"This Little Flap of Flesh": Colonialism, Masculinism, and Colonized Men–*M. Butterfly* and the Problems of Anti-/Essentialism

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> But, like, it just hangs there. This little ... flap of flesh. And there's so much fuss that we make about it.
>
> Renee, *M. Butterfly* 44

> I believe Song should be [played by] a man for many reasons, not least of which is the fact that the character disrobes completely in Act III, Scene 2, and the use of prosthetic devices in the theatre is still rather uncommon [. . .]. [. . .] This [Song's dropping off his brief] is the moment in the play where all of Gallimard's illusions are literally stripped away, and anything less (or more, as the case may be) seems to diminish the gesture.
>
> David Henry Hwang,
> "Author's Notes," *M. Butterfly* 89, 92

Introduction

In his "Author's Notes" appended to *M. Butterfly,* David Henry Hwang gives instructions for future productions of his awards-winning play and expresses his preference that his "heroine," Song Liling, be played by an actor rather than an actress. As Hwang further explains his preference on the ground of the actor's anatomical structure–or the actress's "lack" thereof–in the above quote, the Asian man's "masculinity" is symbolically represented by and, in fact, reduced to this single essential

bodily organ, "this little flap of flesh," which the playwright, albeit sarcastically, claims to be an efficacious weapon against Orientalism and its effeminization of "Asian men."

Hwang's statement, his valorization of the "real" penis over the "fake" one, so to speak, also betrays an interesting note of essentialism for a play which has been hailed, almost unanimously by critics, for its anti-essentialist representation of gender.[1] The above quote, for instance, directly contradicts what many critics have contended to be the core of the play's representational politics: the idea that identities in *M. Butterfly* are performative accomplishments, being constituted as signifiers that are, thus, "citable" and "iterable." Comparing gender roles in *M. Butterfly* to "recipes for food" and "political slogans," Marjorie Garber states, for instance: "Like the exchange of roles between Song and Gallimard, between culturally constructed 'woman' and culturally constructed 'man,'" "all constructions [in *M. Butterfly*] are exportable and importable," as they are "all reproduced as intrinsically theatrical significations" (130).[2] Song's penis, which remains a valorized object that cannot be "reproduced" theatrically, however, defies this structure of "exportability"/ "importability" (thus, "citability"/ "iterability"/ "reproducibility"/ "performativity," etc.). In its theatrical presentation of the "sexed body" on stage, maleness gets fixed in its essential bodily organ, where the meaning of gender finally becomes referential.

In what follows, I will attempt to examine David Henry Hwang's essentialist/ anti-essentialist gender/ racial politics in *M. Butterfly*. In the past critical receptions, *M. Butterfly* has been read not only as a play

1) See Kondo, Garber, Haedicke, Shimakawa, and Loo. One of the few dissenting voices belongs to Cody who, despite in her own essentialism, charges Hwang with sexism, his failure to portray "women."

2) Similarly, Haedicke claims that "'iterability' (Derrida's 'quasi-concept' of structural possibility of repetition and alteration) [. . .] permeate[s] the play's structure" (29).

championing anti-essentialist representational politics, but in such appraisals, the term, "anti-essentialism" has been used almost synonymously as, and interchangeably with, "feminist," "subversive," and "anti-Orientalist.[3) Against this tendency, I will argue in the below that part of the play's political claim, and indeed its most subversive and interventional claim, lies in its overtly essentialist conceptualization of gender, while the paper also intends to investigate a more problematic aspect of Hwang's use of anti-essentialism. In so doing, my aim is twofold: while I maintain that the play demonstrates a division, that Hwang utilizes essentialism for gender and anti-essentialism for racial representations, my interest here is also to question the conventional association by which anti-essentialism tends to be perceived as politically subversive while essentialism reactionary.[4) I will try to show that gender essentialism, placed within the context of colonial power struggles, can be read as a form of resistance, while anti-essentialism, here deployed as a means of attaining racial power reversal, reveals its complicity with the dominant structure.

In fact, what seems worth pointing out here is that despite the critical contention to the contrary, gender in *M. Butterfly*–that is both the maleness and femaleness–operates primarily as an essential, biological entity. (An exception to this is Gallimard's transformation into "a woman," which, as I shall discuss, works as a revenge.) As Hwang's above quote calls into question the performative possibilities of male gender, Hwang also delegitimizes the notion of men performing female gender, as they "masquerade" as women. It is worth recalling that throughout the play, nakedness threatens Song's gender performance, while this becomes high-

3) To my knowledge, Lye has been one of the few critics so far who have problematized this equation.

4) For the useful mapping out of the debate on essentialism vs. anti-essentialism within current critical discourses and what she (rightly) points out to be the falsifying notion that essentialism and anti-essentialism constitute a clear-cut, mutually exclusive, binary, see Fuss.

lighted through the juxtaposition with the figure of a pin-up girl whose exposure of her naked body underscores, by contrast, Song's inability to perform female nudity (*MB* 14). As Hwang's gender politics, thus, heavily relies on his presentation of the "sexed bodies" on stage, gender identity in *M. Butterfly* ultimately takes place in the biological, where the "truth" is conceived to be residing in "the body."[5]

"Essentialism" as a Form of Resistance?

To better explain the significance and implications of Hwang's use of gender essentialism–his need to demarcate the gender line in order to actualize colonial resistance–, I shall begin by referring to the work of Partha Chatterjee. In his influential work, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India," Chatterjee discusses how the nineteenth-century Indian nationalists resorted to a means of cultural essentialism, as they confronted the need to simultanesouly adjust to and resist Western colonialism. He writes:

> To overcome this [Western] domination, the colonized people had to learn [. . .] superior techniques of organizing material life and incorporate them within their own cultures. [. . .] But this could not mean the imitation of the West in every aspect of life, for then the very distinction between the West and the East would vanish–the self-identity of national culture would itself be threatened. (623)

5) I would like to note that my discussion here in no way denies that an Asian man "performing," or for that matter presenting, his own Asian male body constitutes a "performative" act–in both senses of the term. (Nor am I equating the term "performativity" to "performance.") What I suggest rather is that theatrical performance here provides a means to self-consciously highlight the "performativity" of the body.

According to Chatterjee, the nationalists resolved this contradiction by creating an essentialized binary of the outer, colonized, public space (the material domain) and the inner, uncolonized, domestic space (the spiritual sphere). The distinction had served their purpose of asserting the existence of "self-identity of national culture," the inner, uncolonizable essence:

> The world [for the colonized] was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But, the nationalists asserted, it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture. That is where the East was undominated, sovereign, master of its own fate. (624)

Here in these quotes, Chatterjee shows, albeit critically, how the imperialist logic of the "unassimilable Other" had, in fact, become a tool of empowerment for the colonized, as anti-colonial nationalists were able to turn the imperialist logic of "unassimilability" into that of "uncolonizability." (By emphasizing the agency of the colonized, Chatterjee, then, seems to be revising Said in Orientalism, who, for his then apparently strategic purposes, does not explore how the logic of Orientalism could, and has, empowered "the Oriental.") As Chatterjee's argument delineates the process by which cultural essentialism offered a means of resistance to forced assimilation and Westernization, his discussion, I believe, is useful in explicating Hwang's gender politics.

It is important to remember that Song's assumption of female gender occurs in close relationships with Western colonialism, as a result of the West's normative codification of its own masculinity. As Song explains, "The West thinks of itself as masculine–big guns, big industry, big money–so the East is feminine" (*MB* 62). While identities are, thus, conceived as being relational, they are defined by the existing, here colonial,

relations of power. That Song begins to assume his *off-stage* female identity in his courtship with his Western lover is symbolic; it replicates the process by which the East has become, in Hwang's conceptualization, "feminized" in relation to the self-proclaimed masculine West. As Hwang establishes a parallel between individual and national identities in terms of their gender configurations, gender as a socio-biological entity comes to be translated into a metaphorical category, where "ef/feminization," for both Song and the East, takes place as an effect of colonialism.

As far as colonialism, thus, becomes equated to "ef/feminization," the male body which Hwang's "woman" retains and hides under her robes can be read as signifying what Chatterjee has called the "inner uncolonized space," the anti-colonial "essence" that internally resists Western imperial pressures to "effeminize"/ colonize him.[6] As Song comments on the effect of such construction: "being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man" (*MB* 62). The overtly essentialist act of displaying a male genitalia, then, serves as a means not only to challenge the imperialist notions of masculinity, where, to borrow Richard Fung's famous critique, "the Asian man is defined by a striking absence down there" (148). It also purports to underscore the constructed nature of gender, gender being a product of existing power relations.[7] The hidden male body in this sense represents anti-colonialist nationalist claims of uncolonizability and unassimilability (which is "unfeminizability" in this case). It is, as Chatterjee's nationalists asserted, "where the East was undominated," the imperial power "had failed to colonize" the East (624). Remaining intact under the colonial pressure to "ef/feminize" him, Song's penis registers the Asian man's "resistance" to this imperially enforced gendering of race. (It is no

6) For Chatterjee, the inner uncolonized space, which in the nationalist conceptualization has its resonance with sexual purity, is gendered female.

7) While Hwang's use of essentialism, thus, gestures toward anti-essentialism, his anti-essentialist claim paradoxically depends on and, in fact, reinforces essentialism.

wonder, then, that Hwang has refused to rely on "prosthetic devices." The "real" penis must be displayed in order to signify the indestructibility of "Asian manhood.")[8)]

But if Orientalism "ef/feminizes," Hwang's "resistance" simply *re*-masculinizes. Indeed, his insistence on the "real" penis and his articulation of Asian masculinity through this "sexed" body merely reinscribe the imperialist-masculinist notion of gender, where the male genitalia remains to be the ultimate signifier of maleness. Or put differently, his resistance resorts to a politics of inclusion rather than of deconstruction, where the problem is conceived to be rectified by simple inclusions–i.e., "We, too, are men, and we, too, possess penises"–rather than a structural change. As King-kok Cheung points out the Asian American nationalists' failure to "disentangle from the prevailing ideology of manhood or escape its hegemonic hold" (189), Hwang, too, here falls into the trap of trying to "measure up to American notions of manliness" (190).

It is no accident, then, that the female body in this process gets reduced to mere colonially enforced masks and vesture, the "outer" colonized space, to refer to Chatterjee's term again. (Significantly, Hwang describes Song's gender performance as "disguise" [*AN* 89], using a term that suggests the existence of an essential undisguised self.) The national-individual parallel which Hwang has sustained, that Song's transformation into "a woman" mirrors the larger cultural "ef/feminization" of Asia, then, further reveals a deeply problematic structure. Such parallelism not only

8) It must be noted, however, that the notion of "effeminized Asian men" presented and challenged in the play reflects more of the internal U.S. racial relations and the construction of "Asian men" within that particular social and historical context. As Li aptly puts it, "[N]o Chinese man is likely to question his male authority within the Chinese national context. [. . .] If we take China's anti-imperialist history and its history of male domination into consideration, Song's masquerade is indeed out of his 'Chinese' character" (156). In geographical locations where "Asians" constitute a majority, normative masculinity is usually constructed around "Asian" rather than Caucasian male.

foregrounds but actually *creates,* by naturalizing and biologizing, a pristine, pre-colonial masculine identity for the East. As the masculine national/ cultural "origin" is equated to a biological *fact*, cultural essentialism becomes validated by the biological "truth." In this anti-imperial struggle, thus, not only is the anti-colonial subject presumed male; femaleness, which is considered neither a valid form of gender identity for the East nor of colonial resistance, is denigrated to what the male colonial subject must rise above. In the colonial struggle to regain its "true" gender identity and to return to its "lost origin," femaleness is reduced to a mere obstacle in attaining that goal.[9]

"Anti-Essentialism" and the Desire for an Escape from the Body

While Hwang's anti-colonialist essentialism, thus, takes place in the form of masculinism with "resistance" breaking down in another form of dominance, the same process takes place with anti-essentialism, which, enabling power reversals in terms of race and gender between Song and Gallimard, reinstates the same hegemonic power structure. Before going into further discussion, however, let us briefly recapitulate how the ideas of anti-essentialism and performative identity operate in *M. Butterfly.*

Although the term, "performative" can mean both "dramatic" and "non-referential," theatrical performance here epitomizes Hwang's idea of anti-essentialism and performative identity. This is best exemplified in a brief play-within-a-play that takes place in Act One, scene three where Hwang makes his characters reproduce a scene from Puccini's *Madama*

9) Needless to say, this "lost origin" is oftentimes also signified as an idealized and romanticized feminine space, while its recovery is articulated through the desire to return to the maternal "origin." For the valorization of the East as "feminine," as opposed to the patriarchal, masculine, and phallogocentric West, see, for instance, *The Empire of Signs* and *About Chinese Women* as well as Lowe's critique in "The Desires of Postcolonial Orientalism."

Butterfly. Hwang's stage direction shows: "Marc, wearing an official cap to designate Sharpless, Enters and plays the character" (*MB* 10, emph. deleted); Gallimard "pulls out a naval officer's cap [. . .], pops it on his head" and plays "Pinkerton" (*MB* 10, emph. deleted), and later takes up a wig and kimono to become "Butterfly" (*MB* 68-9). Identities are, thus, marked away from the body and signified by theatrical devices such as clothing, makeups, caps, kimono, wigs, etc. As Garber has suggested, identities that are "intrinsically theatrical significations" (130) are destabilized and de-essentialized from the body. They become, in her words, "exportable" and "importable" (130).

What Hwang's play-within-a-play dramatizes, then, is the possibility that one can escape one's identity by "exporting" and "importing"–in short, "trading"–those identities with others. Gallimard comments on one such instance where he "exchanges" roles with his friend Marc. He states: "In the preceding scene, I played Pinkerton, the womanizing cad, and my friend Marc [. . .] played Sharpless, the sensitive soul of reason. In life, however, our positions were usually–no, always–reversed" (*MB* 11). Gallimard's self-conscious remark on the role reversal here helps illuminate Hwang's idea of theatre and acting. In this theatrical space, Gallimard can escape his identity as a nerdy, sissy, "voted 'least likely to be invited to a party'" (*MB* 8) and exchange his place with his wealthy womanizing friend. Hwang's "anti-essentialist" theatre, thus, becomes a space in which the reversal of roles, and thus of power and fortune, becomes possible.

It is notable, then, that this process recurs later in the play between Song and Gallimard, where Song stands "as a man" in his "Armani," watching Gallimard commit ritualistic suicide in the guise of a Japanese woman:

> GALLIMARD. [. . .] My name is Rene Gallimard–also known as Madame Butterfly. *(Gallimard turns* U.S. *and plunges the knife into*

> *his body [. . .]. Then a tight special up on Song, who stands as a man, staring at the fallen Gallimard. He smokes a cigarette; the smoke filters up through the lights. Two words leave his lips.)*
> SONG. Butterfly? Butterfly? [. . .] (*MB* 69)

As critics have pointed out, the final two words, "Butterfly? Butterfly?" which Song utters here originally belonged to Pinkerton at the closing of Puccini's opera (Act III), and to Gallimard at the opening of Hwang's play (*MB* 7). At this play's end, Song, thus, literally replaces Gallimard as "Pinkerton." What Hwang's anti-essentialism ultimately accomplishes, then, is the racial and gender reversal, whereby an Asian man can escape his body, switch roles with a white man who in turn gets "reduced" to a doubly powerless position of a Japanese woman. Theatre, in this sense, becomes "an enchanted space" (*MB* 8) for the socially–culturally, sexually, and racially–disprivileged, as theatrical anti-essentialism enables the reversal of roles and power, allowing those disprivileged to escape their identities by trading positions with their oppressors.

Reversal: Remaking Oneself in the Image of the Oppressor

> [B]lack men who have been demeaned by whites take up the means of the masters with a vengeance. But in making up for past subjugation by being belligerent toward others, they simply remake themselves in the image of their oppressors.
>
> King-kok Cheung 181

As Hwang's anti-essentialism permits Song to adapt a new role of masculinity, enabling him to "become" Pinkerton with the "absolute power of a man" (*MB* 17), the final exchange of roles, which critics in the past have extolled as the "stunning gender/ racial power reversal"

(Kondo 19), reveals a much more problematic aspect of anti-essentialism. It becomes a means through which the Asian man can "overcome" his racial disprivilege and "elevate" himself to the status of a white imperial man, whom he eventually replaces as "the Man" in the play. As Cheung critiques the Asian American men's endeavor to challenge prevailing notions of Asian masculinity (or the very absence of it) by replacing them with Euroamerican models, Hwang's anti-colonialist "resistance," here literally, ends up "reproduc[ing] clones of Western heroes" (191), as Hwang/ Song attempt to "remake themselves in the image of their oppressors" (181).

Put differently, what Hwang's anti-essentialist "resistance" accomplishes in the end is a reversal without deconstruction, an inversion without displacements. It is no surprise, then, that "the reversal" reinstates the same hierarchization in which "Pinkerton," the white man, remains an "archetypal male," the victor and survivor, while "Butterfly" the "sacrificed" and "victim." Or, as far as identities in the play are defined by inverted and interlocking opposites–"[t]he West thinks of itself as masculine [. . .]–*so* the East is feminine" (*MB* 62, emph. added)–, Gallimard's transformation into Butterfly repeats the same process by which Song has been made into a "woman."[10] As "resistance" occurs in the form of "remak[ing] [oneself] in the image of [one's] oppressors" (Cheung 181), "resistance" (or revenge) can also take place in "remaking" the oppressor in the image of the oppressed.

It seems useful here to refer to the work of Frantz Fanon who illumi-

10) Or if, as Garber suggests, the "little Peepee" is Gallimard's "detachable phallus" and the "'proof' of his 'masculinity'" (139), what Song's unveiling of his penis destroys is this illusion, since Song's penis attests to the sheer impossibility of Gallimard's paternity. In effect, Song's penis, which then also functions as the "phallus" of the play, not only erases, but metaphorically replaces Gallimard's illusory phallus, making inevitable that the "castrated" Gallimard becomes a "woman," which is a position defined in the play as "lack."

nates psychological dimensions in which such reversal takes place. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon discusses a case of a black medical officer who fantasizes a similar "reversal," as he suffers from an "agonizing conviction" of self-insufficiency resulting from the lack of societal recognition. According to Fanon, the officer tries to salvage himself by reversing positions with white men, not only by having them serve "under his command," where he can be "feared or respected," but further by having them "adopt a Negro attitude toward him." Fanon explains: "In this way [the officer] was obtaining revenge for the *imago* that had always obsessed him: the frightened, trembling Negro, abased before the white overlord" (60-1). What the role reversal accomplishes, then, is the symbolic suicide through murder, an act of projecting, thus displacing, onto this Other the socially imposed image of himself, in order for such an image to be disowned, displaced, and discarded. The final reversal of roles, then, only repeats Gallimard's earlier gestures by which he, too, attempted to disown and displace his own effeminacy/ emasculacy onto Song, and onto the Orient.

Anti-/Essentialism and the Desire for the Erasure of Race (but not of gender)

> Song. Now–close your eyes. *(Song covers Gallimard's eyes with one hand. With the other, Song draws Gallimard's hand up to his face. Gallimard, like a blind man, lets his hands run over Song's face.)*
> [. . .]
> [. . .] I'm your Butterfly. Under the robes, beneath everything, it was always me.
>
> *M. Butterfly* 66

With the ending role reversal, thus, ultimately revealing Hwang's

desire for racial transformation, it seems worth considering here that this anti-essentialist reversal also closely resembles what Hwang has envisaged as an ideal of "color-blind" or "cross-racial" theatre and casting. Take, for instance, the following quote in which Hwang elaborates his belief that "different people should be able to play anything they want" regardless of their actual racial identities:

> [U]ltimately Jonathan Pryce should be able to play anything he wants. B.D. Wong should be able to play Jewish and James Earl Jones should be able to play Italian; that's where you want to get to. You want to say that acting is acting. [. . .] [U]ltimately you do want to get to a place where you suspend your disbelief. It is theatre; it is metaphor. We're used to seeing *The King and I* with somebody who's not Asian; we say, "Okay, I guess he's supposed to be Asian," and we accept that. I don't see why the reverse can't be true as well. (*Playwright's Art* 135)

With the ending that actualizes the "reverse" as Hwang describes here presenting a miniature version of "cross-racial" theatre, the passage articulates the kind of provocative, postmodern, playing with "race" as a discursive category.[11] Such an articulation, however, also gets compromised, as it is read from the context of previous discussion, where his anti-essentialism entails a more problematic move for de-racialization. A final exchange between Song and Gallimard, which immediately follows the revelation scene (quoted at the top of this section), illustrates this point. Demanding Gallimard to "close [his] eyes" and touch him, Song insists that Gallimard acknowledge the existence of Song's true, buried self:

11) The ending can also be read as a caricature, if not also the symbolic death, of the tradition of the U.S. minstrel theater, where Caucasian actors, such as Jonathan Pryce, have played Asian roles with taped eyelids.

"Under the robes, beneath everything, it was always me" (*MB* 66). Hwang's stage direction collaborates in the making of this "color-blind" Song/ "me": "Song covers Gallimard's eyes with one hand. With the other, Song draws Gallimard's hand up to his face. Gallimard, *like a blind man,* lets his hands run over Song's face" (*MB* 66, emph. deleted and added). As far as the "me" which Song challenges Gallimard to know is the Song whom Gallimard can see only with his eyes closed, what the passage delineates is a humanist cliché that perception inhibits true "human" understanding. Hwang's idea of anti-essentialist identity reveals its affinity to that of liberal *human*-ism, disclosing also his deep ambivalence toward the body as a racialized entity.

What is peculiar, then, is that Hwang's anti-essentialism ultimately links with essentialism in its desire for and inclination toward the erasure of race. As the former enables Song to transform (and escape) his racial identity, the latter helps him get to his "interior" which is presumably colorless. In the following interview, Hwang expresses his discomfort with "race," and in so doing, attempts to replace the concept with that of "culture":

> What we're essentially talking about when we talk about race is culture. We're saying that if we associate different races with different behaviors we're not associating the color of the skin as much as we are the culture of that root country. I don't know why it's necessarily true that skin color and culture need to go hand in hand. [. . .] [T]he whole idea of skin color doesn't seem to me to be that useful anymore. (*Playwright's Art* 136)

Although "race" usually does connote more than just "skin color," Hwang's effort here to divorce "race" from "skin color" and reinterpret it as cultural behaviors indicate his desire to de-colorize and de-biologize

race. As Hwang further experiments and elaborates upon the idea in his later pieces such as *Bondage* and *Trying to Find Chinatown,* one result is a possibility of the "blonde and blue-eyed" Caucasian Asian American, a figure he creates in *Trying to Find Chinatown* (13). Identifying himself as an "Asian American" on the ground of his cultural competence and performativity–which are based partially on his having majored in Asian American Studies at University of Wisconsin and of his rather symbolic heritage of having been "adopted by Chinese American parents at birth" (13)–, the figure, "Benjamin Wong" denies that his "race" be judged "by [his] genetic heritage alone" (13). In a manner not dissimilar to Gallimard putting on his "yellow face" (for whom, then, even the "skin color" becomes something attachable and detachable) or Song assuming his "Armani," this "Caucasian Asian American," like other cross-racial performers of the play, highlights the disjunction between the essentialized, here "raced," body and the "racial" identity he performs *and* "embodies," with the gap underscoring, once again, the constructedness–the "exportability" and "importability"–of "race." As "race," thus, becomes a "metaphor," it becomes an entity that can be "adopted" and performed.

What is further notable, then, is that Hwang's claim for the metaphorical nature of theatrical performance displays a problematic double-standard in terms of race and gender, as he demands gender-accurate casting for *M. Butterfly,* precluding gender from the above explained anti-essentialist theatrical operations. Hwang insists:

> [C]asting a woman [for the role of Song] is not playing fair with the audience. If they are to believe that Gallimard was seduced by a man disguised as a woman, then we have, I would think, the obligation to present an actor doing exactly that. (*AN* 89)

Read alongside the first quote, the passage exhibits a striking contrast. As

soon as gender becomes an issue, Hwang's theatre suddenly ceases to be "a metaphor," where his idea of "man" and "woman" shows a much more fixed, essentialized category than the "Asian," "Jewish" or "Italian" in the earlier quote. As we recall how Hwang's anti-essentialism has served as a means for an Asian man to reverse power positions with a white man, it is significant that Hwang forbids such "reversal" from taking place in terms of gender. In the end, his differentiating use of essentialism and anti-essentialism proves how it serves to empower an Asian man, as such an employment enables him to transform, or else erase, his race without sacrificing his gender privilege.[12]

The "Victim" vs. "Sellout": *M (adama) Butterfly* and the Anxieties of Miscegenation

> The particular image of "brown women" submissive to "white men" may not stem from the desire to liberate "brown women" but in fact register, in deeply misogynist ways, the colonial anxieties of "brown men."
>
> Colleen Lye, 262

With Hwang's anti-essentialist theatre, thus, revealing its problematically misogynist traits, a similar tendency can also be witnessed in his "deconstructivist *Madama Butterfly*" (*AN* 86), where his "revision" dis-

12) It must be noted, however, that Hwang's more recent play, *Bondage* attempts to conceive both race and gender as performed entities, a position and experience which one can learn to inhabit by enacting those culturally constructed (albeit often stereotypical) roles and knowledge. Hwang's use of the sexually marked costumes in the play also indicates the possibility of the performativity of the body, as they challenge the idea of the body as a natural, biological entity. This equation of the body to a theatrical device, however, collapses in the final scene in which the actors strip themselves to expose their "real" bodies, which finally triumph over the "fake" ones.

plays the same patriarchal characteristics as those of the original opera which it purports to critique. It is particularly significant that both the opera and the play serve as a cautionary tale for an indigenous woman's desires for interracial unions, while in both instances, the "Asian woman" is constructed as a reproducer of racial/ national boundaries whose sexuality that can lead itself to miscegenation needs to be controlled and restricted.

In her study on "interracial romance," *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction,* Gina Marchetti argues that "tragedy" as a narrative pattern can work as an inhibition against interracial union, helping to "maintain racial divisions" (8) and imperial hierarchy.[13] Puccini's famous tragic love story between an imperial man and his colonial mistress can be read as (what Marchetti calls) a "justified consequence of miscegenation" (89), a reminder that such interracial love cannot–and *should* not–be consummated in a socially legitimized form. It is notable, then, that the opera also dramatizes, by subtly ironizing, the colonial woman's transgressive desires, her vain and erroneous belief that she can be "American" by "renouncing" her people, culture, and religion. The opera with its tragic end points to the "mistake" Butterfly makes, and consequently punishes her by making her pay with her own life for the outcome of the interracial union, for having abandoned "her people" for a white man and crossed the racial barrier. (It is interesting, in this sense, that the opera, despite its Orientalism, actually serves the interest of the indigenous "yellow men," just as Butterfly's relatives, as she herself puts it, "were so pleased to see [her] damnation" and abandonment [Act II].)[14]

13) See particularly "Introduction" and Chapter 5 "The Scream of the Butterfly."

14) Needless to say, what is referred to as "yellow men" here does not constitute a monolithic category. As is perhaps best exemplified in the discourse of "my blond and blue-eyed son-in-law," the yellow man can claim his colonial patriarchal authority by establishing a homosocial liaison with a white man, a

But if Puccini's opera characterizes Butterfly primarily as "a victim"– an innocent, "childlike" creature whose naive yet "sincere" faith in her Western lover gets betrayed ("so much blindness," as Sharpless calls it in the opera [Act II]), Hwang revises this construction by conferring on her a traitorous agency.[15] In the following quote which shows his rewriting of one of Puccini's episodes, Hwang suggests that Butterfly's rejection of Japanese Prince Yamadori is based on his "inferior" racial position rather than, as Puccini implies, her determination to remain faithful to her American husband. Her servant, Suzuki admonishes Butterfly's "internalized racism" on Hwang's behalf:

> SUZUKI. Now, what about Yamadori? Hey, hey–don't look away– the man is a prince–figuratively, and, what's even better, literally. He's rich, he's handsome, he says he'll die if you don't marry him– and he's even willing to overlook the little fact that you've been deflowered all over the place by a foreign devil. What do you mean, "But he's Japanese?" What do you think you are? You think you've been touched by the whitey god? (*MB* 15)

The passage which unveils the racial dynamics that have been masked in Puccini's "love story" illustrates how Butterfly's "love" is grounded in Pinkerton's superior racial power. As Fung explains the operation of colonial power relations within gay community, that the economic and "accompanying cultural imperialism grant[] status to those Asians with white

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liaison which is made possible through the exchange of the yellow woman.

15) In an interview by DiGaetani, Hwang critiques Puccini's construction of Butterfly and the East as being "helpless to resist" Western colonialism (143). One can also argue, however, that Puccini's representation of Butterfly *as* "a victim" intends to underscore the brutal nature of American colonial practice, to convey an anti-imperialistic, anti-American message that in DiGaetani's words "the white man has caused great evil in the Orient" (DiGaetani 98).

lovers" (156), the statement also applies here albeit in heterosexual terms. Hwang's re-characterization of Butterfly implies how her self-willed estrangement from her people actually betrays her desire to place herself *above* her fellow Japanese, particularly the men, while the revision also discloses the self-serving aspect of what Puccini has characterized as the self-sacrificial or selfless love of the woman.

While this emphasis on the colonized woman's agency makes Butterfly at least a more interesting character, what is disturbing is the way Hwang's portrayal of her agency takes place in a strikingly unsympathetic and, indeed, overtly sarcastic manner. In fact, what is caricaturized here is the woman of color's desire to turn herself into "an honorary white" through the interracial liaison, her desire to seek admittance into the white world of power, as Fanon grudgingly described the black women's similar desire in *Black Skin, White Masks.* Indeed, it seems worthwhile here to consider how Hwang's ironic delineation of Butterfly bears a striking resemblance to Fanon's now infamous depiction of "frantic women of color in quest of white men" (49). Fanon writes: "Mayotte loves a white man to whom she submits in everything. He is her lord. She asks nothing, demands nothing, except a bit of whiteness in her life" (42). The passage with its ironic overtone articulates a sense of resentment which "the yellow man" shares with "the black man," while their discomfort seems to be directed to the way the power and agency get transferred to black and yellow women, where those women, as agents of reproduction, can choose, and, more importantly, *reject,* these men as their suitors. As Lye puts it eloquently in the above quoted passage: the "image of 'brown women' submissive to 'white men'" *can* "register, in deeply misogynist ways, the colonial anxieties of 'brown men'" (262). The play, likewise, articulates the anxieties of the colonized yellow man. Hwang's text condemns the yellow woman's "complicity" in the act of miscegenation where she is constructed as "a sellout."[16]

Ironically in this sense, then, Hwang's depiction of the interracial sexuality only repeats (again in reverse) the trope of "yellow peril" as sexual threats, whose primary aim, as Marchetti explains, is "an ideological condemnation of miscegenation" (84). (What the narratives of "M/adame Butterfly" impart, then, is the anxieties of miscegenation which take place on *both* sides of the colonial borders.) Indeed, as Hwang himself describes the terms of the interracial relationship that takes place in his play–an Asian woman "being oppressed in a very seductive and pleasurable manner" (*AN* 89)–, such a construction simply recycles the more widely known racist and sexist convention of yellow peril as sexual threats: the rhetoric of "'they' are after 'our' women" within which it is usually the Asian men who threaten blonde American with their perverse and illicit sexual desires.[17]

Hwang's unflattering characterization of Gallimard in this context can be read as a revenge and punishment, as Hwang revises the original opera's construction of Pinkerton, an arrogant and callous, yet handsome and attractive white imperialist, to a sissy, nerdy, "not very good-looking" (*MB* 9), neither "witty" nor "clever" (*MB* 8) "and pretty much a wimp" (*MB* 10), a figure who would typify an existing Orientalist stereotype of "a 'sissy' white male courting 'China dolls' in order to satisfy his insecure masculinity." As Gallimard himself describes: "We, who are not handsome, nor brave, nor powerful, yet somehow believe, like Pinkerton, that

16) In this respect, it is perhaps worth pointing out here that the colonialist creed of "divide and conquer" and the anti-colonialist critique of it actually reflect the logic and interest of the colonized ruling elites who can presume such pre-colonial unity.

17) The rhetoric of "'they' are after 'our' women," which has historically been the basis as well as the justification of lynching, has also been widely used to target "Asian men," from early Hollywood films such as Cecil DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915) to more recent manifestations such as Michael Chrichton's *Rising Sun* (1992) and Tom Clancy's *Debt of Honor* (1997). For discussions of yellow peril as sexual threats, see Higashi.

we deserve a Butterfly" (*MB* 13). The characterization offers an exemplary case of what Fung describes as the "[w]hite men who [. . .] are deemed unattractive in their own countries, suddenly find[ing] themselves elevated and desired" (Fung 156). As Hwang utilizes the existing discourse surrounding interracial sexuality, the denigrating stereotype here not only purports to demystify and invalidate "Pinkerton's" power; it also indicates how a racial minority can exploit the dominant discourse in order to punish, do revenge, and claim power over his immediate oppressor.[18] Consequently, Hwang's deconstructivist Butterfly reveals not just an anxiety but a deep resentment toward "the white man [who] gets the girl" (*MB* 20) and the yellow woman who is (constructed as) an accomplice in this traitorous relationship.

Conclusion: Japan, Empires, and the Narratives of *M/adama Butterfly*

> Convincing? As a Japanese woman? The Japanese used hundreds of our people for medical experiments during the war, you know. But I gather such an irony is lost on you.
>
> Song, *M. Butterfly* 18

I would like to end this paper by briefly commenting on the way in which the figure of the *Japanese* "Madame Butterfly," particularly in Hwang's deployment, highlights the multiplicity of colonial situations in East Asia and the complex interrelations between Japan, empires, and the narratives constructed around this woman. Hwang's take on this issue, as is seen in the above quote, is ironic. In the scene in which Song first

18) If, as Mosse and other theorists of nationalism have suggested, the position of an outsider is marked by his/her supposedly "deviant" sexualities, one can argue that the white man who courts an Asian woman gets outsided within nationalism's normative constructions of masculine identity, where he becomes "emasculated" *as a result* of the interracial contact.

encounters Gallimard, Gallimard praises Song's performance of Butterfly as "utterly convincing" unlike when the role is "played by huge [Western] women in so much bad makeup" (*MB* 18). Song responds to this "compliment" with sarcasm by pointing out Gallimard's failure to see through the history of domination among the "Asians." While the passage caricaturizes Gallimard's Orientalist myopia which reduces "the East" to one homogenizable Other–an idea which obviously enabled *Madame Butterfly* to be recycled into *Miss Saigon* even when Japan was one of the U.S. allies during the Vietnam War–, Hwang calls attention to the intra-Asian structures of dominance and the way the potentially homogenizing term, the "Asians" can cause to obscure the historical and political specificities within which the domination has been taking place.[19]

Like Hwang, Lye also cautions us against making any homogeneous assumptions about the relationship between Orientalism and "the geographical location of its articulation" in our current era since Orientalism, she argues, "constitutes a discourse of power about the 'East,' implicated in the globalizing logic of capital" (283). As a result of "the uneven and unequal development of capitalism in Asia," Orientalist discourse comes to be "deployed by and pitched to a variety of subjects in different sites, many of which are themselves 'Asian'" (Lye 283). As both authors invite us to consider the meanings of colonialism within Asian contexts, one cannot but think about the irony of "Madame Butterfly" still being used as a representative imperialist narrative on Japan, not only by the West but as part of the nation's (albeit Western-made) self-representation. (The

19) Hwang's use of the figure of the *Japanese* "Madame Butterfly" shows how he both problematizes and exploits this initial Orientalist conceptualization. Critiquing such Orientalist homogenization of "Asians" as is exemplified in the quote, Hwang himself relies on the same Orientalist framework in order to highlight the emasculinization of "Asian men" (with all the national, ethnic, class, sexual, and other differences). In effect, Hwang's deconstructive Butterfly reproduces the same universalizing Orientalist categorization, which his text simultaneously attempts to subvert.

performance of the opera at the opening ceremony of the 1998 Nagano Olympic games provides just one, rather grotesque, example.)[20]

The numerous instances of sexual exploitations, both past and present, of Filipina, Thai, and other Southeast and East Asian women by Japanese men, whose presence in these regions attests to the imperialist practices Japan has been imposing on its own colonial sites, indicate the problem of the continual linkage of the work with the nation, while those historical facts also challenge any easy assumptions about the notion of "the victimized 'Asian women,'" of which "Madame Butterfly" has often served as a signifier. As John DiGaetani tells us, however, if in the time Puccini created "Madama Butterfly," Japan *was* America's "rest and recreation base" where "American officers often used Japanese geishas as prostitutes" (97), Japan's more recent imperialist and economic exercises can be seen as a prime example of how the "oppressed" has successfully turned and recreated himself in the image of his oppressor.[21] As such has been the preoccupation of this paper, a critical examination of Hwang's text will, I hope, pinpoint the danger of such identificatory practice.

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20) For a detailed discussion of the problematic signification of the event, see Takemura.

21) As is seen in the 1995 Okinawa military rape of a twelve-year old school girl by three U.S. servicemen and in the more recent cases of similar rapes and sexual assaults, DiGaetani's statement still holds true in the present period, at least in the region where another history of Japan's colonial rule has been inscribed.

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