genetically inferior "creature," television pundits describe Len as "sensuous," "magnetic," and as someone who can appeal "to everyone of every

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher Chen, "Mutt" (unpublished manuscript, December 8, 2015), Portable Document Format file. 49.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 26.

background and persuasion."<sup>26</sup> Len delivers the future now, which is, as he puts it, "exciting and non-threatening at the same time."<sup>27</sup> But the presence of the mixed-race body does not in actuality represent racial transcendence, as the Face of the Future would have us believe. On the contrary, a mixed-race person represents an interracial union that disrupted the racial divide and chose transgression rather than dismissive transcendence.<sup>28</sup> Resultantly, the status quo and the rule of hypodescent continue to force mixed-race persons into specific monoracial categories.

Nonetheless, Len's superhapa persona reinforces the idea that we are all mixed, even though we may not know it. While television pundits are impressed by his ability to rattle off his diverse parentage, it becomes clear that what separates us from multiracials like Len is mere knowledge—personal histories that would reveal our mixed selves if only those histories had not become lost to us. As Hanna observes, these erasures are how we have become divided, since there is a concomitant pressure to identify monoracially—an impossibility for many Americans. The truth is that the intermixing she believes is forthcoming has already taken place. Furthermore, Len's "beigewashed" superhapa becomes a symbol for the desired universality that underlies the notion of a transcendent, raceless society. By problematically sidestepping the very real challenges of racism faced by many Americans, this beigewashing attempts to "homogenize us all."<sup>29</sup> As Chen has affirmed about Len, though he may be a supermix of every major race, part "of the joke is that he's a blank

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>28</sup> Maria P.P. Root, "A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People," in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Productions, Inc. 1996): 9-10.

<sup>29</sup> SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs, introduction to *Mixing It Up: Multiracial Subjects*, eds. SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Speirs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004): 3.

slate,” that is, in his embodiment of many races, his racial mixedness becomes homogenized and consequently, erased.<sup>30</sup> The supposed representation of many different cultures and communities, united under the umbrella of the universal, is merely a matter of perception, of “optics,” rather than a true reflection of the reality of different life experiences. Nick reminds us that the American hegemony only cares “about a racial culture’s greatest hits collection of American-like attributes.”<sup>31</sup> In the refusal to acknowledge the histories of oppression housed in the racialized body, we see the danger that universality brings.

Chen sees societal erasure and cultural amnesia as hastened by the evolving dependency on technology and social media—a dependency that rapidly expedites the loss of our own personal histories. Nick attempts to rediscover his cultural roots because he is genuinely interested in his family’s history. Yet modern technological culture changes so quickly that Nick’s Chinese father, Carruthers, cannot remember moments that happened the day before much less oral histories that were handed down decades ago. In this digital world of perpetually renewed information, our genealogical and cultural memories evaporate, and Chen sees this evanescence as an unfortunate “product of American culture.”<sup>32</sup> Though Nick tries in vain to help his father recall superficial details of his life in China, Carruthers warns him not to romanticize the past and not to trust memory. In a broader sense, Carruthers’ dismissal of Nick’s cultural soul-searching could serve as a way to disrupt the romantic persistence of Orientalism and the West’s attempts to reduce Asian culture to stereotypes. But as a prisoner of digital culture, Carruthers has also lost his connection to his ethnic past in his

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<sup>30</sup> Christopher Chen, (playwright) in discussion with the author, October, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Chen, "Mutt" (unpublished manuscript, December 8, 2015), Portable Document Format file. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Christopher Chen, (playwright) in discussion with the author, March, 2016.

desire to be relevant and keep up with the times.

Chen highlights the devastation of cultural amnesia through Carruthers' confusion and through the manipulation of temporal space onstage. Within surreal scene transitions, a disembodied voice interrupts the action by announcing, "It's night time! It's daytime!" The performers stop the action, frozen in place, and then reanimate, seemingly not affected by this loss of time. What has become "real time" in this world is time without contemplation. Only the Inspector, who moves about in a noir space that progresses slower than the main narrative, seems to have time to reflect. Indeed, days and nights move by so quickly that Nick's father cannot remember what is happening from moment to moment.

Curiously, the third and final witness interviewed by the Inspector reveals in this quirky version of virtual time. As she tracks a delivery online, she delights in how quickly her package "pings" across the globe.<sup>33</sup> She praises the enlightened members of our technologically enhanced society and vehemently asserts that here there is no race and no time. In her world, or our world, she is beyond the confines of time and, as a result, believes she is beyond the confines of race, much to the Inspector's confusion. Nevertheless, when she is asked to speculate on the race of the suspect, she unquestionably identifies him as an African American, which exposes her ability to see race after all. Chen thus sharply interrogates our blind adoption of a technological culture that would aid us in forgetting cultural memories and the lessons of the past. It perpetuates a belief in colorblind transcendence that is actually an internalized lie.

In this savvy appraisal of the erasures committed in the digital age, the Inspector

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<sup>33</sup> Christopher Chen, "Mutt" (unpublished manuscript, December 8, 2015), Portable Document Format file. 61.

identifies Len, the embodiment of the universal, as the serial killer. His sketch artist compiles the varied eyewitness descriptions and produces a composite sketch that is reminiscent of the Face of the Future imaginary. The rendering is a portrait of Len. Yet the Inspector, who has been overtaken by his own white guilt, allows Miriam to dissuade him from charging her candidate with the murders. In the frenzied conclusion that follows, Len stabs Nick in the neck during a campaign speech on national television. Despite this heinous act, Len—heralded as the candidate who can "save us all"—ultimately wins the election.<sup>34</sup> The play culminates in a frenetic clamor of techno music, which is intertwined with the chorus of "We Are the World" and video projections that proclaim America's victory over race—such as "America Defeats Race Issue" and "National Nightmare Over!" In the play's final moments, the hedonistic din builds to a crescendo before the stage goes black.

Len's character embodies the false acceptance of cultural and ethnic multiplicity in American society. As the invisible Latina earlier in the narrative reminds us, in this system the only body that ultimately can be seen is one that fits the hegemonic white ideal. Len's shape shifting physiognomy morphs into a manifestation of the universal, which methodically proceeds to erase histories of color. His actions reveal a fallacy in the myth of American racial democracy. Metaphorically, the philosophy of transcendent colorblindness kills difference. It is a serial killing that singles out people of color. The consequences of this action are dire. The failure to recognize race means that racism does not end. In our refusal to discuss race, as Nick endeavors to do, we overlook these erasures of color a result of social conditioning and entrainment. As Nick asserts, "America is a mutt," but the dominant desire

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 75.

for a beigewashed universality systematically attempts to eliminate these cultural and racial differences in America.

In an alarming indication that the colorblind mentality is alive and well in the United States, many of the Chicago reviewers found Chen's script to be an ineffective and unnecessary critique of race. One critic in particular believed that race was non-existent. Reviewer Tom Williams from the *Chicago Critic* called the production "loud, stupid, and witless."<sup>35</sup> He objected to race as the play's central theme by asserting, "Chen didn't realize that Obama made that a non-issue."<sup>36</sup> Williams' comment ignited a maelstrom among Chicago theater artists of color, who called for a ban of the critic from their shows.

The show also illuminated the colorblind rhetoric present in the 2016 presidential election, a series of events that Williams did not believe was adequately represented in the performance. He recommended that the production cull *YouTube* for video clips of real 2016 candidates and contended that if "the producers really want to satirize presidential politics in 2016, all they need do is act out what the misfit collection of Republican contenders, led by Trump are actually doing on the campaign trail!"<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, it is exactly these moments of art imitating life that *Stageandcinema.com* critic Lawrence Bommer found disturbing and horrific. Bommer disbelieved Len's extensive ethnic background and was disgusted by the audience's positive reaction to Len's tendency to "shoot people in the face."<sup>38</sup> Bommer criticized the opening

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<sup>35</sup> Tom Williams, "Mutt," *Chicago Critic*, January 15, 2016, <<http://chicagocritic.com/?s=mutt.>>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Christopher Chen, "Mutt" (unpublished manuscript, December 8, 2015), Portable Document Format file. 33.

night audience for finding this “perversely” funny, adding, "This creature, who apparently has ancestors in every country, inevitably morphs into a stateside serial killer—but that’s no hindrance to his race (pun intended)."<sup>39</sup> He found the play implausible and condescending. Most significantly, he understood that Chen's argument about a "mongrelized" United States was destroyed in a "final grotesquery,"<sup>40</sup> although he failed to recognize that this grotesque erasure was, in fact, Chen's point.

This "cynical ending" demonstrates the brutality inherent in a colorblind society and replicates the climate of the 2016 political landscape.<sup>41</sup> The election of a presidential candidate who openly incites violence, keenly parallels Donald J. Trump's own rise to political fame. During the run of the production, Trump boasted to a crowd of supporters in Iowa that, "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters."<sup>42</sup> His comment drew laughter from the Iowa rally much like the opening night audience's amused reaction at Len's desire to shoot people on the face. Jeremy Diamond of CNN has observed that Trump "repeatedly pointed to the loyalty of his supporters, many of whom tell reporters and pollsters that almost *nothing* could make them change their mind about voting for Trump in the presidential race."<sup>43</sup> In *Mutt*, Len's questionable character is also no deterrent for the Republicans, who continuously stand behind him, drawn to his

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<sup>39</sup> Lawrence Bommer, "A Seriously Stupid Screamfest," *Stage and Cinema*, January 14, 2016, <<http://www.stageandcinema.com/2016/01/14/mutt-stage-left-red-tape/>>, this author's emphasis.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Jeremy Diamond, "Trump: I Could 'Shoot Somebody and I Wouldn't Lose Voters,'" *CNN*, January 24, 2016, <<http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/23/politics/donald-trump-shoot-somebody-support/>>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

ability to garner unabashed loyalty from the voters. Len mirrors Trump's broad appeal as a member of a white, privileged class, who panders to racial and cultural groups solely to win an election. In this way, Chen's drama feels like a chilling prophetic vision, especially considering that the play was written two years prior to Trump's presidential rise. Furthermore, Len's hypocritical, Janus-faced policies mirror Trump's Machiavellian campaign rhetoric. In Len's character, Chen literalizes Trump's "killer" mentality and makes manifest an embodiment of the political landscape.<sup>44</sup> The play unwittingly satirizes Trump's mind-boggling political ascent, from his contradictory points of view to his penchant for violence, which is precisely what Williams accused the production of failing to do.

Bommer's review also highlighted the tenacity of the tragic Eurasian trope in which race mixing produces an impure, pathological subject. Bommer identified Len as a "creature," an unreal abomination much like the Jekyll and Hyde character Patsy O'Wang.<sup>45</sup> He repudiated the claim that Len could possess an extensive mixed-race background, even though he believed that this creature could "morph" into a criminal. Bommer's assessment of Len reveals the persistence of the nineteenth-century racial trope in which defects of character can be passed through a mixed racial biology. Unbeknownst to Bommer, the play illuminated the multiracial's ability to shape shift, not to serve as evidence of the tragic Eurasian's criminality but rather to interrogate the malevolence of systemic colorblindness.

The mixed-race individuals' ambiguous racial physiognomy exposes our reliance on

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<sup>44</sup> Trump biographer, Michael D'Antonio, notes that Trump's father, Fred, raised him to extol the benefits of being a "killer" and a "king." See Michael D'Antonio, "Donald Trump Believes He Was Born to Be King," *The Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 2015, <<http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-1203-dantonio-trump-race-horse-theory-20151203-story.html>>.

<sup>45</sup> Lawrence Bommer, "A Seriously Stupid Screamfest," *Stage and Cinema*, January 14, 2016, <<http://www.stageandcinema.com/2016/01/14/mutt-stage-left-red-tape/>>.

racial markers and reveals the fallacy of a colorblind society. *Chicago Theater Beat* reviewer Lauren Whalen praised the *Mutt* production for its timeliness and overall understood the play's ultimate goals. Interestingly, though, even Whalen failed to recognize the depth of the play's critique of persistent racial tropes. As Whalen recounts, "some jokes are right on the money and hilariously tragic. . . . Others don't make quite as much sense, like the subplot in which a white police officer attempts to find a prolific serial killer whose description keeps changing."<sup>46</sup> Whalen refers to the subplot in which the Inspector cannot determine the suspect's racial profile because the criminal continuously shape shifts. These shifts occur not only because of Len's complex ethnic background but also because of the shifting perception of the witnesses, who "read" his racial make-up differently. Whalen's confusion surrounding these dramatic details perhaps stems from a misunderstanding of the centrality of mixed-race personhood in the drama. The work was, after all, originally commissioned to explore hapa identity, and Chen's multiracial perspective is what drives the narrative. Without this key component, the play is seemingly just another parody about race. Its focus on multiraciality illuminates fissures in the racial hierarchy—slippages that can create confusion in observers like the witnesses in *Mutt*. Mixedness slips in between fixed categories and, in doing so, dismantles colorblindness as a viable tool for social transcendence.

The Chicago production of *Mutt*, directed by Goodman Theater directing fellow Vanessa Stalling, focused on Chen's examination of racial politics and public misperceptions. Stalling, sensitive to the racial violence and tension present in Chicago, worked closely with Chen to add an African American character to a script about race which, at that point, had none. In the Chicago version, Nick and Hanna encounter Karen, an African American

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<sup>46</sup> Lauren Whalen, "Mutt," *Chicago Theater Beat*, January 15, 2016,

woman, who is a political science professor at Georgetown University. Nick asks Karen to describe the black experience to him in an effort to be more racially sensitive. Skeptical about his intentions, Karen gently reminds him that one experience cannot be distilled into a single sound bite for political gain nor can it represent all racialized experiences. Stalling highlighted Karen's message throughout the production by having the same actress play all the witnesses. Under the chameleon-like prowess of actress Nicole Michelle Haskins, the audience viewed the same black body in different cultural circumstances. This directorial choice effectively illuminated Karen's point that while we might assume that all black bodies are the same—in this production they were the same body—not all experiences are alike. The embodied racial commentary was sensitive and smart. The creation of Karen developed under Stalling's perceptive collaboration with Chen was a necessary and effective addition to a production having its Midwest premiere in Chicago, a city dominated by black and white racial politics. Furthermore, Stalling mindfully cast her actors in roles against the script to illuminate how race changes or problematizes our social expectations. For example, her casting of Haskins as the third witness, who in the text is a white hippy living in a religious commune, disrupts and modifies the audience's perception of what a religious zealot might look like.

I applaud Stalling's bold, visual direction and her sensitive, compassionate choices about racial politics, and I wonder if perhaps a closer consideration of mixedness crystalized her vision even more. This occurred to me as I sat in the dark, watching the final dress rehearsal unfold at Theater Wit in Chicago. I noticed that while the focus of the burgeoning show concentrated on the discrepancies of race, the idea that the three most powerful people

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<<http://chicagotheaterbeat.com/2016/01/15/mutt-review-stage-left-red-tape-theatre/>>.

in the play were mixed was not entirely addressed. While textual interpretation is the prerogative of the director and the production team, it seemed to me that perhaps a sparse exploration of mixedness in rehearsals would impact the final product.

In a show about race, especially in a play where the plot revolves around the experiences of mixed-race hapa subjects, a discussion of mixedness in the rehearsal process is perhaps crucial in fully communicating the essence of the play's central themes. Interestingly, the three hapa actors who played Len, Hanna, and Nick admitted to me in a group interview that their ethnic backgrounds were never discussed in the initial table reading or at subsequent rehearsals. All of them also had similar, though varied, life experiences with misperception. They each expressed moments of double liminality, which means they felt distanced from one another through different cultural as well as generational experiences.

Other than in the casting appointments, the material presence of mixed-race bodies onstage and their centrality to the production was seemingly overlooked. In fact, when I first saw the performance of Aurora Adachi-Winter, the actress who played Hanna, I questioned whether or not she was actually mixed. When her character reveals that she is mixed-race in the play, Adachi-Winter did not seem to draw on her deep understanding of hapa subjectivity to communicate Hanna's embodied sense of self. I was later pleasantly surprised to learn that Adachi-Winter was half-Japanese and half-white. I surmise that Adachi-Winter's somatic awareness as mixed-race individual was not translating on stage initially, because her experiences as a multiethnic subject had not been incorporated into the rehearsal process. According to Adachi-Winter, when her ethnic background did come up in side conversations, these took place in down times between cast members outside of rehearsal. This seems a

missed opportunity, especially since I found Adachi-Winter to be the most vocal of the three actors. In her interview, she seemed both politically and socially aware of the impact of her mixedness and understood that she related to society in a way that is different from those who are monoracial. She shared stories about subverting pointed questions regarding her ambiguous ethnic physiognomy as her peers tried to figure out "who she was" and how to categorize her.

Furthermore, Adachi-Winter realized that the white community around her saw her as monoracially Asian even though she also identified as white. This is problematic because it illustrates the persistence of the rule of hypodescent,<sup>47</sup> which also often applies to those of African/African American ancestry as well as to other groups of color.<sup>48</sup> For instance, she recounted how a friend asked

about my ethnicity in the worse possible way and he's a very sweet kid, but he was like, "Aurora, are your, were your ancestors born here?" And I was like . . . if my ancestors were born here, I would be a Native American, so no. I know what you're asking me.<sup>49</sup>

Likewise, the rule of hypodescent perpetuates the monoracial cultural paradigm and erases the notion of mixedness from our social consciousness.

While I commend the Chicago production of *Mutt* for confronting stereotypes and

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<sup>47</sup> Hypodescent refers to the assignment of a mixed-race individual to the race of the parent deemed socially subordinate. Consequently, mixed-race figures identify as monoracials, who are only able to claim their non-white parentages.

<sup>48</sup> Except for individuals of Native-American Indian descent. See Circe Strum, *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> Aurora Adachi-Winter, (actor) in discussion with the author, January 2016.

assumptions in racial perception, I offer that a further exploration of the mixed-race experience would have provided the production with a deeper interrogation of the status quo's fascination with monoraciality. The multiracial's ability to shapeshift into a monoracial group is contingent on the reception of a viewer and the perceived phenotype of the mixed-race body. The shift completes when the mixed-race figure verbally confirms her ethnic background. Because of her physical ambiguity, this can initiate a shift because the ethnicity revealed may be different from the viewer's presumptions about her parentage.

Mixed individuals especially trouble the racial status quo when they refuse to shift into monoracial categories. As Cynthia L. Nakashima notes, the mixed-race people frequently “resist the oppressiveness of having to [publicly] “choose” . . . by maintaining” their privacy.<sup>50</sup> Dan Smith, who played Len, often refrains from answering the "what are you" question.<sup>51</sup> His unwillingness to participate in the co-creation of his racialization illustrates the two-sided nature of the shape shifting process, one that is contingent on the observer's reception of an individual's perceived race. Smith told me that he was reticent to engage in these exchanges and to disclose his ethnic make-up.

You know, I'm not going to say it's en vogue or whatever, but . . . I don't readily offer it up. I mean, I identify as an American. . . . I just hold onto it a little more. If I'm comfortable with you, you know, I'll go through the list of it. . . . If I don't really know you, you're not going to get anything from me. I'll just say a lot of different

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<sup>50</sup> Cynthia L. Nakashima, “An Invisible Monster: The Creation and Denial of Mixed-race People in America,” in *Racially Mixed People in America*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, Inc., 1992): 177.

<sup>51</sup> Maria P.P. Root, “A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People,” in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Productions, Inc. 1996): 7 and Teresa Kay Williams, “Race as Process: Reassessing the ‘What Are You?’ Encounters of Biracial Individuals,” in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996): 191-210.

things or I'm a mutt, you know? . . . [Or why] do you want to know? . . . Why are you asking?<sup>52</sup>

Smith reveals his skepticism at the viewer's intentions in these last two questions. Far from being colorblind, experience has shown him that because observers cannot readily identify his racial background, they will vigorously pursue information about his parentage. Smith's reticence then prevents the shape shifting process from taking place. In this way, he leaves observers uncomfortably colorblind. Without knowledge of his ethnic background, he remains racially ambiguous, since the viewer's mind fails to complete the shape shifting transformation.

Smith's experiences foreground ruptures in the efficacy of colorblind transcendence. Observers belie their dependency on racial markers when presented with an ethnically ambiguous body. Adachi-Winter, who is fourth generation Japanese American, has also experienced this phenomenon. In the same interview with Smith, she expressed her annoyance at being asked the dreaded but familiar "what are you" question from men who tried to pick her up. "Eventually we'll get there, you know. They'll get real specific on what it is that they want, and I'm like, I'm half-Japanese. There you go. That's the answer you're looking for. That was a great conversation."<sup>53</sup> Exchanges like these reveal the failure of transcendent colorblindness in society. Far from not seeing race, these interracial encounters demonstrate how racial categorization is embedded in our social consciousness. Our society is not color-neutral. When a mixed-race body fails to immediately fit into a monoracial

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<sup>52</sup> Dan Smith, (actor) in discussion with the author, January 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Aurora Adachi-Winter, (actor) in discussion with the author, January 2016.

category, it creates what Maria Root calls an "emotional/psychic earthquake" that disrupts a belief in racial immutability.<sup>54</sup> Rather than transcending color, we rely on it.

In theater, as in life, monoraciality and racial transcendence continue to trouble theatrical spaces. Performances of racial transgression must actively dismantle the prevalence of the racial transcendence that has permeated theater institutions and their art. Just as mixed-race bodies fade into singular racial categories in society, on stage they may also disappear. An example of this can be seen in the controversial casting of The Engineer in the musical *Miss Saigon* (1989). To date, no mixed-race actor has ever played the role, even though the character is of mixed-Asian descent.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, all three Amerasian actors in *Mutt* said they had never had the opportunity to play a hapa character, even though they have collectively worked at over twenty-five different theaters in both Chicago and New York. *Mutt* was the first time any of them had ever encountered a mixed-Asian character, and they doubted whether other hapa roles existed. The actors' experiences simultaneously illustrate the continued erasure of the mixed-race body in theater. Chen's drama succeeds in foregrounding mixedness at his play's center, while director Stalling, to her credit, sensitively and tirelessly worked to bring Amerasian actors to auditions for the multiracial roles.

The mixed-race actors' life experiences also successfully mirrored the doubly liminal experiences of the characters. This crucial similarity illuminates the complexity of double liminality because while ethnic backgrounds can differ between mixed-race individuals, the

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<sup>54</sup> Maria P.P. Root, "A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People," in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Productions, Inc. 1996): 9.

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion on the casting history of *Miss Saigon*, see Antonia N. Glenn, "Racing and E-Racing the Stage: the Politics of Mixed Race Performance" (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2004): 62 and Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006): 177.

extent of these differences is further complicated by how much access each person has to their familial cultures. Michael Reyes, who played Nick and identifies as half-Filipino and half-white ("mostly Dutch"), leapt at the chance to audition for the role.<sup>56</sup> This was not only because the character was hapa but also because, like Reyes, he felt isolated from his father's Asian heritage. Reyes said he explained his connection to the character in his audition, and as a result, he never felt the need to discuss it again.

They announce the season, and they announce the play, and I'm like look, that's exactly me. It's not just because I happen to be half-Asian, but because I happen to be a half-Asian guy who doesn't really know anything about this father's ethnic background. It's sad. It's really, really sad. I don't know anything about the Philippines at all. . . . Anyway, my point is that I kind of laid all that out. I said, hey, you know that part of it, at least for me, I think I kind of got. . . . So, I don't recall having specific conversations about me in particular [after the audition].<sup>57</sup>

The role of Nick was an opportunity for Reyes to play an Amerasian character with whom he specifically identified. Nick and Reyes did not share the same ethnic background (Chinese and Filipino), but they both had similar experiences with Asian fathers and paternal cultural backgrounds with which they could not relate. Furthermore, while the actors' mixed-race histories were not discussed in the rehearsal process, the director gave the actors the space to discuss it in auditions. This is important because it acknowledges and validates their mixed-race subjectivities. An opportunity for Reyes to bring his individual experiences into discussion during rehearsal could have additionally enriched the theater making process even

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<sup>56</sup> Michael Reyes, (actor) in discussion with the author, January 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

more.

While multiracial experiences were explored in auditions, some scenes about mixedness were ultimately cut from the final performance. In an interview with Vanessa Stalling, the director, I asked her about these omissions and whether or not she considered multiraciality to be a driving force in the play. She said that in trying to find the musicality of the piece, she felt that the "rhythms of the play overall weren't working."<sup>58</sup> She made the decision, in consultation with Chen, to cut scenes that she felt made the play veer off in another direction. Her artistic choices aimed to assess how to make the play, which had only been produced once before, work rhythmically. Stalling, who acknowledged that a non-white director would perhaps have seen different underlying thematic threads, remained committed to the narrative's interrogation of race and misperception in a broader sense. In her words, she chose to highlight "how misguided our thinking of race is in general."<sup>59</sup> While Chen himself asserted that the play is about "all race, not just hapa identity," he also conceded that the play was written "from my subconscious" or the collection of mental processes that were surely informed by his mixed-race identity.<sup>60</sup> From this perspective, Stalling may have had a blind spot about the mixed-race subjectivity driving the play due to her own positionality as a white director.

In a serendipitous, Orwellian moment in the show's climax, it was the physical shape shifting qualities of Dan Smith that illustrated how mixed-race individuals become subsumed by monoraciality. Though half-white and half-Korean, Smith looks phenotypically more

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<sup>58</sup> Vanessa Stalling, (director) in discussion with the author, April 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Asian, yet the prop that the sketch artist produced was a portrait of an "Anglicized" version of the actor's face. In the Chicago production, the character of Len, who is ridiculously multiple, literally morphs into a reflection of the dominant. While the "whitening" of Smith's facial features in the onstage prop was perhaps unintended, the rendering ironically served to demonstrate the core of Chen's larger project. Len is the embodiment of a political climate that peddles a belief in racial transcendence. While colorblindness purports to embrace all peoples and all colors, in refusing to acknowledge race, it only reflects the interests of the white hegemony. We realize that Len represents all of us, living and accepting a monoracial system of categorization created by a white society.

### **The Colorblind that Cannot Be: *Lidless***

If Len Smith knows every ancestral ethnicity that makes up his mixed-race background, in contrast, Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig's Rhiannon Jones knows nothing of her multiethnic lineage. Cowhig's play *Lidless* also illuminates the limited visibility of mixedness in contemporary American theater. The work of the critically-acclaimed, transnational mixed-race playwright has been described as "salty, surreal and bombastic."<sup>61</sup> *Lidless* is Cowhig's debut drama and has received professional productions in London, New York, Philadelphia, and Tucson. Most recently, the Horse Head Theater Company in Houston presented the play in the summer of 2016.

Cowhig has written about mixed-race erasure in a play that is also not singly about mixed-race. Multiraciality is not the focal point of the narrative. Rather, *Lidless* explores the

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<sup>60</sup> Christopher Chen, (playwright) in discussion with the author, March 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Andrzej Lukowski, "The World of Extreme Happiness," *Time Out*, October, 1 2013, <<http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/the-world-of-extreme-happiness>>.

traumatic effects of war and political evasion after the September 11 attacks. In the play, the decisions of the political elite play out in personal, domestic spheres. Although neither Chen nor Cowhig would solely characterize either of these scripts as "hapa" plays, I contend that, like *Mutt*, a bifurcated sensibility undergirds Cowhig's narrative. This is significant as it demonstrates the shift in mixed-race drama that differs from the ethnic "identity" plays produced before the turn of the millennium. These plays demonstrate a more sophisticated awareness about mixed-race than ever seen before.

In *Lidless*, Cowhig explores how the systematic, political erasure that occurs in the aftermath of war results in cultural amnesia. By pitting a misguided military woman against an incarcerated racialized prisoner, she keenly elucidates how legal decisions filter down and impact our everyday lives. In Cowhig's narrative, one of the by-products of this amnesia is also the expunction of mixed-race. Whereas Chen's superhapa Len highlights his extensive multiracial background, Cowhig's character, Rhiannon, demonstrates how quickly genealogical knowledge can be lost. This intervention is significant because it critiques how mixed-race subjects may become complicit in their own oppression. Rhiannon represents those of us who, through no fault of our own, have "forgotten" our mixed histories.

While United States military conflict is only hinted at in *Mutt* vis-à-vis Len's tour in Afghanistan, the war on terror is the soil on which Cowhig's drama grows. The play's narrative is non-linear, beginning at the Guantánamo Bay detention center in 2004 and flash forwarding 15 years later to middle-class life in Minnesota. The play features non-illusionistic staging with locations delineated only by squares of stage light. The props are also minimal.

The play's searing critique about the ethics of one's actions revolves around a cultural amnesia that subtly condones violence in imperialistic projects. Rhiannon Jones is a fourteen-year-old girl who knows nothing of her true biological parentage and cultural past. She is the product of a rape committed by her mother, Alice, a white, United States army interrogator. Rhiannon's biological father is Alice's Muslim prisoner, Bashir, a former Guantánamo detainee of Pakistani descent. Alice has been authorized by the U.S. government to use rape, an "enhanced interrogation technique" referred to as "invasion of space by a female," in order to extract information from Bashir.<sup>62</sup> While Alice's best friend, Riva, an army medic of Assyrian-Iraqi descent, tries to dissuade her from using the sexual tactic, Alice relishes the idea of spoiling her prisoner's chances of entering Heaven. So determined is Alice to extract information that she will use any means necessary as long as she does not have to remember the events. To ensure this, she takes government-issued pills designed to erase her memory and above all, to absolve her of her "sins." This premise provides the background for the unlikely examination of the invisibility of mixed-race in America.

Erasure of the truth in the face of war is not new to the history of the United States. In her critique of the U.S. policies during the Vietnam War, Yen Lê Espiritu has noted "the unsettling entanglement between military acts of violence and recovery, with recovery overlaying and at times disappearing (the memory of) violence."<sup>63</sup> In an effort to maintain a reputation as the global "do-gooder," the United States justifies acts of violence as a "humanitarian" means of keeping the world safe. Cowhig highlights the irony of this policy as Alice uses sexual tactics, or mechanisms of war, to bring the salve of democracy to the

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<sup>62</sup> Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, *Lidless* (New York: Methuen Drama, 2011): 8.

<sup>63</sup> Yen Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014): 40.

Middle East. As she says to Riva before she commits the assault, "I am what democracy looks like."<sup>64</sup> She then forgets the crime and lives her life in "recovery." As the representation of white American hegemony, Alice suffers a self-imposed amnesia, which serves to exonerate her of past behavior in the service of war. She believes that her compliance with military policy protects her from taking responsibility for past events. In a broader sense, Alice's actions also mirror larger political erasures committed by the American government.

But, as Cowhig asserts, cultural blindness and amnesia are never permanent. Fifteen years after the incidents at Guantánamo, Bashir reenters Alice's life. She is now a florist with no memory of the brutal events she committed 15 years earlier. Having contracted hepatitis during his time at the detention center, Bashir begs Alice for her liver. He reasons that the gift of a liver transplant will absolve Alice of her sins.

The encounter between Alice and Bashir makes clear who colorblindness serves. Alice, a character of white privilege who carries out atrocities of imperialist project, is the only one who forgets these sins. Bashir, on the other hand, still grapples with the effects of the past. Rhiannon, their mixed-race child, without knowledge or memories of her ethnicity, shape shifts into whiteness.<sup>65</sup> This transformation occurs like it has for many individuals whose mixed-race heritage has been lost to time. They, too, shift into the monoracial category most readily available, or deemed acceptable, for them. This racial state is a space that is created and then inhabited, and the erasure of those individuals' mixed subjectivity

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<sup>64</sup> Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, *Lidless* (New York: Methuen Drama, 2011): 8.

<sup>65</sup> Espiritu quoting Marianne Hirsch notes that the memory of the postwar generation can be thought of as "postmemory—secondary, mediated, and inherited memory of a long past." See Yen Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts:*

allows the current racial framework to continue.

Rhiannon's circumstances demonstrate how the process of shape shifting is a co-constitutive project between the subject and the observer. This process creates a perceived racial identity that is often based on context and influences how the subject self-identifies. Like the character Evelyn in Velina Hasu Houston's *Kokoro (True Heart)*, Rhiannon "passes" into monoraciality. Cowhig includes the actual spectators in the audience as part of this process as well. Similar to the characters in Rhiannon's respective "family," the audience members ostensibly have no idea that Rhiannon is mixed-race until the end of the play. The spectators also accept Rhiannon's supposed parentage (Alice and her husband, Lucas) and the monoraciality of her character, which demonstrates the way that context and reception collaborate to mark the mixed-race body.

Cowhig points to the contextual mechanisms that facilitate this process of racialization at different moments in the play. This is crucial in understanding how racial identities get assigned and become internalized by mixed-race subjects. When Bashir purports to recognize Alice's "true self," she scoffs, "Spare me the true-self bullshit. No one is anything *except their situation*."<sup>66</sup> Later, Bashir tells Rhiannon, "When you can't see, everything is only what you make it."<sup>67</sup> As shown in *Mutt*, a raced body comes into being through perception and context. Cowhig elucidates how circumstances play a key role in enabling these shifts to take place. Context influences the perception of the observer.

Joshua Chambers-Letson has keenly noted how the United States legal system grants

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*The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014): 141-142.

<sup>66</sup> Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, *Lidless* (New York: Methuen Drama, 2011): 36, this author's emphasis.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

personhood through a process of racialization.<sup>68</sup> Without this "necessary" context, an individual runs the risk of becoming a non-entity. Alice tells Bashir, "You have a role. An identity. That's what you've really lost. You got out of prison but you never found a new self."<sup>69</sup> She highlights how Bashir benefits from becoming a raced person in the American political system. Though he gained his freedom from a racialized state, he cannot be "seen" in the eyes of the white hegemony. That is, Alice does not recognize him unless he resumes his performance as a racialized prisoner of Middle Eastern Asian descent.

Intriguingly, Lucas, Rhiannon's "adoptive" father, is possibly multiracial. He is described in the cast of characters only as "racially ambiguous." In the logic of realism, this makes sense as Rhiannon, a mixed-race child, could not unquestionably be Lucas' daughter unless he was a person of color or mixed as well. Yet, throughout the entire narrative, Lucas' ethnic background is never discussed nor questioned. It seems that Lucas has shape shifted, too. Both he and his daughter, Rhiannon, have quietly "passed" into monoraciality, specifically into whiteness. This is not to say that the characters are not mixed, but through casting choices and under the paradigm of race, these figures shift into a normative racial designation.

Aided by casting, Lucas and Rhiannon could, in effect, shift into whiteness. This demonstrates how the racial paradigm has coopted the institution of theater in its political project and how in the casting of characters, white bodies are more apt than mixed ones to be cast in racially ambiguous roles. Indeed, in two different casts of *Lidless*, Lucas' racial

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<sup>68</sup> Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013): 3.

<sup>69</sup> Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, *Lidless* (New York: Methuen Drama, 2011): 37.

ambiguity has seemingly slipped past the production teams. In the 2011 InterAct production in Philadelphia and the 2012 Borderlands production in Tucson, both actors playing Lucas were phenotypically white. In all productions of *Lidless* to date, except for one at the 2010 Contemporary American Theatre Festival, Rhiannon has also been cast as a white character. This is striking when considering that Bashir is always cast as a person of color. Like Len Smith in *Mutt*, the racially ambiguous characters Lucas and Rhiannon silently transform into embodiments of whiteness.

While the American hegemonic system strives to forget the crimes born from the traumas of racism and war, Cowhig demands that both her characters and her audience bear witness to these atrocities. The play's title, *Lidless*, does not seem to reference any specific moment in the play, but it does have a personal resonance for Cowhig. As she explained to me in an informal interview, her brother had a dream that his eyelids were ripped off so that he couldn't close them anymore. In the dream, he experienced "living without eyelids" and always being forced to see. For Cowhig, this state of being "lidless" means that one is never able to not see the consequences of their actions.<sup>70</sup> In the play, Cowhig pulls the lids from her characters' and spectators' eyes. In a 2010 email to Contemporary American Theater Festival artistic director, Ed Herendeen, Cowhig asserted that "the audience is just being forced to watch a stream of action without having time to blink or breathe."<sup>71</sup> All the theater participants are faced with the same realities of war and its aftermath—the residual, sedimentated, and generational trauma.

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<sup>70</sup> Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, (playwright) in discussion with the author, June 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Ed Herendeen, "Director's Concept Lidless" last modified March 10, 2010. <<http://catf.org/directors-concept-lidless/>>.

These reverberations of the past set Rhiannon on a journey to discover her lost identity. Like Nick, she also interviews her father in an attempt to collect his personal oral history, though she does not realize that Bashir is, in actuality, her biological father. When Rhiannon asks to interview Bashir, he counters, "Which history do you want?" Confused, she answers, "How many you got?"<sup>72</sup> Bashir explains that history is never straightforward but complex, multilayered, and contingent. In many ways, Rhiannon is like Len Smith in *Mutt*, the product of a vast history of ethnicities and cultural narratives. The difference, however, is that, like most of us, she does not know about the entirety of her genealogical history as a result of the erasure caused by monoracial cultural logic. The expectation that we identify monoracially causes us to lose our ethnic histories.

Yet Rhiannon perseveres because she is determined to get to the truth. She feels a profound connection to Bashir that she cannot explain. As she tells him during her interview, "I feel like I've known you my whole life."<sup>73</sup> However, while she desperately tries to question her family about the past, they refuse her requests. Frustrated by her imposed ignorance, Rhiannon accuses her mother of deliberately keeping her in the dark and asks Riva, her godmother, to fill in the missing pieces of her history. But Riva refuses, insisting that, "It's hard to focus on the present when you're thinking about the past."<sup>74</sup> Crucially, the characters' desires to leave the pain of the past behind also cause other truths to vanish.

Plays like *Lidless* provide a necessary venue for exploring forgotten truths, including the existence and prevalence of mixed-race personhood. Early in the play, Rhiannon explains

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<sup>72</sup> Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, *Lidless* (New York: Methuen Drama, 2011): 26-27.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

her strategy for identifying with the interviewee of her oral history project, saying, "If I want to understand someone, I need to dress like them, walk like them, talk like them. I need to become them."<sup>75</sup> At the end of the play, Rhiannon tries to become Bashir in an effort to understand him, understand his past, and ultimately, to understand herself. Since all she knows about him is his life as a detainee, she dons his orange jumpsuit, puts on black out goggles, and handcuffs herself. She then tries out a stress position that Bashir was placed in at Guantánamo Bay. Because Bashir's American subjecthood is inextricable from the performance of his perceived race, Rhiannon, through her performance of Bashir, changes her racialized state as well. In doing so, she actualizes her mixed-race self and performs a reclamation of her Middle Eastern Asian parentage as understood in the American political system.

These mixed-race bodies threaten the neatly, racially organized social structure. Rhiannon's attempt to embrace mixedness becomes a stark contrast from the uncompromising persistence of monoraciality in the American status quo. And yet, Rhiannon's tenacity also becomes her downfall. While restrained, she suffers an asthma attack. Unable to access the handcuff key, she fails to grasp her inhaler and succumbs. Her suffocation metaphorically illustrates the consequences of attempting to claim another racial identity. In Cowhig's narrative, the woman in search of the truth dies, which signifies, for Cowhig, punishment for those who resist surveillance and containment. Like the serial killer in Chen's *Mutt*, the dominant hegemony thwarts Rhiannon's attempt to transgress a racial system that enjoins her to forget and "get over it."<sup>76</sup> After Rhiannon's death, Bashir receives

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<sup>75</sup> Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, *Lidless* (New York: Methuen Drama, 2011): 13.

<sup>76</sup> Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black*

her liver and, in this process, a part of her lives on in a racialized body. Her mixed self has now disappeared. Rhiannon then "vanishes" into a new monoracial category, a process facilitated by the rule of hypodescent.

In *Mutt*, political progressive Quinn Hernandez reminds Nick and Hanna that the "system of racial categorization that is actually a tool of social dominance based on false science."<sup>77</sup> She innervates their newfound racial platform by asserting that "We're all mixed-race stews."<sup>78</sup> In Christopher Chen's *Mutt* and Frances Cowhig's *Lidless*, we see how the fluidity of mixed-race identity becomes buried under polarizing monoracial cultural logic. The mixed-race characters of *Lidless* and *Mutt* are subsumed by whiteness whether by disappearing into monoracial categories or by upholding the hegemonic ideals of white assimilation and universality. The dramas also illustrate and critique the ways that mixed-race subjectivity becomes appropriated to further the transcendent rhetoric of colorblindness. Cultural amnesia follows, erasing the histories of ethnic multiplicity and intermixing in American society. Through Chen and Cowhig's theatrical narratives, we see how performances of racial transgression seek to reclaim dramatic narratives from the racialized project of transcendence. Their ruptures with established racial norms and categories illuminate how theater can carve out new spaces for the representation of mixed-race subjectivity in the new millennium.

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*Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011): 21.

<sup>77</sup> Christopher Chen, "Mutt" (unpublished manuscript, December 8, 2015), Portable Document Format file. 67.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

## Chapter 5

### Beyond Monoracial Hierarchies: Performing Double Liminality and Recovering Lost

#### Selves

“We greet you as liberators . . . This “we” is that us in the margins, . . . I am speaking from a place in the margins where I am different—where I see things differently.”

bell hooks<sup>1</sup>

"I am mixed blood, it is true, but I differ from the party line in that I consider it neither an honor nor a shame."

Zora Neale Hurston<sup>2</sup>

Might we reshape our current monochromatic racial vision into a more complex and radical understanding of a generational hybridity? In the first epigraph above, bell hooks asserts that those who live life in the margins can free society from the bonds of the extant racial codes that normalize separatism. In my application, the ability for mixed-race persons to simultaneously occupy and integrate multiple racial constructions shows us that race is not a biologically-determined state, nor is it a sound and accurate marker through which to *cast* people. On the contrary, dominant racial constructs falsely produce diacritical bodies for the purpose of easy organization and the preservation of white hegemonic control. As sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant remind us, race is not fixed nor stable, but the

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, “marginality as site of resistance,” *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Min-ha, and Cornell West (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990): 343.

<sup>2</sup> Hurston, Zora Neale, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996): 243.

“racial state inhabits us, so to speak; it is within our minds, our psyches, our hearts.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the construction that determines difference vis-à-vis race is not real nor static, but the system of classification that enforces the use of racial semiotics doggedly persists. Its existence lies within social inscription and the compliance of the body politic.

This dissertation has examined the discursive practices that contribute to the formation of a doubly-liminal mixed-race identity within this racialized system. Multiracial subjects encounter a white hegemonic discourse that identifies them solely as people of color rather than as an amalgamation of various ethnic backgrounds. Conversely, the subdominant discourse (in this case, the Asian community) may deny the mixed-race subject full group membership because of a mixed heritage, thus barring them from the very designations assigned to them by the dominant. Harvey Young refers to these cultural assumptions about the body as social *habiti*. These are external social expectations that become internalized and incorporated into the subject’s identity. *Habiti* instruct the racialized body how to behave.<sup>4</sup> Young, however, applies this process exclusively to monoracial identities.

Extending Young’s observations, I have applied this process of identity construction to the mixed-race experience and have suggested that multiple *habiti* leave the multiethnic person at the limen of several different groups. This learned separation includes being set apart from other mixed-race persons who may not share the same cultural nor ethnic backgrounds. But I suggest that another complex process is also at work. The act of shape

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014). 13.

<sup>4</sup> Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010): 20.

shifting serves mixed-race people with a tactic for managing the confines of the dominant culture (and its current racial scaffolding) and the subdominant discourse where mainstream racial codes may be internally inscribed. As mentioned in chapter four, these shape shifting acts are racially transgressive performative moments that expose society's problematic reliance on racial phenotypes as a means to classify individuals. The performances of mixed-race subjects in daily life and the representation of these experiences in theater evince the fallacy of race as a viable social marker and subvert the power of the racial hierarchy.

Thus far, I have traced the doubly-liminal subject and the act of shape shifting represented in theater from the Progressive Era in the late nineteenth century to the present. This inquiry has attempted to illuminate the world in which each play was crafted and to conjecture on the interventions that these dramas may have made in the historical period in which they were situated. Specifically, I began with the depiction of mixed-race Asian Americans in 1890 and arrived crucially at the plays by Amerasian playwrights in the first eighteen years of the new millennium. In the mid-century, I followed Omi and Winant and considered the political shift from racial domination to racial hegemonic control after World War II and beyond the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s.<sup>5</sup> In this historical moment, Omi and Winant have astutely observed that right-wing counter movements reframed “the emancipatory politics of the Black movement” and ultimately transformed them into a desirable erasure of race vis-à-vis colorblindness.<sup>6</sup> Mixed-race individuals have then been co-opted as the “poster children” for a post-racial era that will be bathed in a racial

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014). 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

transcendence. This designation of multiracial people as the “Faces of the Future” problematically fails to recognize the histories of oppression and violence that have been imposed on racialized communities.

Performance scholar Antonia N. Glenn has astutely identified the tragic Eurasian and Face of the Future imaginary as the mixed-race Asian tropes that have bookended the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> These tropes together construct an invisible/visible binary to which mixed-race persons inevitably find themselves assigned, effectively erasing their subjectivity in contemporary representations. Popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century depicted the mixed-race figure as pathological, biologically impure, weak, and often monstrous. In these portrayals, the tragic Eurasian is physically and emotionally incapable of productively functioning in society and, unworthy of recognition; any actual mixed person is rendered invisible.

By contrast, the Face of the Future imaginary curiously elevated the mixed-race figure to that of a visible racial savior. The trope was popularized with the appearance of the 1993 *Time* magazine cover “The New Face of America,” which featured the face of a woman who was supposedly a mix of several racial backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> In the Face of the Future imaginary, mixed-race persons, who are prized as physically novel or exotic, are asked to shoulder the burden of alleviating racial tension and to serve as a salve to heal the wounds of racial violence. In political rhetoric and public discourse, the mixed-race Face of the Future

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<sup>7</sup> Antonia N. Glenn, “Racing and E-Racing the Stage: the Politics of Mixed Race Performance” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2004): 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ted Thai, “The New Face of America,” *Time Magazine*, November 1993.

transforms into a visible beacon that will illuminate the way to an enlightened, post-racial future, where a beige or gray mixed-race population will render society colorblind. Yet these portrayals of multiethnic people as aesthetically appealing are often, as Maria P.P. Root observes, “used as tools to reduce discomfort” couched “in guise of something special or positive being offered.”<sup>9</sup> Although these depictions may appear to be positive, they nonetheless illuminate the social distance typically assigned to mixed-race people who are have been othered in society. Thus, the Face of the Future imaginary cannot help but to acknowledge the marginalization endured by the mixed-race subject.

Likewise, the Face of the Future imaginary is always suspended in time. This delay is a crucial element in the futuristic trope. The attractive glimpse of a “beige” (read: “colorless” and by extension, white) future offered in the present, vis-à-vis the mixed-race subject, attempts to reduce the multiethnic subject’s racial strife and frame it as temporary. Under the paradigm supported by this trope, the much-desired post-racial society never arrives. The Face of the Future imaginary inevitably exists as an extension of invisibility deployed by white hegemony to erase the racial tension of the present. As seen in chapter four, playwrights like Christopher Chen and Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig subvert the Face of the Future in their plays by exposing the hegemonic, monoracial universality embedded within the construct. Will the next generation of Amerasian playwrights continue to resist the Face of the Future? Can the new millennium cultivate and encourage other paradigmatic possibilities, like shape shifting, that will resist the invisible/visible binary?

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<sup>9</sup> Maria P.P. Root, “The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as a Significant Frontier in Race Relations,” *Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996): 8-9

The case studies in the previous chapters have also demonstrated the limitations of hypodescent. The normalized process of racial and social assignment forces individuals to abandon entire family histories through disassociation from one parentage. Through this process, the dominant culture can control groups of color by collapsing mixedness into a monoracial framework. Hapa subjects must deny family histories that linger and swirl around them like ghosts, until, eventually, through lack of recognition and acknowledgment, they fade away. Multiethnic individuals become monoracialized then and solely identify with one monoracial group. As playwright Christopher Chen persistently reminds us in *Mutt* (2014), this process begets a cultural amnesia that is transferred to subsequent generations. That this erasure has taken place is undeniable. Where then are the mixed-race populations of previous generations? Where, for instance, are the children of the “seventy or so” interracial Chinese-Irish unions from New York City’s Chinatown in 1882?<sup>10</sup> Have they been, like Anna Leonowens and her children, absorbed by the racial framework and lost to a monoracial system? Has the racial hierarchy also made many of us and our histories invisible, even to ourselves? Are all of our bodies potentially racially transgressive through an unknown, invisible mixed-race heritage? Perhaps when the current racial paradigm acknowledges the existence of doubly-liminal space, our ways of seeing will cease to be mono-visual.

Theater has been historically complicit in this process of erasure. Yet, at times, theater has also offered up its space and its practices as a hopeful sanctuary. While it has succumbed to the system in which it lives, it also remains at its core, a nebulous, open space, full of possibility. As performance theorist Anurima Banerji reminds us, it is in performance

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<sup>10</sup> Robert G. Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999): 75.

that these alternative possibilities come into being.<sup>11</sup> Theater has the opportunity and the ability to hasten a new way of seeing and to continue to explore narratives about the mixed-race experience as rendered through the consciousness of hapa playwrights. Theater can expose audiences to the mixed-race experience and encourage visibility and representation of the mixed-race subject.

The theater makers in these case studies have ignited the stage in a way that has changed subsequent mixed-race performances. In the 1986 Asian American Theatre Company's production of *Thirst*, Velina Hasu Houston constructed a racially transgressive play that empowered the theater and future playwrights to carve out a new space for multiracial representation. In one particular moment in the production, actress Nadja Kennedy (as Plinka) coolly declares her doubly-liminal position to Michael O'Brien's Joseph. Plinka states "I like being Japanese and I like being white."<sup>12</sup> She easily negates Joseph's claim that her whiteness is a burden to her. Rather, Plinka defiantly proclaims her right and her ability to embrace both cultural and ethnic backgrounds simultaneously. While the monoracial hierarchy may be real, through Plinka, Houston asserts that mixed-race hapa subjects are also legitimate and not a tragic subject nor a prophecy for the future, but real now.<sup>13</sup> This small moment of transgression in theater in the face of a white masculine hegemonic subjectivity paved the way for other mixed-race Asian artists to tell their own

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<sup>11</sup> Anurima Banerji, "Paratopias of Performance: The Choreographic Practices of Chandralekha." *Planes of Composition: Dance, Theory, and the Global*, eds. André Lepecki & Jenn Joy (Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 2009): 354.

<sup>12</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Thirst" (unpublished manuscript, February 1, 1990): 25.

<sup>13</sup> Velina Hasu Houston, "Notes from a Cosmopolite," *The Color of Theater: Race, Culture, and Contemporary Performance*, eds. Roberta Uno and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns (New York: Continuum, 2002): 84.

stories through similar “cosmopolite” sensibilities.<sup>14</sup> Houston became an early voice in the mixed-race movement that vitally emerged to its full force in the following decade. This transgressive yet hopeful moment opened up and claimed new space in Asian American theater.

Future productions point to inquiries of research about audience reception of mixed-race and can provide another robust locus of analysis. My fourth chapter features an interview with Dan Smith, one of the mixed-race Amerasian actors from the 2016 Chicago cast of *Mutt*. In the interview, Smith affirmed that, in his personal life, he often refuses to disclose his ethnic background to the uninitiated observer.<sup>15</sup> His refusal to participate in the social performance of his racialized body by “going off script,” that is, not saying the lines expected of him (“I am x, y, and z”) opens up a site for a critical hermeneutic. His nebulous, phenotypic characteristics then move and shape shift, easily bending under a monoracial perception and reading. Exchanges such as these reveal a dependence on the racial hierarchy to maintain order, and Smith’s refusal to participate in the process of racialization exposes the porous boundaries that exist between racial categories. Can playwrights actively illuminate this slippage for their audiences?

My proposed extensions of *habiti* and racially transgressive performance to encompass the mixed-Asian experience moves the terms away from restrictive monoracial applications. In turn, I have examined the process of shape shifting in theatrical performance as a powerful way that mixed-race persons have freed themselves from monoracial

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-89.

<sup>15</sup> Dan Smith, (actor) in discussion with the author, January 2016.

designations, thus allowing them to perform their double liminality. Can playwrights, therefore, take a more active role in dramatizing the shape shifting process on stage through new narratives? Can theater makers actively and ethnically seek out and cast mixed-race actors in these roles? I suggest that future research expand to determine the use of mixed-race-conscious casting practices. This research could also examine the efficacy of dramatizing the shape shifting process on stage and deduce if the visibility of the ambiguous, non-identifiable mixed-race performer onstage will continue to *recast* the audience's perceptions of mixedness and race.

In the new millennium, mixed-Asian theater has seen the emergence of multiracial voices like Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, Christopher Chen, and newcomer Japanese American hapa playwright Leah Nanako Winkler. In their work, these artists have begun to talk back to the social status quo by challenging the racial and legal structures persistently in place. They push beyond an articulation of what it means to be mixed-race and instead investigate the reasons that these ideologies fall short in the first place. Their theater clarifies the human condition under these regimes of control.

In light of all this, how will mixed-race playwrights continue to address and interrogate the shifting racial landscape of the twenty-first century? How will they persist in developing and expanding representation in theater as the political and social climates continue to evolve as they did at the end of the first millennium? What new challenges await these dramatists? What issues will they feel compelled to address? Will more burgeoning mixed-race playwrights emerge and transform the current canon of mixed-race plays?

The current American theater landscape has perhaps begun to finally open its generative space to the mixed-race Asian experience, its representations, and its artists. My dissertation began with a memory of the 2011 National Asian American Theatre Conference and Festival and a theater community of color still grappling with an ambivalent acceptance towards the mixed-race Asian artists in their midst. Yet I conclude this dissertation in a new terrain in which the 2017 Obie award-winner in Playwriting, Christopher Chen, and the 2018 Yale Drama Series Prize winner, Leah Nanako Winkler, are both mixed-race playwrights of Asian descent. Each of these dramatists writes with bifurcated insight as they critically examine racial dynamics in America.<sup>16</sup> Their plays reach into political and domestic spheres and question archaic Jim Crow and Coolie-era racial constructs in a new millennium. Currently, Winkler has risen to the national spotlight. Besides winning the 2018 Yale Drama Series Prize for her play *God Said This* (2018),<sup>17</sup> Winkler's play *Kentucky* (2016), about a mixed-race Asian family in the American South, received a world premiere at East West Players (EWP) in Los Angeles. Her new play about race and whiteness, *Two Mile Hollow* (2017), will see a 2018 "rolling" world premiere at Artists at Play in Los Angeles, Mu Performing Arts and Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis, Ferocious Lotus Theatre Company in San Francisco, and First Floor Theater in Chicago.<sup>18</sup> Winkler's emergence in the

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher Chen won the Obie award for Playwriting, along with playwright Lynn Nottage, in 2017.

<sup>17</sup> "Leah Nanako Winkler Wins 2018 Yale Drama Series Prize," *American Theatre*, March 29, 2018, <<https://www.americantheatre.org/2018/03/29/leah-nanako-winkler-wins-2018-yale-drama-series-prize/>>. Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig won the prize for *Lidless* in 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Basil Considine, "Interview: Leah Nanako Winkler on Parodying Stage Whiteness, the Kilroys, and More," *Twin Cities Arts Reader*, 11 December 2017, <https://twincitiesarts.com/2017/12/11/interview-leah-nanako-winkler-two-mile-horror/>.

mixed-race Asian American theater canon hopefully points to a new generation of Amerasian playwrights who continue to push the boundaries of race in America.

The new artistic leadership at East West Players also seems to be engaged in this new national conversation about mixed-Asian representation. Tim Dang's successor as the new Artistic Director of East West Players,<sup>19</sup> Snehal Desai, proudly asserted his desire to "produce the [hapa] canon" at the theater's reading of Chen's play *Mutt* in November of 2016.<sup>20</sup> His shift in the theater's focus and vision at the site of the 2011 National Asian American Theatre Conference and Festival only seven years before, seems like a promising step toward the embrace of mixed-race Asian subjects in theater. What new hopeful moments then will these new plays and their playwrights and performers spark in the potential for a radically redemptive moment in the new millennium? Future ethnographic studies of these productions at EWP and of productions of new plays by Leah Nanako Winkler, including in-depth audience surveys and analysis, will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which playgoers view the mixed-race Asian subject and will measure how theater continues to nurture in racially transgressive performances and social change.

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<sup>19</sup> Tim Dang served as the artistic director of East West Players from 1993-2016.

<sup>20</sup> Snehal Desai (in discussion with the author), November 2016.

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