David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*: The Eye on the Wing

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Safely ensconced in a feminist identity, like a dog-tag of otherness on the battlelines of sexual difference, I attended in 1988 the New York production of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. Expecting an indictment of male exploitation, I anticipated pleasure in viewing not only this vehicle of validation but also the discomfort of my male companions before it; such self-confirming pleasure, however, gave way to a still-haunting response. Since reviews and the text itself should have excised any shock value from the climactic transformation of the Butterfly figure into a man, my gasp betrayed a complicity in representation which after-theatre conversation only confirmed. The males' admiration of B. D. Wong's body forced admission that I had hardly noticed his nakedness, a testimonial, unfortunately, not to a non-erotic gaze but to my own objectifying one. From a defiant female position of object-oppressed, I nonetheless had pleaded guilty to the Asian's onstage indictment of Western men: "And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man" (62).

This destabilization of my own gaze personalized the juncture of theory and theatre, prompting conviction that the recent intersection of feminism and postmodernism signifies more than an academic stance. *M. Butterfly* obviously begs for a feminist reading; yet an Anglo-American feminism grounded in sexual difference as paradigmatic opposition falters before this play. Since it marks my own epistemological shift[1] and since Hwang criticism thus far seems to reflect that previous perspective, I hope to provide convincing argument that *M. Butterfly* represents not only cultural and gender binaries but also the

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representation, or the production, of those binaries. The play thus extends audience complicity from the Broadway theatre to the theatre of Western culture. A recognition of *M. Butterfly* as metatheatrical, metapsychological, metalinguistic, and, finally—if I can forgive even myself the term—meta-metaphysical locates the play's meaning not onstage, where critics have dwelled, but in that "field of perception" (Blau "Hysteria" 12) between play and spectator, that force-field whereon my own compass needles went haywire.

Resisting such dislocation, Robert Skloot formulates either/or choices for interpreting the play's "thematic (but not moral) ambiguity" (64). Although he notes the play's subversion of binary oppositions, Skloot writes of Hwang's "ultimate intention of pondering the possibilities of their reconciliation" (60). This notion of oneness through the union of opposites, the "androgynous fulfillment" (61) of the final suicide, which achieves "Gallimard's transformation into his cultural (and gender) opposite" (60), actually reinscribes the binary logic which *M. Butterfly* indicts. Skloot's often perceptive discussion of the play's cultural, gender, and theatrical politics seems bound by the same limitations as liberal feminism or misconstrued post-structuralism:[2] inversions without displacements of binaries. Though he sees the play as Hwang's "version of 'metadiscursive reflectiveness'" (59) which forces audience complicity, Skloot evades the problems of language, subjectivity, and spectatorship, subsuming audience perception under a presumably unitary "we." His elision of the metatheatrical element as by now too "old-fashioned" to contain much surprise or risk (64) and his occlusion of "postmodern parlance" (62) lead Skloot to the refuge of authorial intentionality as meaning; citing Hwang, he concludes: ". . . I believe that *M. Butterfly* achieves its political objective 'to fight the religion of the present in America' by trying 'to link imperialism, racism and sexism [in] a certain historical perspective'" (64). Yet, if the play fights only in representing and historicizing the present, which inevitably is to produce as well as to reproduce it, then its politics smack of the facile.

Thus Skloot's reading of the play as the transposition of oppositional paradigms cannot deflect such attacks as Gabrielle Cody's "David Hwang's *M. Butterfly*: Perpetuating the Misogynist Myth" or James Moy's "David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Phillip Kan Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die*: Repositioning Chinese Marginality on the American Stage." Pointing out that the rape mentality of imperialism is hardly a new idea, Cody finds Hwang's "effortless brand of liberalism" (24) hypocritical and the "seductive theatricality" disguising the "real play underneath": "rather than examine the cultural and political circumstances that determine gendered behavior and make it easier to believe in than to challenge, [Hwang] concludes that male and female

cannot be reconciled in one person" (27). Hence, the theatricalism that Skloot dismisses Cody targets as camouflage for Hwang's "rejection of human complexity in his characters" (27) and as intoxication of the audience.

Moy, conversely, faults Hwang for an over-determination of human complexity: "As racial and sexual confusion both dominate one character, Song Liling functions as a vehicle of massive self-doubt" (54). Thus the representation's "clear [verbal] indictment of the cultural hegemony of the West" (55) is subverted theatrically by "another disfigured stereotype" who fails to provide "a new, hoped-for vision of Chinese or Asian identity" (54). Disturbed that this representational rupture may signal an intentional capitulation to an Anglo-American marketplace, Moy dismisses Hwang's "anamorphic intersection of race and gender" (54) as defusing the issue of racial/sexual identity, which presumably can only be raised through a unified presence who signifies "an assimilation . . . into the American mainstream" (55). For its failure to present a consolidation and validation of identity, Moy, like Cody, denies the play the political progressiveness which Skloot descries.

In their emphasis on reconciliation, however, these critics share a common ground in insistent binarism and in the location of meaning (or lack thereof) solely in the text; such readings, positing a fixed subject/object relation to the play as well as a standard of unitary subjectivity, reproduce the very terms which *M. Butterfly* deconstructs. Further, it is through its maligned theatricalism that this "deconstructivist *Madama Butterfly*" (Hwang, Author's Notes 86) encourages political/cultural transformation and perhaps inadvertently achieves the political objective Skloot via Hwang specifies. Foregrounding its "iterability" (Derrida's "quasi-concept" of the structural possibility of repetition and alteration which I see permeating the play's structure),[3] I cite Hwang's intent again: "to fight the religion of the present in America by trying to link imperialism, racism and sexism [in] a certain historical perspective." Conceding to Cody that representation reproduces rather than fights, I shall focus on *M. Butterfly*'s structure, reading "present in America" spatially as well as temporally. A challenge to the western metaphysics of presence, *M. Butterfly* not only represents "a certain historical perspective" but presents history as perspective, a theatre produced by and for the gaze. Extrinsically, the play foregrounds history as a field of fiction since Hwang based it on a two-paragraph *New York Times* story about Bernard Bouriscot. A French diplomat, Bouriscot was imprisoned in 1986 for passing information to his lover, Mr. Shi, a Chinese opera singer whom for twenty years Bouriscot mistook for a woman. Not wanting "the 'truth' to interfere with my own speculations" (Author's Notes 85), Hwang deliberately eschewed further research. Such emphasis on speculation—the specular eye/I which

problematizes "truth"—pervades the play as the gaze continually intrudes on its "reality."

I find encouragement for my argument in Hwang's own resistance to binary readings and his insistence on the defining dangers of the gaze:

> *M. Butterfly* has sometimes been regarded as an anti-American play, a diatribe against the stereotyping of the East by the West, of women by men. Quite to the contrary, I consider it a plea to all sides to cut through our respective layers of cultural and sexual misperception. . . . (Afterward 100)

Hwang's emphasis on perception—like the foregrounding of language and humor—suggests parallels with Beckett, which make relevant Herbert Blau's comments on Beckett's dramaturgy: "It is this exercise of perception in the deconstruction of appearances which is the subject of expanding consciousness in the most abbreviated of Beckett's plays, which have always been about consciousness" ("Bloody Show" 14). Like Beckett, Hwang dramatizes "contortions to achieve self-presence in the living present" (15) as the play's narrative takes the form of Rene Gallimard's autobiographical narrative, itself a contortion to reconstruct a past contortion, a trope for specularity.

As Gallimard turns upstage to gaze upon Song and sigh "Butterfly, Butterfly . . . ," the play's opening situates him as a secondary spectator, a point of identification for the audience gaze. Yet immediately he disrupts the subject/present/presence illusion of realistic theatre by directly confronting the spectators with their own imprisonment in the illusion of a fixed position: "The limits of my cell are as such" (7). Hwang's stage directions—"*With a flourish, Gallimard directs our attention*" (8) to the subsequent scene of a Parisian party, where he is mockingly toasted ("Vive la différence" [9])—foreground Gallimard's life story as "always already" constructed much as Hwang has constructed Bouriscot's history. Gallimard directly forewarns the audience that the illusion of unmediated subjectivity constitutes performance and that the specular eye/I confuses theatre with history, history with truth, autobiography with the life:

> Alone in this cell, I sit night after night, watching our story play through my head, always searching for a new ending, one which redeems my honor, where she returns at last to my arms. And I imagine you—my ideal audience—who come to understand and even, perhaps just a little, to envy me. (9-10)

Of course, only the shared desire for an unequivocal gaze could sustain such identification and equate Gallimard's theatre with Hwang's. That the play's critics seem to do so testifies to the tenacity of such a gaze, a tenacity in character *and* in spectator which constitutes the play's tragic focus. As Gallimard turns on his tape recorder to produce the opening strains of "Madame Butterfly" over the house speakers, the theatre emerges as a cell of perception and culture as such a theatre.

Framing the representation of his own life with Puccini's representation, Gallimard directs and performs his version of *Madame Butterfly*, the parodic tone of which foreshadows the parallel parody of his "remembrance of things past." Gallimard's Brechtian double-casting and reversal of type (himself as Pinkerton, his friend Marc as Sharpless, Song as Butterfly, and Chin as Suzuki) foregrounds the performance aspect of his own text. Further, the ironic intercutting (significant that film terms so readily come to mind) of Gallimard's impotent gazing at the pin-up girl, materialized from his girlie magazines, underscores not only the self-avowed irony of his role as Pinkerton, but the inadvertent irony of his narration. Though the voyeuristic male gaze may wield power, it delivers its eye/I to prison, not potency. In narrating his life into history and himself into death, Gallimard recreates the song he had created in Song, turning his voyeuristic gaze onto himself as object. Though Skloot notes the affinity of sexual and theatrical voyeur in the triumph of imagination over reality (64), Hwang's presentation continually subverts the "reality" of the representation, undermining such polarization. Skloot's "reality," of course, is that Song is a man, but the play problematizes the term in its structural, paradigmatic, oppositional definition: male = West = subject = perceiver = power. To desire, like Gallimard, union with a female without or, like the spectator/critic, union of opposites within is to posit meaning in sexual difference as opposition, not difference.

Gallimard's recreation of 1904 Puccini dissolves to his memory of Song's recreation of Butterfly's death scene for Western diplomats in 1960 Beijing. By the time Song steps from this stage onto that of Gallimard's 1988 narration, Hwang has dramatized a play within a play within a play within a play. Such layers of [mis]perception continually displace the theatre of binaries—presence versus absence, reality versus illusion, perceiver versus perceived, subject versus object, male versus female—as an Italian recreation of a Japanese woman is recreated by a Chinese man recreated by a French man recreated by an Asian/American man. This "play" within the play dismantles the spectator's unitary gaze as Gallimard, through metaleptic plotting of the failure of fixed identity, attempts to perform another into existence. His play, not Hwang's, takes place on the Oedipal stage, site of the legacy of binarism in the form of

unequivocally gendered subjectivity, which, for a male, requires definition against (M)Other. Gallimard's self-psychoanalysis emerges as comic theatre when, for example, Marc, playing a bureaucrat in the 1960 Beijing embassy, speaks in his own voice to reveal that he had scripted the sexual initiation of the effeminate adolescent Gallimard. In recalling in this imagined dialogue that "I was worried about my legs falling off" (29), Gallimard diagnoses his sadistic attraction to Song as a desperate attempt to preserve his legs or finalize the prescribed Oedipal resolution of male subjectivity through castration anxiety, a scenario perpetually played on the (M)Other's body.[4]

Thus not only Song's profession as actor, but his own Oedipal act enabled Gallimard to suppress sexual confusion through binary scripting. Though Song initially attacks the Western fantasy of "the submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man" (18) and the conflation of Chinese and Japanese ("The Japanese used hundreds of our people for medical experiments during the war, you know" [18]), Gallimard subsumes this political subversiveness with polarization: "It is the Oriental in her at war with her Western education" (25). Since binaries are inevitably hierarchical,[5] Gallimard fixes his gaze—and the audience's—on the "Oriental" (a term which, Hwang points out, "denote[s] an exotic or imperialistic view of the East" [Author's Notes 85]) as emblem of the female scar of inferiority[6] to privilege his pole (couldn't resist): "*To us*" he boasts, "Did you hear the way she talked about Western women? Much differently than the first night. She does—she feels inferior to them—and to me" (28). Having failed to convert a Western woman into a man-metaphor as directed by Marc, his projected super-ego, Gallimard successfully performs prescribed male subjectivity only when racial and cultural otherness bolster sexual superiority. Enforcing absence on Song for seven weeks, his psyche (and her letters "of shame") creates a paradigmatic Other—a Butterfly—who will presumably establish him firmly as neither "a eunuch or a homosexual" (30), obliterating adolescent insecurity and marital sterility. When this power play results not in punishment but in a promotion to Vice-Consul, the Gallimard of 1960 exulted in masculinist power: "God who creates Eve to serve Adam, who blesses Solomon with his harem but ties Jezebel to a burning bed—that God is a man. And he understands! At age thirty-nine, I was suddenly initiated into the way of the world" (32).

The Gallimard of 1988, perceptually and physically imprisoned by his reification of the Freudian scenario, still clings to its narrative of fixed subjectivity. Resisting another perspective in his projected script, Gallimard fights the entrance of Comrade Chin, Song's director as Marc was his, but is chided by Song: "Now, don't embarrass yourself" (38). After a parodic scene in which the 1960 Song receives directions from the Party, the 1988 Song

patronizingly permits Gallimard, once Chin has gone, to "Please continue in your own fashion"(39). Such intrusions into Gallimard's remembrance increasingly betray its narrative of psychological causality as a representation. In claiming that Hwang reduces Gallimard's sexual ambiguity to a "safe dramatic icon" (25), Cody overlooks the fact that the psychological text, wherein sexual confusion is attributable to failed object relations, is Gallimard's, not Hwang's. Likewise, "Hwang's attraction to caricature over characterization" (Cody 25-6) is actually the disillusioned Gallimard's mocking, yet yearning for, his past narcissistic identity confirmed by otherness. Rather than resulting in a "perverse cancellation of thought" (Cody 26), the tone of caricature brings Hwang close once again to Beckett, who, as Blau notes, shared Proust's view of voluntary memory providing an image "as far removed from the real as . . . the caricature furnished by direct perception" ("Bloody Show" 13). I here venture a reminder that the name of Proust's publisher was Gallimard as a further cautionary signal against viewing the play as mimesis.

As Gallimard replays the psychoanalytic scripts of his history, Hwang plays the script of psychoanalysis as the history of the *production* of sexual difference as oppositional, gendered, and hierarchical rather than multiple, shifting, and heterogeneous. In a psycho/cultural system where difference constitutes meaning, there is nothing safe about ambiguous sexuality since vacillation of gender presupposes vacillation of subjectivity. Thus Rene Gallimard retreats from his "extra-extramarital affair" (43) with Renee, the Danish language student with a French name, because the difference in a silent *e* proves insufficient. Without the superiority of race, culture, and class to fortify that of gender, Gallimard's voyeuristic gaze falters: "Renee was picture perfect. With a body like those girls in the magazines . . . . And it was exciting to be with someone who wasn't afraid to be seen completely naked. But is it possible for a woman to be *too* uninhibited, *too* willing, so as to seem almost too . . . masculine?"[7] (43). Refusing to play absence to his presence, mediator to his desire, silence to his speech, lack to his phallus, Renee undermines the scopic reassurance of anatomical difference; her contemporary feminist assertiveness—sexual and linguistic—disrupts not only the Freudian biological but the Lacanian symbolic Oedipal scenario. On the problem of the penis, Renee declares:

> But, like, it just hangs there. This little . . . flap of flesh. And there's so much fuss that we make about it. Like, I think the reason we fight wars is because we wear clothes. Because no one knows—between the men, I mean—who has the biggest . . . weenie . . . . But, see, it never really works, that's the problem. I

> mean, you conquer the country, or whatever, but you're still wearing clothes, so there's no way to prove absolutely whose is bigger or smaller. And that's what we call a civilized society. (44)

Gallimard pronounces "not acceptable" (44) this mockery of the Lacanian phallus as universal signifier within the symbolic order, admitting that his potency with Renee sprang only from Butterfly's tears and silence. His determined perpetuation of the phallogocentric system, however, proves self-victimizing. Informed that his proposed script for the Vietnam theatre will be performed, "That the U. S. will allow the Vietnamese generals to stage a coup . . . and assassinate President Diem" (45, ellipsis original), Gallimard is also advised that he will be the scapegoat in the case of a bad finale. Attempting to reassert voyeuristic/linguistic dominance by demanding that Butterfly strip, Gallimard, revolted by the image of Pinkerton, relents and kneels before "her." Yet, though he recalls that "love" triumphed over the male Western oppressor in him, Gallimard merely shifted from the voyeuristic to the fetishistic aspect of his self-conscious male gaze, over-valuing rather than devaluing woman to validate gendered identity.[8]

Still exalting this "love" as the reconciliation of opposites, the 1988 Gallimard scripts himself from this point in his text as a victim, projecting Song as director of his downfall. Still kneeling, he watches an intercut of Song's report to Comrade Chin, who warns "You're just gonna end up with rough notes" (48). Answering her own question as to why female Peking opera roles are played by men, Song boasts: "Because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" (49). Even this disillusionment projected into the past does not dissuade the Gallimard of the present from the lure of idealization and representation:

> *Gallimard.* . . . I could forget all that betrayal in an instant, you know. If you'd just come back and become Butterfly again.
> *Song.* Fat chance. You're here in prison, rotting in a cell. And I'm on a plane, winging my way back to China. Your President pardoned me of our treason, you know.
> *Gallimard.* Yes, I read about that.
> *Song.* Must make you feel . . . lower than shit.
> *Gallimard.* But don't you, even a little bit, wish you were here with me?
> *Song.* I'm an artist, Rene. You were my greatest . . . acting challenge. (*She laughs.*) It doesn't matter how rotten I answer, does it? You still adore me. That's why I love you, Rene. (*She*

points to us). So—you were telling your audience about the night I announced I was pregnant. (49, ellipses original)

The metatheatrical, metapsychological, and metalinguistic conjoin here, as they do throughout the play, to dramatize consciousness as perception. Embodying the castration anxiety on which both the Freudian and Lacanian Oedipal constructs are based, Gallimard, notwithstanding his turning the gaze on himself, clings tenaciously to binary positionality as phallus/tongue in the past and in his narrative of that past. In part, his misrecognition of Song's sex is attributable to linguistic reassurance of self-presence through oppositional absence: "But mostly we would talk. About my life. Perhaps there is nothing more rare than to find a woman who passionately listens" (40). Back in Paris in 1970 after being demoted, Gallimard is primed for acquiescence in Song's spy mission through his yearning for linguistic more than sexual power: "This is the ultimate cruelty, isn't it? That I can talk and talk and to anyone listening, it's only air" (58). Constituted in language, the characters as actors as characters employ words as weapons for self-presence, hoping to perform an identity into existence. Thus Hwang foregrounds the materiality of language and deconstructs the ideality of the *logos* in both the Broadway and the cultural theatre.

Finding the "butting up of unlikes . . . inherently theatrical" (Interview 148), Hwang states that he "made a very conscious choice to be American and use a lot of American slang" (152). This disjointedness is nowhere more off-putting than in the scene where Song is denounced by Comrade Chin, whose slang, like the upstage dancers' agit-prop mimicry of revolutionary violence and lampoon of the Chinese Opera, renders parodic the Cultural Revolution (as did Tiananmen Square the following year[9]): "Serve the Revolution? Bullshit! . . . Yeah, I knew what was going on! You two . . . homos! Homos! Homos!" (55). Such theatricalism in staging and language further deconstructs the binaries of the play's representation as the East—already divided racially into Japan, China, Vietnam—is divided also by gender and class. Hwang regards Chin's talking "like the crassest person on television" (Interview 148) as a paradoxically realistic reflection of her class in the Chinese social structure. Moreover, Chairman Mao, like the Western male God that Gallimard perceived, oversees another patriarchal system of prescribed exclusionary norms. In a 1970 commune, Chin, a masculinized woman, has license to denigrate Song, a feminized man: "Because what does the Chairman say? He tells us *I'm* now the smart one, you're now the nincompoop! . . . Then *you* go to France and be a pervert for Chairman Mao!" (55). *M. Butterfly* dismantles not only the opposition of East and West by insistence on internal division but

also the transparency of language by repeated confrontation with its artifice. Gallimard and his audience must increasingly part ways, a severance of that identification requisite for the male gaze which is signalled by Gallimard's nostalgia for such retrospectively ironic comments as Song's "I don't know how to become another woman" (46).

Hwang deconstructs the theatre of psychological/linguistic/theatrical illusion most dramatically in "undramatizing" the play's climax. Between Acts II and III, Song flaunts his transvestism to the audience, who, unlike Gallimard, generally do not exit despite the invitation to do so:

> *Song.* . . . The change I'm going to make requires about five minutes. So I thought you might want to take this opportunity to stretch your legs, enjoy a drink, or listen to the musicians. I'll be here when you return, right where you left me. (*Song goes to a mirror in front of which is a wash basin of water. She starts to remove her make-up as stagelights go to half and houselights come up.*) (59)

Gallimard's earlier entreaties to Song not to change ("You have to do what I say! I'm conjuring you up in my mind!" [59]) must reflect audience desire; the tenacity of his illusion, theirs. Otherwise, the palpable shock—my own gasp echoed in the house—remains inexplicable given the preparation for the "truth" in Gallimard's autobiographical text.

Cody finds Song's transformation into a man rendered "painfully devoid of meaning": "We applaud the dexterous expertise of the actor rather than the significance of his transformation" (26). Yet the significance lies exactly in the theatricalism; and the meaning, in the space between on and off stage. The spectator prepared by Renee's clothes/culture connection, can perceive in this *gestus* the call to an "other" logic which "can lead us to complicate—distinctly—the logic of binary oppositions and to a *certain use* of the value of distinction attached to it " (Derrida 127). In her deconstruction of the engendering produced by the reading process, Mary Jacobus examines travestism to establish a parallel between words and clothes as constitutive, citing Shoshana Felman:

> if it is clothes alone, i.e., a cultural sign, an institution, which determine masculine and feminine and insure sexual opposition as an orderly, hierarchical polarity; if indeed clothes make the *man*—or the woman—are not sex roles as such, inherently, but travesties?

> Are not sex roles but travesties of the ambiguous complexity of real sexuality, of real sexual difference? (15)

M. Butterfly thwarts the eye/I with recognition of this real sexual difference, this division, which paradoxically subverts the cultural divisiveness of gendered identity. Like the Balzac characters Felman reads, Song and Gallimard (who will assume the transvestism) "'are thus but transvestisms of the other sex's deceptively unequivocal identity; that is, they are travesties of a travesty'" (cited by Jacobus 15). And whereas Balzac's text "'could be viewed . . . as a rhetorical dramatization,'" Hwang's text is an actual dramatization as well as "'a philosophical reflection on the constitutive relationship between transvestism and sexuality'" (Felman cited by Jacobus 15).

It is, then, fitting that the play's climax occurs outside the structure of representation since it is that very structure which Hwang puts into play in Derrida's sense of play as the "structurality of structure" (cited by Blau, "Bloody Show" 11). The "arrogant simplicity" (Cody 26) of Song's gender reversal belies the notion of a literal referent for a core gender identity, which emerges as but a representation. So deep-rooted is binary—ultimately hierarchical, thus misogynist—essentialism that it ironically underscores Cody's attack on Hwang's misogyny. Rather than view the transvestism as a theatricalization of a theatricalization, a travesty of a travesty, Cody objects to Hwang's subversion of the Onnagata/Kabuki (and Shakespearean) tradition of males portraying idealized women, which Hwang regards as "obscene" and "inherently sexist" (Interview 146). Cody overlooks the fact that Butterfly is not the idealized representation of a woman but Gallimard's retrospective representation of an idealized representation of a woman; frighteningly, even women resist, like Gallimard, the deconstruction of the "beauty and delicacy" (Cody 26) of the ideal—the creation of the Other: "But Wong deliberately plays Butterfly as a man-playing-at-being-a-woman, self-consciously endowing her with Gallimard's fantasy of how an Oriental woman should behave—the equivalent in the West, of third-rate transvestism" (Cody 26).

The transvestism is, of course, exactly the point; moreover, Hwang's excess, the "over-Orientalizing" as well as "over-feminizing" of Butterfly, works toward that end which Cody indicts: "Butterfly's culture is now implicated in her inauthenticity and exploited to maintain the male actor's female identity" (26). If this identity is maintained—for Gallimard, for the audience—despite its obvious inauthenticity, then all are exposed as complicit in psycho/sexual/cultural impersonations. Hwang, who finds the East equally "complicit in this dual form of cultural stereotyping" (Interview 141), calls into question a cultural stage on which identity is stabilized only through the

creation—by subject and object—of oppositional otherness, which becomes a self-sustained illusion. *M. Butterfly*, rather than examining the causes of gendered behavior, as Cody demands, presents for deconstruction the very structure of gendered binaries, hence the structure of Western (and now possibly Eastern) metaphysics, which prescribes the "kind of perverse cancellation of thought" (26) of which Cody accuses the play.

Song's transformation into an Armani-(Puccini-) armored man earns him the present/presence speaking pole even in Gallimard's representation. Alone on stage, he displaces Gallimard's narration, recounting for a 1986 Paris courtroom his 1970 arrival in Paris "after four years on a fucking commune in Nowheresville, China" (60). Reduced to "blind groping" by the Party which sent him impoverished to "pollute [with his sexual perversion] the place where pollution begins—the West" (55), Song duped Rene into espionage for fifteen more years. Playing to the courtroom as theatre-double ("Tough Room" [61]), Song boasts of the ease of his role: "Okay, Rule One is: Men always believe what they want to hear." (61), and "Rule Two: As soon as a Western man comes into contact with the East—he's already confused. The West has sort of an international rape mentality towards the East" (62). The desire for unequivocal identity to deflect confusion, full-presence to deflect fear of absence will emerge not only as Gallimard's, but as Song's and the audience's as well.

Assaulted aurally by music from Butterfly's "Death Scene," which "blares" over the house speakers, the spectator is assaulted visually by Gallimard, the erstwhile gaze-point, the universal male signifier, crawling toward Song's discarded wig and kimono. Gallimard's mind "flip-flopping like a man on a trampoline" (63) reflects the spectator's gaze, destabilized before the crescendo of temporal, spatial, and gender displacements in the final two scenes. The 1988 Gallimard's "picture dissolves" (63) so that the 1986 Song, no longer Italian stereotype of Japanese but now French stereotype of Italian ("The type that prowls around discos with a gold medallion stinking of garlic" [63]), emerges from the witness box to reenact "her" 1960 emergence from the Peking opera stage: "Yes. You. White Man" (63). Though Gallimard claims to be "transported" (63) once again, he remains in 1988 form to resist Song's nostalgic recollections and sexual advances:

> *Gallimard.* . . . Every night, you say you're going to strip, but then I beg you and you stop!
> *Song.* I guess tonight is different.
> *Gallimard.* Why? Why should that be?

> *Song.* Maybe I've become frustrated. Maybe I'm saying "Look at me, you fool!" Or maybe I'm just feeling . . . sexy. (*He is down to his briefs.*) (65)

Song's strip, confronting Gallimard with differences in biological sameness, effects a shift displaced years ago when his voyeuristic demand to strip gave way to a fetishistic "love." His 1988 rejection of Song as a man and of his own relational homosexuality, betrays his love—and renders suspect all love—as a representation of the gaze, an illusion of the reconciliation of opposites which reinscribes opposition. Laughing at his waste of time on "just a man" (65), Gallimard replaces objectification of a woman with objectification of a man and derides Song's protests against such essentialism as "some kind of identity problem" (66). Able to recognize Song only through touching "*like a blind man*" (66), Gallimard reclaims a fixed gaze, a unitary eye/I position, by now scripting Song as homosexual to his heterosexual; echoing Comrade Chin, ostensibly his political opposite, he banishes Song through an equation of body with subjectivity: "and I don't want your body polluting the room!" (67). Such a script precludes the release of Song from song: "I'm a man who loved a woman created by a man. Everything else—simply falls short" (66).

Song's creation was actually Gallimard's and remains so as he rejects the projected Song's subversive possibilities. When Song expresses disappointment that Gallimard has not become "something more. More like . . . a woman." (67, ellipsis original), it is not an uncloseted, unequivocal homosexual which Gallimard's runaway consciousness solicits but the shifting subjectivity that Song's "identity problem" reflects: "Men. You're like the rest of them. It's all in the way we dress . . . You really have so little imagination!" (67). The "we" here is not women but Woman—the position of otherness he shares as being Asian-in-the-West subsumes his maleness. Song is impelled by such division to imagine subjectivity beyond paradigmatic binaries, but his call for imagination is perverted by Gallimard's claim to reside in "pure imagination" (67) since purification reduces imagination to illusion.

It is this totalizing impulse which finalizes Gallimard's psychic imprisonment, for in self-consciously "choosing" illusion over reality, he evinces the ultimately theatrical binary misperception of such a choice, itself the quintessential illusion.[10] In calcifying the oppositional perspective that choice implies, Gallimard resists the possibilities of autobiography which he had perceived; as a performative act, the constitution of subjectivity linguistically, Gallimard's life-writing offered transformation, the possibility of a subject determined by self-representation as well as cultural representation.[11] Rather than imagining beyond the subject/object division of self-consciousness to a

self-consciousness about self-consciousness, however, Gallimard remains imprisoned in a repetition compulsion, in the theatre of idealization: "I've played out the events of my life night after night, always searching for a new ending to my story, one where I leave this cell and return forever to my Butterfly's arms" (67-68). Positing the same oppositions within as he had without, "oppositions designed to save at least the concept of an 'ideal purity'" (Derrida 115), Gallimard's fall into consciousness or division, unredeemed by the meta-conscious perception of difference and affirmation beyond negativity, proves fatal—the tragedy of the gaze: "It is a vision [of the Orient] that has become my life"(68). Mistaking the frame of representation for a mirror of reality, Gallimard perceives only either/or rather than both/and: "Love warped my judgement, blinded my eyes, rearranged the very lines on my face . . . until I could look in the mirror and see nothing but . . . a woman" (68, ellipses original).

Since his love took no leap beyond representation's union of opposites, it can effect only an inversion of polarities, stopping short of "the point where the same demand of rigor [which sustains oppositional logic against empirical confusion] requires the structure of that logic to be transformed or complicated" (Derrida 123). Thus Gallimard reverses Song's disrobing to embody the travesty of a travesty, the perversion of a perversion in reappropriating the Butterfly masquerade. Re-entering Puccini's representation rather than linguistically extending his own or deferring his signature, Gallimard re-enacts the opera's finale with his ritual suicide. The irony of his final lines and of the blaring "Love Duet" indicts idealization as his act dramatizes the death call of history, the self-consuming consciousness:

> The love of a Butterfly can withstand many things—unfaithfulness, loss, even abandonment. But how can it face the one sin that implies all others? The devastating knowledge that, underneath it all, the object of her love was nothing more, nothing less than . . . a man. (*He sets the top of the knife against his body.*) It is 1988. And I have found her at last. In a prison on the outskirts of Paris. My name is Rene Gallimard—also known as Madame Butterfly. (68-69, ellipsis original)

Refusing to defer his desire for "plenitude . . . already inaccessible in perception or in intuition in general as the experience of a present content" (Derrida 121), Gallimard paradoxically inscribed his absence in the text by denying its inevitable structural possibility: "Is not the 'pure realization of self-presence' itself also death?" (Derrida 116).

Seemingly servicing our own nostalgia for unity, the play suggests circularity as Song's closing line echoes Gallimard's opening words: "Butterfly? Butterfly?" (69). But ellipses have yielded to question marks as this cigarette-smoking Song—no longer Gallimard's projection—assumes Pinkerton's position, foregrounding its precariousness and echoing audience instability. In a flood of gender, racial, cultural, and theatrical shifts, the spectator seeks vainly for grounding in a unitary eye/I, which has dissolved into the irreducible bisexuality of the gaze.[12] Those who claw their way back to that illusory pinnacle of the male gaze, of gendered identity, of full-presence, upon leaving the theatre re-enter Gallimard's prison and risk his self-victimization. Not heeding Hwang's plea for the "heroic effort" of desaturating the consciousness of myth, they occlude connection in difference "between nations and lovers": "Those who prefer to bypass the work involved will remain in a world of surfaces, misperceptions running rampant" (Afterward 100). Such work is deconstruction in the sense on which Derrida insists: "a practical analysis of what is called the parasite and of the axiomatics upon which its interpretation is based" (136). These "metaphysical axiomatics" Derrida questions (116), Hwang questions also. The tragedy of *M. Butterfly*, then, is the tragedy of the metaphysics of presence inscribed in psychology, in language, in theatre—the tragedy of the gaze. It is in this sense that the play is most radically political and on this political ground that postmodernism and feminism most productively intersect.[13] Driven to this perceptual intersection, the spectator of *M. Butterfly*, gaze dismantled, subjectivity decentered, can perceive beyond the cultural representation of subjectivity through exclusion to the exigency of transformation through self-representation.

If today's audiences are, as Blau claims, "gathered around the most dubious values and exhausted illusions, like the barest fiction of remembered community" ("Hysteria" 10), then we are at least not practicing the exclusion that "community" presupposes and that *M. Butterfly* presents. As a "consciousness constructed" by the play, a *"community of the question"* (Blau, "Hysteria" 12, emphasis original),[14] we can resist the closure of Gallimard's consciousness by heeding Derrida's call to defer, to differ, to experience "*différence* in presence" (137) and through such undecidability to be granted passage to "moral or political responsibility" (116). On that 1988 evening, I lost in the theatre my own script of white, western, heterosexual middle-class feminism and, with it, a posture of full-presence in an exclusionary feminist community. Cross-currents of racial, sexual, and class difference having shifted gendered ground, the community of opposition gave way to a community of the question. Playing with the play's play, I began then to write a life in the "concept of writing or of trace [which] perturbs every logic of opposition, every

dialectic" (137). Trembling still from continental drifts reverberating in my own subjectivity, I nonetheless urge such life-writing to reprieve, if only fleetingly, the eye from I, from perceptual prison, to trace a butterfly on the wing.

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Notes

1. Teresa de Lauretis dates this shift away from the oppositional concept of sexual difference, which "keeps feminist thinking bound to the terms of Western patriarchy itself" (*Technologies* 1), to the early 1980s publications by feminists of color. Their critique of mainstream feminism prompted recognition of its complicity with ideology, especially the ideology of gender. De Lauretis's consequent assertion that "*The construction of gender is the product and the process of both representation and self-representation*" (9) plumbs the wellspring of Hwang's dramaturgy.

2. Jill Dolan examines the limitations of the "identity politics" of liberal or cultural feminism, tracing the tensions in feminist drama criticism between this sociological focus and the theoretical (post-structuralist) focus of materialist feminism.

3. The "alogical logic" of iterability provides, in its "identificatory" aspect, the possibility of idealization while it marks, in its "altering" aspect, the limit of idealization, "of all conceptual opposition" (Derrida 119).

4. Mary Jacobus dismisses the castration complex as a retrospective representation to resolve the equally fictitious Oedipal complex: "castration anxiety leads the boy to see; . . . the ability to see sexual difference is his defense against an original undecidability" (113).

5. Derrida repeatedly refers to the "hierarchical axiology" of western metaphysics, insisting that "it can hardly be denied that these value-oppositions constitute hierarchies, that they are posed and repeated as such by the very theory which claims to analyze, in all neutrality, their mere possibility" (71).

6. Jacobus critiques the Freudian conclusion that women emerge from their assymmetrical trajectory through the Oedipal/castration complex psychically and socially scarred with inferiority (114).

7. Gallimard's need for gender fixity reflects the widespread fear evidenced by the current backlash against feminism. Even *Time*'s special issue on women defuses its focus by concluding with Sam Allis's portrayal of the "postfeminist male" as an angry, exhausted, confused "success object." Allis reflects a frighteningly myopic middle-class perspective in ignoring the economic rather than psychological imperative which motivates women to work for $.65 for every male-earned $1.00: "If women don't like their jobs, they can, at least in theory, maintain legitimacy by going home and raising children" (81).

8. In her 1975 conceptualization of the male as "bearer of the look," Laura Mulvey postulated a gendered spectator position dictated by classical Hollywood cinema, which works through either voyeurism (devaluation) or fetishism (over-valuation) of women to counter castration anxiety. Subsequently, film and drama critics have too often canonized the fixity of this position, ignoring even Mulvey's modifications.

9. A recent AP account of the long-delayed trails of the Chinese protest leaders underscores Hwang's notion of culture as theatre: the "trials are being carefully orchestrated. Top judges and prosecutors were selected . . . and their statements are pre-scripted" ("Student" 11A).

10. Derrida refers to the consequences of such misperception in the political theatre: "No less dangerous (for instance, in politics) are those who wish to purify at all costs" (119).

11. In postulating a non-Althusserian possibility for self-determination, de Lauretis states: *"But the terms of a different construction of gender also exist, in the margins of hegemonic discourses. Posed from outside the heterosexual social contract, and inscribed in micropolitical practices, these terms can also have a part in the construction of gender, and their effects are rather at the 'local' level of resistances, in subjectivity and self-representation"* (*Technologies* 18).

12. Rejecting the notion of a male gaze as regressively grounded in the Lacanian opposition of phallus/presence to castration/lack, recent feminist film theory conceptualizes a bisexual, vacillating gaze, hence multiple subject/spectator positions. See de Lauretis's chapter "Desire in Narrative" in *Alice Doesn't* 103-57; Modleski's Introduction, 1-16; and Mulvey's essay "The Oedipus Myth: Beyond the Riddle of the Sphinx" in *Visual and Other Pleasures* 177-201. Though greatly influenced by feminist film criticism, feminist drama criticism generally elides this evolution and thereby limits itself to the passive spectator concept, which precludes resistant subjectivity and self-representation.

13. I refer always to Derridean post-structuralism rather than to the American import, which increasingly tends toward an apoliticism and moral relativism overtly rejected by Derrida and self-negating for feminism. For a cogent recuperation of deconstruction from misapprehensions, see Norris, Introduction 1-48 and chapter 3, "Limited Think: how not to read Derrida," 134-63. Recent attempts to posit cultural consequences of theory often cite feminism as an exemplary juncture of theory and politics. See, for example, Natoli, esp. p. 12. Since feminists cannot sacrifice the question of agency to the nominalist negativity so often (mis)taken for post-structuralism, feminist theorists offer some of the most promising formulations of subjectivity within a postmodern frame. De Lauretis addresses the tensions between the "critical negativity of [feminist] theory, and the affirmative positivity of its politics" (*Technologies* 26) while Alcoff affirms an identity in positionality, though she needlessly disassociates it from post-structuralism.

14. I stand indebted to Bill Demastes, not only for braving with me Blau's treacherous turf but also for exemplifying infallibly the promise of a "community of the question."

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