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Dislocating Camps: On State Power, Queer Aesthetics & Asian/Americanist Critique

Christopher Alan Eng

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Dislocating Camps:
On State Power, Queer Aesthetics & Asian/Americanist Critique

By

Christopher Alan Eng

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

DISLOCATING CAMPS: ON STATE POWER, QUEER AESTHETICS & ASIAN/AMERICANIST CRITIQUE

by

Christopher Alan Eng

Advisor: Kandice Chuh

My dissertation argues that the history of Asian racialization in the United States requires us to grapple with the seemingly counterintuitive entanglement between “the camp” as exceptional space of biopolitical management and “camp” as a performative practice of queer excess. While each practice of camp has been theorized as exemplary of modernity, these considerations have been largely separated into studies of political economy on the one hand, and queer aesthetics on the other. Taken up predominantly in political philosophy and the social sciences, the former centers the death camps in Europe during World War II as epitomizing state violence within modern politics. Meanwhile, celebratory narratives in queer studies champion camp aesthetics as a crucial survival strategy against widespread homophobia. Yet, these accounts neglect to consider how camps have sustained longer histories of racial violence. Examining camps organized around labor, internment, resettlement, and counterinsurgency, I consider how camps proliferated in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century onward alongside exclusionary measures against Asian migrants as a means of policing the parameters of citizenship and expanding the state’s capacities for managing space and bodies. My project establishes how these camps stage states of provisionality wherein populations are configured as provisional to national belonging along the axes of race and sexuality. That provisional state, in
other words, affords the improvisation of the meaningfulness of legal citizenship. Camp aesthetics play a pivotal yet understudied role in the processes of racialization that produce confinement as well as embodied practices that challenge them.

This project traces a genealogy of camps that have mediated the entry of Asians into the United States, including Chinese railroad work camps, Japanese internment camps, resettlement camps for Southeast Asian refugees during the Cold War, and the counterinsurgency camps in the Philippines. Juxtaposing the governmental archives of these camps in relation to a set of literatures and performances, each chapter focuses on a figure central to (Asian) American Studies—the coolie, the internee, the refugee, the diva, and the Asian American—and attends to how they articulate and are mediated by these multiple forms of camp. Analyzing legal texts and government reports alongside cultural productions by David Henry Hwang, Maxine Hong Kingston, Miné Okubo, Karen Tei Yamashita, Chay Yew and others, I explore how these works use camp aesthetics to locate and dislocate the various logics of encampment that provide the conditions of possibility for juridico-political decisions to construct and sustain sites of encampments. Tracing the contestation of encampment through campiness in Asian/American history, I elucidate the creative modes of solidarities that such cultural works envision. In this way, this project deepens understandings about not only the interconnections between state power and sexuality, but also the processes by which militarized violence and rightlessness are rationalized, negotiated, and challenged.
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**Camp**

*From the OED*

**noun1**
1. Martial contest, combat, battle, fight, war.

**noun2**

I. In the military sense
1. The place where an army or body of troops is lodged in tents or other temporary means of shelter, with or without intrenchments. In common modern use the collection of tents, huts, and other equipments is the chief notion, the site being the ‘camping-ground’
2. a. A body of troops encamping and moving together; an army on a campaign.
3. Used for: The scene of military service; military service, the military life in general.

II. *transf.* from the military sense
4. a. The temporary quarters, formed by tents, vehicles, or other portable or improvised means of shelter, occupied by a body of nomads or men on the march, by travellers, gipsies, companies of sportsmen, lumbermen, field-preachers and their audiences, or parties ‘camping out’; an encampment.
   d. Quarters for the accommodation of detained or interned persons
5. An encamping; a ‘camping out’.
6. a. The whole company or body of persons encamped together, as surveyors, lumbermen, sportsmen, etc.; a company of nomads.

III. *fig.* from the military sense.
7. A ‘host’ or ‘army’ of arguments, facts, etc.
8. a. A body of adherents of a militant doctrine, or theory.
   b. The position in which ideas or beliefs are intrenched and strongly defended.

**adjective**
Ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to or characteristic of homosexuals

**noun5** ‘Camp’ behavior, mannerisms, etc.; a man exhibiting such behavior.

**verb1**
1. *intr.* To fight; to contend in battle.

**verb2**
1. a. *intr.* To live or remain in a camp; to form or pitch one’s camp; to encamp
3. *trans.* To establish or place in camp; to lodge; also to place, put

**verb3**
 a. *trans.* To make (something) ‘camp’; esp. in phr. to camp it up
 b. *intr.* To be ‘camp’; to be or behave like a homosexual.
INTRODUCTION

Everyday practices, rather than traditional political activity like the abolition movement, black conventions, the struggle for suffrage, electoral activities, et cetera, are the focus of my examination because I believe that these pedestrian practices illuminate inchoate and utopian expressions of freedom that are not and perhaps cannot be actualized elsewhere. The desires and longings that exceed the frame of civil rights and political emancipation find expression in quotidian acts labeled ‘fanciful,’ ‘exorbitant,’ and ‘excessive’ primarily because they express an understanding or imagination of freedom quite at odds with bourgeois expectations. — Saidiya V. Hartman, Scenes of Subjection

“Ladies and Gentlemen, it’s my great pleasure to welcome to the stage at this time—Miss Visa Denied!” The up stage becomes dimly illuminated as three shadows maneuver onto the stage. Finger snaps mark out a beat against a drawn out chord, keeping time and building anticipation—for the beat to drop, for the iconic words of the diva singer, and for the spectacular performers to emerge into the spotlight. In the meantime, the limbs of Visa Denied’s silhouette move slowly and deliberately as he transitions from one pose to the next, illustrating various fluctuations of movement and fixity, movement in fixity. Between one pose to the next, one magisterial stance of glamor to another, the interstitial movements and extravagant gestures constitute the ephemeral activities that make the next snapshot—equally ephemeral in nature—possible. The demand to “strike a pose,” delivered by the mechanical yet seductively captivating

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voice of Madonna, reverberates across the soundscape. In rhythm with this sonic command, our performer, the Malaysian immigrant drag queen, emerges in all his fabulousness, donning a chic bob and a sleek leather outfit.²

It might perhaps strike one as unusual that we observe Visa Denied lip-syncing with two other dancers for the nearly full five minutes that is Madonna’s “Vogue” in an episodic play of more than twenty-five scenes that purports to stage “150 years of Asian American history.” Yet, underwriting this lip-sync are multiple racial histories, labor relations, and complex global circuits within which queerness travels. Through such a staging, Chay Yew’s 1998 play A Beautiful Country compels us to consider Visa Denied and these circuits of queerness that he embodies as not a frivolous sideshow to but rather a central platform for the historical crossings between U.S. state power and Asian racializations. Listen closely. This Malaysian immigrant drag queen lip-syncs to the melody by global gay icon Madonna, raising questions about the place of queerness within the globalized economy and how various sites of Asia are interpellated by even as they negotiate and rework these systems. At the same time, this classic gay anthem “Vogue” also speaks to the practices of U.S. queers of color in ball cultures who historically developed this cultural practice not only as a means of navigating interconnected structures of systemic racism and homophobia, but also to relish in fun and fabulosity. Yet, the aestheticization and popularization of these practices raise questions about the processes by which racialized labor is commodified and stylized for cultural consumption, evacuated of its historical conditions and political uses. Accordingly, this number also gestures toward the

dominant practices—academically, culturally, and politically—that produce, disseminate, and consume an understanding of “queer” defined over and against its constitutive racialized others.

In what unfolds, I contemplate the possibilities for centering these queer performances, in all their multifaceted allure, complexities, and contradictions, as the starting point for apprehending “Asian America.” My use of ‘queer’ thus attends to both dissident sexual socialities and the structures by which they become unthinkable, particularly in narratives of cultural nationalism that circumscribe understandings of the ‘political.’ At the same time, queer queries not only historical and scholarly accounts that often unwittingly reinforce notions of heteronormative masculinity but also dominant invocations of ‘queer’ and ‘LGBT’ that willfully dismiss critiques of state power and structural racism as unrelated to questions of sexuality. This is also to suggest that such violences and exclusions indexed by “queer” are not merely historical, but present and ongoing. As such, queer, I contend, cannot come to stand in for signaling spaces of celebratory difference or pure radical resistance. Instead, I mine the productive ambivalence of the term as an analytic that illuminates not only the processes of normativization, hierarchization, and differential in-/exclusion based on the imbricated categories of race and sexuality, but also the creative practices and alternative ways of being and thinking that emerge from the spaces and bodies that endure such processes. I take inspiration from the aesthetic-theoretical work that Yew’s play performs in navigating through various distinct yet intertwined conversations between (Asian) American studies, critical ethnic studies, geography, performance studies, political philosophy, and queer theory. In particular, I follow Roderick A. Ferguson’s contention that the figure of the drag queen elucidates not only the structural conditions of and lived experiences under racial capitalism but also the rich analytic
possibilities of queer of color critique that stem from the vernacular practices and performances crafted by queers of color for inhabiting and thriving within such compromised conditions.\(^3\)

In order to do so, let us consider the very conditions that allow for Visa’s re-entrance onto the main-stage in such fabulous fashion. He first appears with his back to us in the opening scene of the play, facing a white immigration customs officer, who, through an onslaught of interrogations, demands answers about Visa’s intents as a precondition for entering the country. From this interrogation, the scene shifts back in time to the migration of Chinese as railroad laborers into the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. Behind the silk screen appear various shadows of moving bodies, miming the physical labor exerted by the migrant workers. Notably, Visa Denied is there too, as the silhouette of his unmistakable bob dances alongside these workers. Thus, Visa Denied not only emerges from these historical conditions, but also performs alternative ways of understanding and engaging with this very history. Between the theatricalized rituals at the borders of immigration and Visa’s lip-sync and vogue-ing, the play stages the various “scenes of subjection” within which Asian/Americans come into being in the nation-state.\(^4\) Within these scenes, the body marks a dense site of contestation, as the meanings it invokes and its movement within space register the racialized body’s anxious positioning with the national body politic. In so doing, this play, I contend, provides a crucial means of reassessing the work that “Asian America” does politically, aesthetically, and epistemologically. Put differently, Yew’s play stages myriad manifestations of queerness, within and against aesthetic and spatial structures of confinement, as central to both the historical processes of Asian racial formation and the scholarly-political-aesthetic works that Asian/Americanist


\(^4\) Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*. 
critique compels. It beckons us to ask: in what ways does queerness figure in Asian racial formation as a point of articulation within which state power is varyingly upheld and contested? How do the realms of the aesthetic and cultural coordinate with the metaphorical and geographic places that Asian/Americans inhabit within the U.S. nation-state?

Following Yew’s lead, I suggest that we might tease out these various structures and processes by analyzing the multivalence of “camp.” Merely six slides, Scene K illuminates the spectral presence of camps that haunts national memory as the video screens, on either side of the stage, project facts surrounding the incarceration of Japanese/Americans during World War II. Projected against the soft music of American wartime jazz, the second slide reads: “9,400 Japanese / Americans in Los / Angeles were / unjustly expelled / from their homes,” providing information about historical practices of racism materialized through camps. The scene ends with the following two slides: “Internees were then / herded off in buses / and trains” and “to a concentration / camp in Manzanar, / California” (216; emphasis added). Rehearsing these specific historical contexts, this scene elucidates how analyses of camp must attend to not only the physical sites of the incarceration, but also the discursive regimes that created the conditions of possibility for establishing these sites and justifying the imprisonment of Japanese/Americans. We see this as the closing slide of Scene K. transitions directly to the next scene with a slide that reads “HOW TO TELL YOUR / FRIENDS FROM THE / JAPS” (216). The continuity between these two slides suggests that these material and discursive practices of camp are in fact mutually dependent upon one another. Scene L. revisits this popular set of guidelines published by Time magazine, which colludes with the material establishment of camps by teaching citizens how to
assume differences between Asian ethnicities.5 Reading certain bodies as “Japs” successfully racializes them as enemies.

This performance fails to evoke affective responses of fear as Yew stages the disjuncture between the representational and the real through a doubling of camp. In providing the stage direction for a “very camp Truman Capote-esque MC,” he outs the campy construction of this manual by highlighting the farcical incongruities within this presumably sincere effort by the magazine (216). Through this campy performance, Yew interrogates the racial performativity of the enemy Jap through a fashion runway showdown. The MC reveals that Time’s manual can do little more than mark out the Japanese body the way that this scene does: she is the model “wearing horn-rimmed glasses” (216). Reading the race of a body becomes akin to reading an accessory as a cluster of ambiguous gestures becomes a placeholder for reading ethnicity: “The Chinese expression / is likely to be more placid / kindly / open / The Japanese expression / is more positive / dogmatic” (217). Ultimately, the question that concludes this scene “Can you tell the difference?” necessitates an answer in the negative as this campy scene elucidates how this ‘how to’ always fails. Rather than an aberrant scene within the play, this exchange between camp and camp actually intensifies and brings into relief a crucial dynamic underlying the various scenes of Asian American history restaged by the play.

This dissertation attends to this linking between camps, which I argue provides keen insight into both the modes of racial subjection for Asian/Americans and the possibilities for performing otherwise. Literatures surrounding the histories of Asian racialization in the United States compel us to grapple with the seemingly counterintuitive entanglement between “the

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5 While the play states that this article comes from Life magazine, it actually comes from Time. However, both publications ran an almost identical piece on the same day. “How to Tell Your Friends From the Japs,” Time, December 22, 1941; “How to Tell Japs From the Chinese,” Life, December 22, 1941.
“camp” as exceptional spaces of biopolitical management and “camp” as a performative practice of queer excess. While each practice of camp has been theorized as exemplary of modernity, these considerations have been largely separated into studies of political economy, on the one hand, and queer aesthetics on the other. Taken up predominantly in political philosophy and the social sciences, the former centers the death camps in Europe during World War II as epitomizing state violence within modern politics. Meanwhile, celebratory narratives in lesbian and gay/queer studies champion camp aesthetics as crucial survival strategies against widespread homophobia. Yet, these accounts neglect to consider the centrality of camps within longer histories of racial and colonial violence. Examining camps organized around labor, internment, resettlement, and counterinsurgency, I consider how camps proliferated in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century onward alongside legal exclusion measures against Asian migrants as a means of policing the parameters of citizenship and expanding the state’s capacities for managing space and bodies.

This study establishes how these camps stage states of provisionality wherein populations are configured as provisional to national belonging along the axes of race and sexuality. Provisionality, in other words, affords the improvisation of the meaningfulness of legal citizenship. My project illuminates the logic of encampment as a key aspect of the rationalism deployed by the modern nation-state. Such logics legitimize processes of differential value-making that select and assign certain bodies to camps of various kinds. The logic of encampment attends to how anxious efforts to contain and fence off Asian bodies manifest through both spatial and discursive strategies of containment to ‘fix’ bodies in place to maintain the geographical and symbolic distance between the larger national body politic and its racial others.

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This logic thus invites us to center culture as a pivotal domain wherein state and capitalist political and economic interests become consolidated. Rather than see such logic as perpetrated primarily by the official discourses of state, through policies and laws, I point to the centrality of cultural discourses as complementing these state actions. In other words, I emphasize the role of cultural production—especially as they depict that which is seemingly trivial, benevolent, and irrational—as dialectically related to these official modes of racialization and sexualization that subtend the logic of encampment.

This project thus reorients and complicates dominant critical discussions of the camps. Most prominent in that scholarship is the work of Giorgio Agamben, who posits that ‘the camp’ constitutes “the biopolitical paradigm of the modern.” Centering this paradigm on the Nazi death camps, he contends that the camp exemplifies the state of exception, in which the sovereign suspends the normative legal order to enact enormous violence by reducing bodies to bare life. Yet, his conceptions of bare life and exception remain insufficient insofar as they occlude the historical centrality of camps for the United States in managing different racialized bodies and their provisional status to national belonging. At the same time, emphases on alienation and melancholia in studies of racial performance overemphasize injury and loss while cutting off the spaces for excess and dark humor. These distinct discourses overlap in framing state power as totalizing while eliding the resistance of people living under compromised circumstances. Moreover, these accounts render unthinkable the central role of apparent frivolity in both consolidating and resisting violent state power. By doing so, they tacitly exemplify “straight” performances of victimhood that subjugate and disavow queer aesthetics as resources crucial to resistance and survival. Focusing in on camps that have historically managed the

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Asian-raced bodies, I contend that dominant approaches to their archives normativize camp experiences into ideals of Americanness by deploying tropes of the tragic and heroic that embed camps within a narrative of struggle and triumph.

In light of these straightforward, or simply, “straight” or reproductive accounts, what might it mean to *queer* the archives of camp? Here, I am thinking alongside Regina Kunzel, who provocatively notes that scholars “have underlined the archive’s normative, normalizing power, but I wonder, too, if there’s something queer about archives: in their unruliness masked by orderliness, their excess and eccentricities, their sometimes erotic charge, the way they spark and frustrate our desires.” Queer, in other words, indexes a cluster of dissident or non-normative erotic desires, practices, relations, and socialities. Yet, queer also gestures toward the historical structures and processes that designate these clusters as unruly or improper, outside the confines of the normative ideal, and therefore in need of regulation. To *queer* archives then points to the double function of attending to the absent presence of such clusters and an interrogation of the methods that render them unthinkable or undesirable.

Queer, I argue, prominently registers within these archives as what Karen Shimakawa calls the “phantasms of orientalness.” The Oriental captures a number of racial anxieties that construct Asian bodies as outside the symbolic parameters of national citizenship, as unassimilable aliens who exhibit forms of perverse gender and improper sexuality that are threatening to U.S. domesticity. Ironically, camps often served to *produce* this queerness, inverting gender roles and disrupting kinship systems. Insofar as orientalness shapes the processes that queer Asian-raced bodies outside the bounds of citizenship and therefore in need

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of confinement, straight accounts of the camps reject its phantasms as unruly, disciplining them in line with displays of patriotism. As a result, acts that redeploy orientalness in order to unsettle the logics of encampment often become illegible. Queerness understood in this sense emerges as a dense site of contestation through which these phantasms of orientalness work to both make and unmake the structures of incarceration. Or, in other words, I would argue that we are prompted to engage with the camp archives as also campy archives.

Why the campy? While camp aesthetics has been notoriously difficult to define, it generally refers to queer performances of cultural excess, characterized by a mixture of exaggerated irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor. Camp plays with and troubles binaries, particularly gendered sexual norms, by coupling that which normally do not seem to belong together. But, its manifestations vary widely from overly ornamental style to cross-gender drag performances and witty word play. Hence, the seemingly divergent takes in two common practices of camp: one, a set of strategies developed by queers in the U.S. and Europe to pass and build community within a homophobic public; the other, a postmodern ironic appreciation of popular media that are “so bad, they’re good.” Thus, since its public outing by Susan Sontag with her 1964 essay “Notes on ‘Camp,’” the aesthetic has generated heated debates around its uses, effects, and politics. For these reasons, scholars postulate that there are different kinds of camp that must be assessed in relation to its specific contexts. In particular, I draw our attention to the understudied intimacy of camp aesthetics in relation to vexed histories of racialization and resistance. I argue that camp aesthetics, often dismissed as trivial, plays a pivotal yet understudied role in both the processes of racialization that reproduce these spaces of confinement and the creative practices that bodies enact to inhabit and challenge these terms.

Camp aesthetics nuances the contradictory processes of state power in rationalizing the
encampment of Asian bodies by mediating their provisional status between the unassimilable Oriental and model minority. Within its mediating function as abjection and triangulation, Asianness shapes and is shaped by racialized unruly bodies who are deemed as always suspect, inscrutable, and duplicitous. I argue that camp indexes various spatial and aesthetic structures of im/mobility that aimed to fix this unruliness by containing and mediating the movements and meanings these bodies perform. Camp, then, stages the scene of queering that regulates the movement and meaning surrounding Asian/American bodies outside the normative ideals of the U.S. citizen. Through camp aesthetics, cultural productions redeploy vexed issues of racial stereotype and minstrelsy by underscoring the historical use of aesthetics and humor in configuring sexual perversity around racialized bodies. Asian/American literatures and performances challenge assumptions that camps contain docile bodies at the mercy of the all-powerful state. Instead, these productions map the dynamic relations of bodies in camp spaces, elucidating practices of resistance that unsettle notions of “bare life.” Asian American literature and performance prove for these reasons rich resources for advancing a study of the mutual interdependence of the logic of encampment with the aesthetic of campiness. Before further tracing the historical entanglement between the camp and camp, let us chart the prolific scholarship around each term to better elucidate the conditions shaping the unthinkability about their intimacies as well as the conditions of (in)hospitality for Asian/Americanist critique within these discourses.

Reorienting “The Camp as Biopolitical Paradigm of the Modern” Through Its Racial Others

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While, in the academy, Japanese American internment camp history is most often discussed in Asian Americanist discourses, a number of different encampment experiences characterize the history of Asians in the United States: immigrant detention on Angel Island; labor on the West Coast and plantations in Hawai‘i; resettlement for Southeast Asian refugees displaced from war; and, the indefinite detention of Arab Americans and South Asian Americans in such places as Guantanamo Bay. Extant scholarship establishes the regularity with which modern nation-states use a variety of camps for objectives such as detention, security, labor, death, evacuation, and reeducation, and justified on the basis of necessity, whether as a consequence of natural disaster, profit-making, or national security. Flexible in form and function, the spaces of camp are framed in terms of provisionality. Meanwhile, the allegedly temporary nature of these spaces codes the encamped people and rationalizes the varying degrees of deprivation, infringement of rights, and confinement as a result of these state practices. I suggest that focusing on these key camp experiences in Asian American histories illuminates the racialized violence constitutive of citizenship and the processes by which the modern U.S. state increased its capacities for managing space and bodies through camps.

While these various campsites have received sustained scholarly engagement, they are rarely theorized in relation to one another as camps and alongside the attendant sociopolitical processes and historical conditions that they elucidate. Doing so problematizes and nuances the prolific, extant scholarship around “the camp.” In working with and through Asian American history with a focus on these operations of the racial state, I both draw on and extend critical discourses around politics and the state in which “the camp” often singularly refers to the death camps of World War II and serves, as in the work of Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman, to show that these camps are not exceptional, but rather are central to projects of modernity that
legitimize while obscuring mass state violence.\textsuperscript{11} Giorgio Agamben goes so far as to insist on assuming “camp as the biopolitical paradigm of the modern” within which death and totalitarianism constitute the heart of politics.\textsuperscript{12} For Agamben, the camp spatializes the state of exception, and thereby sovereign power, wherein the suspension of the law both exceeds and redefines the normative juridical order. This exception comes to define the rule and the bodies within camp, reduced to bare life, attest to a “zone of indistinction,” at the threshold blurring law and fact, human and inhuman, value and nonvalue.\textsuperscript{13} Agamben further asserts that any place in which the state of exception manifests may be seen as a camp. Yet, the theorization remains tied to the concentration camp as he posits that the camp emerged during the world wars in Europe when the fictive ties between birth, land, and state began to unravel.

While Agamben’s writings have maintained a hegemonic hold on subsequent scholarship on the camp, scholars have critiqued his theorization as ahistorical and inattentive to spatial geographies. Building off the work of Black feminist scholars Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers, Jared Sexton critiques Agamben’s elision of natal alienation of the Black slave in illustrating how “the racial circumscription of political life (\textit{bios}) under slavery predates and prepares the rise of the modern democratic state.”\textsuperscript{14} These longer racial historical antecedents put pressure on Agamben’s claims about the camp and its exceptionality. Moreover, in contradistinction to the emphasis on bare life, postcolonialist Achille Mbembe’s framing of necropolitics makes explicit the processes of racial differentiation by which some populations

\begin{enumerate}
\item[12] Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life}, 119.
\item[13] Ibid., 6.
\end{enumerate}
must die for the flourishing of others. Against the singularity of camp, especially as posed by Arendt, Mbembe outlines alternative “repressed topographies of cruelty,” arguing that the slave plantation and colonies serve as earlier states of exception as exemplified by the exercise of complete domination over slave’s body in the former and the suspension of law and unmitigated capacity to slaughter natives under the guise of civilization in the latter. These topographies across space and time link together a series of “death-worlds” that subject populations to conditions that transform them into “the status of living dead.”

Through the example of “late-modern colonial occupation,” Mbembe observes “a concatenation of multiple powers: disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical. The combination of the three allocates to the colonial power an absolute domination over the inhabitants of the occupied territory.” In order to attend to such differential positioning of populations along life and death, Mbembe urges us to consider the multiple forms of power exercised within the political.

In response to these critiques, Agamben clarified in a 2004 essay that: “This was obviously a philosophical claim, not a historical account, since one could not confuse phenomena that must, on the contrary, be distinguished.” In making such a distinction, Agamben tellingly points toward what many have questioned as his totalizing and ahistorical theorization of state power centered on the camps. These critiques, however, can perhaps invite us to complicate his genealogy of the camps and its inextricable relation to the other sites of historical racial and colonial violence that such critics examine. As Alexander Weheliye claims: “the concentration camp, the colonial outpost, and slave plantation suggest three of many relay points in the weave of modern politics, which are neither exceptional nor comparable, but simply

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16 Ibid., 29–30.
How might theorizations of the camp in relation to “the modern” shift when we consider the variety of camps that have been used in the service of modern state authority and their intimacies with the colony and the plantation? In posing this question, this project does not intend to claim the exceptionality of camps, yet again, but rather to further complicate its manifestations in ways that bring to the foreground their connectedness and relationality to these sites of racial and colonial violence.

Indeed, the historical development of concentration camps evinces its entrenchment in both empire and nation-building as they arose in the late nineteenth century with the Spanish campos de concentraciones in Cuba, the British camps in the Boer War, and the U.S. war against Philippine revolutionaries following the Spanish-American War. These camps largely served as counterinsurgency measures, a means of relocating and concentrating civilians for military interest and necessity. On the one hand, the clearing and relocation of civilians may be framed as a humanitarian effort, removing them from the scenes of warfare and thus away from danger. On the other, the camps also serve to isolate civilians from insurgents and revolutionaries insofar as they represent the potential force that can sympathize with and join with rebels. Thus, while not built for the exclusive purpose of death and elimination, the camps emblematize how “the exclusion of the enemy from ‘civilisation’ or blunt racial attitudes of superiority were used to justify the intensification of warfare. The resort to civilian internment, involving a blurring of the fragile border between combatants and non-combatants, became acceptable.”

Camps then spatialize and manage bodies through modes of racial classification and differentiation that shift their positionings between the lines of life and death, violence and protection. Paul Gilroy

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usefully conceptualizes “camp-thinking” to examine how these modes were rationalized and institutionalized through the proliferation of knowledge regimes and systems of classification in the late nineteenth century. Gilroy uses “camp” to name how such belief coalesces into imperial formations of the nation based on “their territorial, hierarchical and militaristic qualities.”

This logic of “camp-thinking” both helped produce and were in turn shaped by the material camps of the totalitarian regimes, as mass execution illustrates the most violent manifestation of forming a nation based the exclusion of others.

Between the open and closed, temporary and permanent, camps—Charles Hailey argues—“are at the focus of emerging political and spatial questions of identity, residency, safety, and tensions of mobility and fixity.”

The forms and objectives for camps are multiple, even as bodies suffer varying conditions of rightlessness. For these reasons, Yến Lê Espiritu differentiates between open and closed camps based on her study of Vietnamese refugee camps. In the open camps, inhabitants are afforded a greater flexibility of movement within and sometimes outside the camp space while they await processing to travel toward a new and presumably final destination for refuge. In contradistinction to these camps, the closed camps more closely resemble discussions of ‘the camp’: forceful confinement; denial of basic rights and protections; and, the withholding of necessary provisions of food, adequate shelter, and medical aid. She explains: “The closed camps and detention centers shared a common characteristic: immobilization—the constriction of daily life into a restricted space with multiple constraints.”

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Moreover, in such camps, the putatively temporary nature of the refugee camps as a transit point toward a new country of arrival becomes indefinitely postponed and extended.

Camps in these multiple ways spatialize the processes by which Asian/Americans have been differentially incorporated into the U.S. national body politic through the state of provisionality. The complex temporalities of provisionality allow for the blurring in distinctions between the legitimate and illegitimate as well as the parameters of legality. As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, the provisional denotes that which is “arranged for, or existing for the present, possibly to be changed later.” Not merely synonymous with temporariness then, provisionality underscores a distinctive relationship to the ‘now,’ with the arrangement and existence of something being for the present. Instead, the structures in place serve as what works for the time being. As much as it might try to anticipate the shifts and changes to come, camps remain legitimate and open to the need for transformations and alterations in the future.

With this temporal tie to the present, the grounds for provisionality can be made through varying invocations of necessity, emergency, crisis, or disaster. In this way, claims of exception are certainly part of the repertoire in justifying the present-focused temporality, but exception itself does not quite sufficiently attend to the ways in which new processes and practices come into play as alterations build upon, extend, and adjust already existing legal and political structures. The past enters into these structures through their historical conditions, which provide the grounds for facilitating the interests of the present moment. In the case that extraordinary measures need to come into play, states not only adopt the existing frameworks to lend credibility to their actions, but also improvise new forms of legal functions and make use of other cultural discourses to rationalize instances of radical departure from what is legal or legitimate.
Accordingly, the construction and sustenance of these camps demand not only, or always, the suspension of law, but also the creation of new laws and bureaucratic procedures. Interrogating assumptions about the suspension or absence of law, Laleh Khalili argues that “liberal empires and conquering powers create ostensibly lawless places through a conscious and deliberate legal process of temporarily and functionally setting aside one body of law and adopting another, or in rarer and more extreme instances, replacing legal procedures with administrative procedures.”23 Camps necessitated the improvisation of new modes of governance and legal reasoning to rationalize the putative lawlessness of its spaces and the rightlessness of its detainees. At the same time, the dominance of death camps compels the persistent series of disavowals around the different uses of “camp.” We see, for example, politicians, state officials, and government authorities vehemently deny that the various sites of confinement under their watch constitute “camps.” Such disavowals aim to distance facilities of detention, labor, or suspension of rights. Meanwhile, government agencies also draw upon the benign association of summer camps to recast these spaces in terms of fun and state benevolence. These contradictory configurations of the camp speak to the complexities of state power at large and the difficulties of apprehending its heterogeneous manifestations.

Given these difficulties, scholars have increasingly grappled with the notion of improvisation to shift what has more commonly been articulated as innovations of statecraft and empire-building. In tracing The Intimacies of Four Continents, Lisa Lowe speaks of the “improvisation of new forms of sovereignty” in which rulers work toward managing its inadequacies and the impossibilities of a totalizing power.24 An understanding of the project of

empire as a deadly yet incoherent one, constantly threatened by its own administrative
deficiencies and the bureaucratic difficulties of management, can gesture toward alternative
routes and paths of what could have been. Thus, the shift in emphasis from innovation to
improvisation perhaps invites us to consider the more contingent nature of state power. Rather
than positing a singular will, sovereign power, or agent, improvisation underscores the
bureaucratic nature of these processes, as piecemeal rather than coherent and whole. In this
sense, what might have been the original intentions for certain state projects become frustrated,
revised, and adapted based on unforeseen circumstances such as natural conditions of
temperature and terrain, logistic difficulties, and acts of resistance from the subjugated
populations. These processes may best be illuminated through the emerging field of
“organizational improvisation,” which aims to better assess, anticipate, and prepare for various
modes of change and crisis. Providing strategies for crisis management, from the minute to the
macro level, the field works well to engage and streamline models of efficiency and productivity
for various organizations and corporations.25

Improvisation asks us to inquire into how the state of provisionality within camp is lived,
inhabited, and negotiated. For those who are encamped, the widely divergent experiences of
camp life come to signal an “impasse” within which “people find themselves developing skills
for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on.”26 Most often,
the attachment that supposedly lifts one out of this impasse is structured by the “cruel optimism”
toward the promise of democratic equality proffered by the nation-state. Such attachments

25 To be clear, my point here is neither to indict nor assess the merits and politics of this field. Rather, I find that some of its premises and guiding principles illustrate well the multiple uses and potential effects of thinking alongside improvisation. Ken N Kamoche, Miguel Pina e Cunha, and Joao Vieira da Cunha, eds., Organizational Improvisation (New York: Routledge, 2001).
manifest in a wide range of camps. Laborers in labor camps hope that their economic toil will allow them to accumulate enough capital to eventually enter and enjoy the rights of citizenship. During the internment of the Nikkei in World War II, internees worked to prove that they were “normal” Americans by performing cultural belonging as a way of combatting their enemy racialization. The displaced refugees gathered in camps await decisions by other nation-states to take them in. All these instances substantiate Hannah Arendt’s observation that the guarantee and protection of rights that are most needed by these individuals are ironically dependent upon that which placed them in such compromised situations of differential rightlessness in the first place—the nation-state.

Despite the cruelly optimistic attachments that might be fostered within these camps, the bodies and the alternative social communities they generated are by no means reducible to bare life at the mercy of the state. By problematizing Agamben and reframing theorizations of biopolitics through Black feminist thought, Weheliye nuances the various modes of power contested within racializing assemblages, which offer an alternative conceptualization: “The particular assemblage of humanity under purview here is habeas viscus, which, in contrast to bare life, insists on the importance of miniscule movements, glimmers of hope, scraps of food, the interrupted dreams of freedom found in those spaces deemed devoid of human life.”

Provisionality and improvisation allow us to home in on these ‘miniscule movements’ and forms of living that bare life renders unthinkable. As A. Naomi Paik astutely argues, the camp installs a spectrum of rightlessness that precisely renders the claims and humanity of the encamped illegible. Yet, even within these circumstances, “[r]ightless subjects craft opportunity through the

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very same mechanisms that have created their rightless condition.”

Similarly, destabilizing the overwhelming theorization of bare life, Raffaela Puggioni calls on us to see the possibility of resistance within camps by looking at two Italian detention centers. More importantly, she shows how their acts of dissent attracted attention of those outside the camp and fomented a movement of solidarity that works across the walls separating camps from the outside. In this way, Ernesto Laclau argues that campmates and other dissenters, rather than being completely outside the law and thereby stripped of political protections (bios) and reduced to bare life (zoe), reject the existing legal order and call for a new law. Collectively then, these scholars compel us to ask: what if we take a look again at the practices enacted inside these camps? What modes of improvisation are elucidated within the state of provisionality?

It is perhaps not surprising that improvisation is most predominantly addressed to aesthetic practices. In such discourses, improvisation is frequently associated with studies in acting and theater as well as discussions of a Black jazz and blues tradition. Improvisation elucidates for Fred Moten the ontology and aesthetics of Blackness that accounts for not only the visual but also the oral, as well as both the contours of knowledge and being-ness along with their radical negation. Yet, improvisation is also closely related to discussions of performativity and queer camp. Exploiting the citationality of oppressive gender and sexual norms, queer camp inhabits and reworks the dominating structures to which queer bodies are confined. Following

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these insights of queer camp, I invite us to inquire into the ways in which encamped
Asian/Americans negotiated the spaces of confinement and challenged the logic of encampment
through improvisational practices, aesthetic or otherwise.

Separate Camps? Contested Aesthetics of Queer or/of Color Critique

The campiness of Asian American performance registers the centrality of improvisation
as queerness to Asian American histories. Camp aesthetics remains something of particular
fascination in queer discourses and cultural productions, even as it eludes attempts to fix its
definition and generates passionate debates about its characteristics, uses, effects, and politics.
Camp is generally understood as a sensibility or style defined by playful, exaggerated, excessive
displays of irony, theatricality, humor, and aestheticism produced by pairing incongruities.
Emerging as sensibility and/or style, camp traverses the dynamic processes and relations
between performance and spectatorship as well as production and consumption. A general
genealogy of this elusive practice helps identify the points of possible convergence and
divergence between encampment and camp aesthetics in relation to questions of modernity. This
genealogy will take us toward possibly paradoxical or directly contradictory claims, including
allegations of conservatism or fascism alongside claims of a radically subversive potentiality.

As a key text referenced in discourses around camp, “Notes on ‘Camp’” infamously
pushed Susan Sontag and the subcultural style into the spotlight. Although not necessarily the
first text to mention camp, the essay is definitely one of the first to engage with camp extensively
and to generate mass attention. Christopher Isherwood’s The World in the Evening (1954), as
Sontag and many others state, is often credited as the first text to mention camp, even though
Mark Booth has uncovered even earlier iterations. Following its publication in *The Parisian Review*, “Notes on ‘Camp’” provoked a number of academic and popular discussions giving rise to something legible as “Camp Studies.” Others cite Sontag’s publication as marking the decline of camp, as it became increasingly taken up in popular forms, what has alternatively been called ‘straight Camp’ or ‘Pop camp.’ In other words, camp has been mainstreamed and ‘de-gayified.’

If “to talk about camp is to betray it,” many also felt that the betrayal lay not in the mere fact of the essay’s publication, but rather in the notes themselves. While some often reference the specific notes to substantiate their arguments around camp, others interrogate and rewrite them. Four aspects have been particularly contentious and debated: 1. camp as sensibility, leading to questions about whether camp is intentional or unintentional, a spectatorial practice or a performance; 2. camp as apolitical; 3. the relationship between camp and homosexuals; 4. form versus content. These points have guided the debates around the characteristics, origins, uses, and effects of camp.

In order to consider these tensions more extensively, let us fast forward to the 1990’s with the rise of queer theory to see the development of these debates. Scholarship around camp seemed to shift dramatically toward a general agreement about its political potential with the rise of queer theory. The question was no longer whether or not camp is political, but rather how it is political and what kinds of politics it offers. The debates around the politics of camp are intimately connected to questions of queerness, reflecting the dynamic between gay as an identitarian category based on sexual attraction toward the same gender and queer as an anti-identitarian analytic that disrupts gender and sexual binaries. Three notable edited collections on

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Camp were published in that decade: David Bergman’s *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), Moe Meyer’s *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (Routledge, 1994), and Fabio Cleto’s *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* (University of Michigan Press, 1999).\(^{34}\) Bergman’s witty anecdote around the publication of his anthology illuminates the changing academic climate at the time. Bemusedly, he recalls how his proposal about a collection on camp was turned down in 1979, but later picked up when proposed again in 1989; it even had another publisher trying to poach him away. He postulates that this marked shift is in no small part due to the re-energization of studies around gender and sexuality with the advent of books and discourses proliferating around the rubric of queer theory.

The rising capital of queer theory did not merely, though perhaps indirectly, help foster more hospitable conditions for the publication of works on camp. Instead, queer theory presented the opportunity for reimagining camp as offering a radical politics. Camp discourse’s engagement with a burgeoning queer theory is not quite unexpected. Camp has arguably played a substantial role in the emergence of queer studies and the theorization of gender and sexuality. Prior to queer theory, discussions of ‘masquerade’ provided insight into the performance of gender roles, as Sue-Ellen Case’s “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic” (1988) exemplifies.\(^{35}\) Often identified as a key founding text of queer theory, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* centrally features Esther Newton’s ethnography of drag queens in conceptualizing the potential of gender performativity. Butler sees the power of drag in problematizing the fiction of a ‘true’ gender identity and exposing the performativity of gender through the performance of “stylized acts”; by

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negotiating the practices of signification to question the regulatory processes of gender, camp and its parodic performances then serve as a possible platform for a subversive politics.\textsuperscript{36}

In each of the three collections on camp, we can see a conscientious effort of reconsidering camp through the queer. Moe Meyer’s introductory remarks demonstrate an anxiety around and investment in demonstrating “camp” as a viable and valuable category of analysis for academia, as “queer” became an increasingly intelligible rubric imbued with cultural capital. Sharply situating camp away from claims of its apolitical-ness, Meyer’s introduction to his collection places camp’s politics squarely in line with discussions of queer’s subversive potentiality.\textsuperscript{37} As Kathryn Bond Stockton rightfully critiques, however, this formulation of camp as the epitome of queer, in the sense of a radical negativity that leads to the complete dissolution of identity altogether, is ironically based on an identitarian foundation of the homosexual.\textsuperscript{38} This central premise guides Meyer’s delineation of an exclusionary standard for what counts as camp. Cleto also points out the ironic nature of Meyer’s positing of a dichotomy between Camp, as a queer practice, and “Pop camp” as a derivative, which assumes an authentic original and a fake copy, a division that camp famously problematizes.\textsuperscript{39}

Given the proliferation of Pop camp in contemporary culture along with its criticisms, Meyer’s insistence upon naturalizing the link between camp and gay is perhaps understandable. Gaining increased visibility as a cultural phenomenon during the 1960s and 1970s, camp has also been discussed extensively outside queer discourses as it was used and appropriated as a practice

\textsuperscript{37} Meyer, \textit{The Politics and Poetics of Camp}.
\textsuperscript{39} Cleto, 16-17.
by mainstream popular culture. As such, camp aesthetics has been framed as characteristic of popular culture within academic discourses, often as an indictment of hegemonic mass culture. In a reductive flattening of camp, Frederic Jameson uses camp to make a condemning assessment of postmodernism as pastiche, defined by a superficial love for artifice. His use of camp draws on the notion of incongruous juxtapositions since he argues that culture is now based on a kind of pastiche that evacuates historicity in piecing together different parts without consideration of their specificities.\(^{40}\) Such an understanding is prevalent in what has been alternatively called “straight camp” which bases the theorization and practice of camp as aestheticism based merely on artifice.

Others have even argued that camp produces the cultural logic of violent practices such as Fascism. When conceived as a stand-in for aestheticism, camp can be seen as not merely complicit with, but also providing the constitutive logic for practices of encampment. By now, the forms of aestheticism under Fascism have been widely discussed. Indeed, these points of contact between these two discourses of encampment and camp aesthetics have been discussed by several key figures already introduced here. The archives of the Nazi party, Judith Halberstam argues, for example, demonstrate that homosexuals were not merely victims of persecution, but also that homosexuals were also present within the Nazi party and complicit with the mass murders. Rather than asserting a clear relationship between homosexuality and Fascism, Halberstam’s intervention urges us to trouble prevalent desires of creating heroic historiographies around queer figures as inherently subversive or resistant.\(^{41}\) Instead, we need to examine moments in which queer sexualities have been and can be mobilized toward

\(^{40}\) Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 34.
perpetuating systems and conditions of oppression. Paul Gilroy’s description of military style and propaganda as “The Glamour of Fascism” strongly resonates with Sontag’s discussion in “Fascinating Fascism.” Sontag observes an uneasy trend whereby critics prioritize the ‘beauty’ of art against any possible form of politics, ignoring themes that are directly connected to a form of Fascist aesthetics. Although there is no direct mention of queer camp in the more well-known published version of this essay, Ann Pellegrini astutely observes an indictment of camp as “proto-fascist” in the version published in Under the Sign of Saturn. Sontag writes:

> Backing up the solemn choosy formalist appreciations lies a larger reserve of appreciation, the sensibility of camp, which is unfettered by the scruples of high seriousness: and the modern sensibility relies on continuing trade-offs between the formalist approach and camp taste. Art which evokes themes of fascist aesthetic is popular now, and for most people it is probably no more than a variant of camp.

Here, Sontag evokes a sense of Pop camp and sees the longing for Fascism as facilitated by this “modern sensibility” that privileges the surface of the aesthetic, disregards historical content, and in the process becomes intimately entangled with the production of such conditions. That is, all three writers show the dangerous ways in which camp can be used to facilitate violent ends.

This dangerous limning of the campy to the camp is illuminated in the cultural archives surrounding Nazi Germany as well. Consider the trial and tribulations of Sally Bowles, the role that solidified the international fame of diva and gay icon Liza Minnelli. Set during Weimar

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Germany in 1931, *Cabaret* is formally structured within the course of a cabaret show that frames an era during which the stage is set for Nazi Germany as the theater for genocide. Significantly the source material for the film is the 1939 novel *The Berlin Stories*, which was written by camp expert Christopher Isherwood and inspired in part by his actual experiences in Berlin at the time. Against the backdrop of escalating state violence and racial tension, the line “life is a cabaret” compels us to question both the possibilities and dangers of performance as a means of intervening in the political atmosphere. At one scene during the latter part of the film, burlesque queens dance a number with canes at stage. As the music transitions, they don hats, their bodies stiffen, and the canes transform into rifles. The previously lax bodies swaying in movement now march militaristically, resembling the Nazi soldiers that shadow the film. The audience’s laughter upon witnessing this shift seems to mirror the sentiment that some of the characters express insistently, that the Nazis are not to be taken seriously and that Germany as a whole will come to control them in due time. At the end of the movie, a mirror reflects the blurred faces, rows of audience members, in which the only distinguishing characteristic is the red Nazi arm band uniformly worn by all of them. The final shot eerily beckons us to interrogate the politics of spectatorship and what it means that the previous laughing audience members are now replaced by Nazi soldiers.

Scholarly and cultural accounts around the Holocaust play a significant role in structuring the impossibilities for thinking “the camp” and “camp” together aside from an antagonistic relation or one that upholds state violence. Even in more benign assessments of camp aesthetics, in which it is not deemed as inevitably facilitating constructions of ‘the camp,’ accounts suggest that its humor is diametrically opposed to the tone of the camp. Here, we return to Sontag once again, but to her infamous “Notes on ‘Camp.’” In one of these notes, she analogizes camp as a
sensibility particularly associated with homosexuals with the quality of moral seriousness as one particular to Jews. In making such a claim, she not only constitutes camp and moral seriousness as opposites of sorts, but occludes the possibility for Jewish camp humor. This tendency, Ann Pellegrini notes, not only obscures a rich tradition of Jewish comics but also evacuate[s] the role of seriousness as a constitutive element of queer camp, in what Pellegrini calls “camp sincerity.”

A number of scholars, including Pellegrini, have observed that the common emphasis on humor over and against seriousness in examinations of camp tends to elide the historical, material contexts in which queer camp practitioners developed humor as a response to the myriad forms of violences under heteronormativity and homophobia. The exclusive focus on the humor of camp risks commodifying its aesthetic style while dismissing its constitutive foundations of violence.

Meanwhile, similar anxieties about the trivialization of trauma and historical violence have often rendered the comedic mode unthinkable around dominant accounts surrounding the camps of the Holocaust. What Sontag marks as moral seriousness may thus be placed in further dialogue with ideas about what constitutes proper modes of remembering the Holocaust. Even more particularly, it functions as a central characteristic in what Terrence Des Pres has observed as a “Holocaust etiquette,” which demands that discussions aim toward the most accurate and solemn characterizations of the Holocaust, preferably as a single, isolated event. With the Holocaust ensnared within “bounds of high seriousness,” laughter within or around the camps remains unthinkable and improper. Despite the unthinkability of humor within the camps, scholars wonder about the prevalence of laughter mentioned in survivors’ accounts, as a coping

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47 Ibid.
mechanism to deal with the brutal conditions of camp.\textsuperscript{48} Such dark crossings between the tragic and the comic are central to queer camp, enacting “the practice of laughing at situations that are horrifying or tragic.”\textsuperscript{49} The demand for high seriousness around the camps can potentially risk obscuring these and other related coping strategies and modes of collective organizing: “All survivors of the camps remember the intense necessity referred to by the term ‘to organize,’ the need to steal and improvise and trade in order to support collective life, a kind of fluid organization distinct from the infamous ‘organization’ of Hitler’s killing machine.”\textsuperscript{50} Accounts of these camps through tropes of the tragic risk replicating notions of bare life by incessantly attending to the “‘organization’ of Hitler’s killing machine” over and against the fleeting, improvisational practices by which bodies organized within and against this machine.

In contrast to “Holocaust etiquette” then, Des Pres postulates a “Holocaust laughter” that, rather than aim to objectively ‘re-present’ the Holocaust through the more common realist modes, foregrounds a “comic spirit [that] proceeds in an antimimetic mode that mocks what is, that deflates or even cancels the authority of its object.”\textsuperscript{51} Despite its usefulness, laughter and the comic are not associated with an intrinsic politic. Arguably, we must remain vigilant to how and toward what end laughter is invoked, especially in relation to the Holocaust. There are risks of trivialization, banalization, and historical amnesia.\textsuperscript{52} Cultural productions have also increasingly turned toward Hitler as a figure for comedic fodder. The 2005 film adaptation of *The Producers*

\textsuperscript{50} Des Pres, “Holocaust Laughter?,” 224.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 220.
and its main number “Springtime for Hitler and Germany” make clear how the campy provides the means for this humor, risking the blatant commodification of a moment of historical violence. The absurdity has continued with the comedy *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) as well as the prevalent “Hitler Reacts to” meme. Such prevalence seems to substantiate claims that the mainstreaming of camp has led to its dilution purely as ironic humor. Indeed, comedic renderings of Hitler have been around since World War II.53 While impersonations of Hitler can work to delegitimize his authority, they can also work to obscure the horrors of the Holocaust and serve as a means of buttressing the moral superiority of the West.54 Camp aesthetics, I suggest, allows us to nuance this productive ambivalence between surface and depth as modes of irony and humor work varyingly to elucidate or elide the political and material conditions from which they emerge. Thus, the campy and the absurdist have also been rendered toward different ends: to explore the role of humor as a coping mechanism, as in the award-winning film *Life Is Beautiful* (1997); to recast Arendt’s famous observation about the “banality of evil,” as in Martin Amis’s widely acclaimed 2014 novel *The Zone of Interest*; and, as emblematic of a mode of historical memory in the face of impossible archives and origins in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002). These comedic renderings, despite or because of their irreverence and humor, have the effect of questioning the predominant modes of remembering the Holocaust and gesturing toward other possibilities of apprehending its legacies.


The increasing frequency of camp aesthetics in such instances compels not only a reassessment of its histories outside political uses of queer subcultures, but also speak to the mainstreaming of camp, which has prompted multiple pronouncements about “the death of camp.” These trends are part of what many scholars decry as the “degayification” of camp aesthetics. As a counterpoint, they underscore camp’s historical uses, particularly in relation to homosexual subcultures. Rather than tracing an etymology to locate an “authentic” camp, however, such efforts beckon us to see the different ways that camp has been and can be used subversively. One interpretation associates camp, as the knowing wink, the parody of a dominant heteronormative culture, what Philip Core calls “the lie that tells the truth,” which at times aligns associations of camp with triviality and aristocratic elitism. Others urge for a need to situate the rise of camp in the early twentieth century within urbanizing spaces as a response to the conditions of homophobia at the time across Britain and the United States as homosexuality became increasingly pathologized, criminalized, and policed. In its association with homosexuality, camp has also been used as a political strategy for queer liberation and HIV/AIDS activism by key organizations such as Queer Nation and ACT UP, along with the increased appropriation of camp within mainstream pop culture.

A historical analysis of camp allows us to apprehend a set of survival strategies within the modern creation of the closet. Matthew Tinkcom provocatively argues that we conceive of camp as a critical knowledge around experiences of living under capitalism and modernity, “as a knowledge about capital’s changeable and volatile attributions of value” in terms of both

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production and consumption. Through an extensive engagement between Marxism and camp, Tinkcom provides a compelling and nuanced analysis of how camp intellectuals do not uphold and reproduce the much criticized form of mass culture that promotes a hegemonic and uncritical consumption from the audience. Rather, he shows that camp locates a number of disconnects between economic and cultural value in order to force the commodity to perform in other means. Camp intellectuals recover the forms of labor obscured within the commodity by troubling the narrative genres of film to introduce its excesses and sensuousness. How do we reconcile these uses with the conjunction of the campy and the Holocaust? The aforementioned cultural examples illustrate the danger and potential of camp aesthetics in fortifying the logic of encampment. Moreover, this ambivalence in politics central to the campy has generated debates about camp’s fraught relationship with race.

The Racial Difference that Camp Aesthetics Makes: Camping Up the Camp-thinking

The academic rise and decline of scholarship on camp aesthetics provide keen insight into shifts and debates around the critical intersectionalities of race and sexuality in queer studies during the last two decades. Cleto’s 1999 anthology on camp seemed to provide the definitive account of the aesthetic. Since then, camp aesthetics has largely receded from scholarly conversations. Critics note that camp aesthetics seemingly exemplifies a mode of queer theorizing that makes claims of anti-normativity by disavowing racial difference and obscuring its embeddedness within structures of power. The understanding of racial difference and a deracinated (read: white) queer camp aesthetics is structured in part by the very terms of camp’s discussion. Pamela Robertson notes the frequent use of analogy whereby the relationship of

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camp to queers is explained by the association between jazz and African Americans. Even more provocatively, Robertson suggests that another consequence of this separation is that the examinations of camp aesthetics have failed to account for its relation to racist iconography:

“But while much work has been done on queer and camp representation and also on racial stereotypes, subcultural studies have unwittingly advanced artificial barriers between audiences and between subcultures such that we often tend to talk about only one audience, one subculture at a time…Most analyses of camp do not, therefore, remark upon the relation between camp’s sexual politics and race discourse.” I would argue that this observation is indicative of the larger landscape of queer studies. Such occlusions prompted the 2005 Social Text special issue “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” to call for stronger engagements with race and empire, while illustrating how LGBTQ groups are increasingly co-opted to further projects of state power and racial capitalism.

J. Jack Halberstam further observes a strong association between camp and what has been called the “antisocial turn” within queer studies. Often associated with the work of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, the antisocial turn generally calls for a conception of queerness as the radical rejection of social relationality as it is premised upon heteronormative expectations. Yet, camp, though also functioning as a form of negativity, can be seen as surprisingly retaining a very specific identitarianism. Halberstam encapsulates and critiques this trend: “[T]he gay male archive coincides with the canonical archive, and…it narrows that archive down to a select group of antisocial queer aesthetes and camp icons and texts.” This is reminiscent of Kathryn Stockton’s critique of Meyer in foregrounding camp as epitomizing “queer” as the dissolution of

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identity, which is ironically premised upon a fixed white gay male identity. Both of these critiques do not call for a wholesale rejection of camp, however. Instead, they consider the possibility of mobilizing camp toward analyses of race as well.

Such analyses between the historical entanglements between race and camp shed light on less than harmonious intimacies. Instead, they elucidate the ambivalence that shaped and is emblematized around the debates in queer studies and the contested political effect of camp’s characteristic elements. Consider that performances of cross-dressing are staples of masculinist spaces, staged on ships, military bases, and work camps. While such performances might be read as moments of queer excess, the introduction of the feminine into these spaces often works to alleviate homosocial anxiety and refortify parameters of ideal heteronormative masculinity.\textsuperscript{60}

Moreover, such performances of not only cross-gender transitivity, but also bodies portrayed with exaggerated gender and sexual characteristics were central characteristics to modes of racialization in the United States. Histories of racialization then shed light on a less celebratory understanding of the aesthetic.\textsuperscript{61} Yet, if scholarship on camp often obscures the aesthetic’s historical imbrication with racial performance through minstrelsy, it also fails to acknowledge and contend with its palpable presence in the thriving ball cultures of urban queers of color.\textsuperscript{62}


These complex histories put pressure on traditional accounts of camp while bringing to light the various processes by which camp becomes associated as a “property of whiteness.”

In limning queerness and aesthetics, campiness, I argue, elucidates a history of the logic of encampment that racialized Asian/Americans in terms of queer and perverse sexualities. Consider, for instance, the resonance of camp elements with key characteristics of the Oriental: exaggerated facial features; cross-racial drag through yellowface minstrelsy; the theatrical overemphasis on effeminacy and asexuality; and, racial farce in depictions of exotic foreignness. Newspapers and print media depicted Asian men as hypersexual and feminine, virile and sterile. The prevalence of these tropes hints at the intimacies between campiness and modes of encampment in the racialization of Asian Americans that are the focus of this study. I contend that these representations illuminate campiness as central to racializing Asian bodies in mediating both the desire for and the repulsion of the Asian Other in defining Americanness within popular culture. This cultural history beckons us to grapple with the means by which racism consolidates through not only discourses of ethnic absolutism—which, like Gilroy’s useful articulation of camp-thinking, make truth claims of innate biological, moral, intellectual, and mental differences—but also the more popular, irreverent, and seemingly trivial.

In light of these histories, it is perhaps no wonder that, as Halberstam argues, camp pervades the gay male archive that is at once the canonical archive. Against this first narrow archive, Halberstam inquires into the need for another archive animated by failure toward a more expansive approach of the antisocial:

Dyke anger, anticolonial despair, racial rage, counterhegemonic violence, punk pugilism—these are the bleak and angry territories of the antisocial turn; these are

the jagged zones within which not only self-shattering (the opposite of narcissism in a way) but other-shattering occurs. If we want to make the antisocial turn in queer theory we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to hash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate.64

Notwithstanding the astuteness and necessity of such a critique, perhaps we may ask if the work performed by these two archives are actually as separate as we think. Are they in fact mutually exclusive? How may camp in its artifice and exaggeration, in its humor, be channeled toward conveying and entering into the “bleak and angry territories” to perform the work of antisexist, antihomophobic, antiracist, and anticolonial critique?

In attending to how “Black” and “queer” as signs cross and interact within operations of shame, Stockton offers one such possibility at the conclusion of her study by beginning a contemplation of what she terms “dark camp,” which “keeps the violent edge of debasement visibly wedded to camp caprice.”65 Rather than attempting to determine whether or not something is camp, Stockton’s method is interested in exploring how cultural productions around the term “Black” have utilized strategies resembling characteristics of campiness to demonstrate the excesses and absurdity around historical and racial traumas. Through these campy characteristics, dark camp not only ‘outs’ the excessive abjection of racialized bodies under the historical and continuing violences under the United States, but also, more importantly, demonstrates the forms of communal bonds and survival mechanisms formed through such

64 Halberstam, _The Queer Art of Failure_, 110.
65 Stockton, _Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame_, 205.
collective debasement. Furthermore, Marlon B. Ross engages in the task of “Camping the Dirty Dozens” to highlight what he observes as the central queerness of Black Nationalist thought as its writers draw upon “sexual identity as a resource for racial identification and racial identity as a resource for sexual identification within and across historical moments within and across cultural traditions.”\(^66\) In this way, both scholars refuse to associate camp as a property exclusive to the cultural tradition of white homosexual subcultures.

Scholars also reassess the practice of recycling of outdated cultural artifacts—a key point of criticism against straight camp—claiming that this act is not inevitably conservative. Indeed, queer theorists, such as Ann Cvetkovich, have pointed to the production and preservation of archives around disappearing queer and sexual histories.\(^67\) Halberstam’s call for us to consider a more complex and profound archive for the antisocial seems to resonate with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s implicit critique of negativity as practiced in the prevalent “hermeneutics of suspicion.”\(^68\) Instead of being preoccupied with the injunction to always excavate below the surface for a hidden, unattainable truth, Sedgwick invites us to attend to the ways in which knowledge is performative and the affects it induces. Crucially, in closing her essay, Sedgwick engages in a substantial discussion of camp in distinguishing between paranoid and reparative readings. The association of camp with paranoia responds to the large scholarship inspired by Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and the central place of drag in her argument about gender performativity. As Butler further clarifies in her follow-up *Bodies that Matter*, the performativity of regulatory ideals such as gender, sexuality, race comes to shape how bodies matter—how it is


known, felt, inhabited, and understood—along with which bodies matter, as in their differentiated valuations. These regulatory ideals operate by abjecting alternative modes of intelligibility for the body. Against such regulation, Butler locates a critical queerness that does not reject such economies of abjection, but rather inhabits the mechanisms to demystify and uncover them. Without dismissing these critical impulses, Sedgwick calls for us to move away from the sole identification of camp as filled with the critically subversive power of exposing and rewriting the regulatory ideals of gender and sexuality:

The desire of a reparative impulse, on the other hand, is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self. To view camp as, among other things, the communal, historically dense exploration of a variety of reparative practices is to do better justice to many of the defining elements of camp performance: the startling, juicy displays of excess erudition, for example; the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternative historiographies; the “over”-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste or leftover products; the rich, highly interruptive affective variety; the irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, popular with high culture.

Through this move, she not only asks us to shift discussions of camp away from that of suspicion, but also uses camp as a way of suggesting the multiple reparative possibilities of

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knowledge production. Reassessing the productive tension between “the camp” and “camp” in conjunction with histories of Asian American racial performances can illuminate these multivalent possibilities.

Mediating the Camps of Asian/America

Given the debates outlined above, it is not surprising that a dominant orientation toward camp for Asian American Studies might be paranoia. The economic and political contradictions that campsites spatially mediate depend upon and work in tandem with cultural discourses that justify their maintenance and rationalize the groups of bodies that deserve to be encamped. Camp aesthetics is illustrative of the racialization of Asian Americans as made evident by the construct of the Oriental and Asian-raced bodies’ always tenuous positioning in relation to American national belonging. Their allegiance is always seen to lie elsewhere. Therefore, their foreignness is seen as intrinsically naturalized and necessitating performances of American cultural citizenship. Camp aesthetics can allow us to apprehend the interconnected modes of Asian racialization, mediating the provisional status of Asian bodies between the unassimilable Oriental and the model minority. Accounting for these multiple processes, Kandice Chuh has argued for attending to the “literariness” of “Asian American,” which as a category “aestheticizes and theorizes the social relations and material conditions underwriting the racism and resistance to which it refers.” In so doing, Chuh compels us to consider the aesthetic as not only symptomatic of but also productive of the very modes by which Asian bodies become racialized as such. As a particularly illuminative instance of this literariness—connected across the cultural, political, and social domains—camp aesthetics in Asian American literatures and

performances have indexed not only creative parodies of the Oriental and the attendant processes of racialization it indexes, but also means of inhabiting, reworking, and undermining the forms of provisionality to which Asian-raced bodies are subjected within the U.S. nation-state.

Insofar as these histories of racialization visualized the Asian body through exaggerated depictions of gender and sexuality, anything that registers as campy is often explicitly disavowed as reproducing the racist effects of emasculation. Asian American political and cultural movements were founded around a project of refuting these ‘fake’ representations and their material effects. In the process, they not only fixed a sense of how these stereotypes can be apprehended but also limited what counts as resistance. Within spaces of abjection, camp aesthetics may also illuminate and cohere a number of creative practices and processes by which Asian-raced bodies have subtly inhabited, reworked, and challenged these very terms of racialization. A number of Asian Americanists thus speak to the prevalence, importance, and need for cultural strategies that confront and work through ‘negative’ racial stereotypes and Orientalist repertoires. Shimakawa calls attention to practices that perform modes of “critical mimesis,” which can include passing, mimicry, and parody. As an example of such critical mimesis, Dorinne Kondo observes: “Satire and parody are valuable tools for politically committed artists, providing ways to subvert oppressive representations through performing their absurdity. Deconstructive readings depend upon invoking and then deconstructing or subverting the dominant.” Furthermore, Tina Chen argues that these are characteristic of U.S. Asian racialization, wherein Asian Americans are always presumed to be imitative and fake, engaging in practices of impersonation. Thus, “Asian American dramatists who chose to use

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impersonation as a strategy against stereotype often effect their serious endeavors via the ‘comic’ practices of parody, specifically camp and drag.”

As canonical scholarship around camp and drag has cautioned, these forms of parody, insofar as they depend upon and work through recycling codes of the dominant, can risk upholding rather than unsettling normative scripts around race, gender, and sexuality. As an example, they question whether the practice of cross-gender drag in fact exploit and reify misogynistic tropes about femininity rather than undermining them. Similarly, in the case of racial representation, the dangers of parody become especially fraught.

Through such generative reconsiderations of camp aesthetics, what are the possibilities for analyzing and challenging the historical and contemporary practices of encampment through critical and reparative practices? These practices coincide with what José Esteban Muñoz points to as the possibility of camp performances to serve as a survival strategy for queers of color through disidentification. Disidentification points to practices that serve as survival strategies for minoritarian subjects in negotiating a majoritarian public structured around systematic racism and homophobia. Orientated around queers of color artists and the theorizing their work performs, disidentification names a disparate set of viewing and performing practices that locate and expose the violent mechanisms of a culture that posits white normative citizenship as an ideal in order to rework these mechanisms and recycle them toward the creation of a counterpublicity.

Just as Stockton argues with “dark camp,” practices of camp aesthetics, through extravagant performances of debasement, serve as a way of exposing the excess of

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75 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
abjection and the absurdity of fixing bodies into stable categories for purposes of encampment. This is camp aesthetics as both critique and repair against the violent logics of encampment.

I contend that mapping camp aesthetics through Asian American cultural productions allows us to apprehend improvisational practices of *queer sense un-making*, through which the contradictory and elastic positionings of Asian/Americans in relation to the national body politic are played out, fixed, negotiated, and repurposed. The following chapters collectively chart a genealogy of camps that have historically mediated the entry of Asians in the U.S., including the Chinese railroad work camps, the Japanese internment camps, the resettlement camps for Southeast Asian refugees during the Cold War, and the counterinsurgency camps in the Philippines. Examining these different campsites central to this genealogy, each chapter juxtaposes the governmental archives of these camps in relation to a set of Asian American literatures and performance as they cohere around a figure central to Asian American Studies—the coolie, the internee, the refugee, the diva, and the Asian American. Reassessing the conditions of (im)possibility for these figures’ queer sense unmaking, the chapters attend to how they emerge and are mediated by multiple forms of camp.

In emphasizing the coolie, internee, refugee, diva, and the Asian American as *figures*, I mean to capture how each is both symptomatic and productive of a dense racialized imaginary that articulates and facilitates a myriad of structures, relations, and objectives across the domains of the political, economic, social, and cultural. Arguably, these figures have each functioned in the field as what Christopher Lee calls “idealized critical subjects” that are meant to be embody and perform both the critical and political work that reflect and further the field’s objectives.
toward social justice.\textsuperscript{76} Put differently, they are model subjects of inquiry that potentially cover up what Viet Nguyen observed as the ideological pluralism and political contradictoriness among Asian American communities.\textsuperscript{77} While keeping Lee’s and Nguyen’s critiques in mind, this study approaches these figures obliquely by inquiring into the queer excesses of these figures that often remain unaccounted for within their dominant treatment. That is, insofar as common scholarly and cultural efforts to represent these figures remain mired in ideals of cultural nationalism, campiness remains unthinkable as a mode of political critique. Cultural nationalism describes a set of ideologies wherein minority groups make claims toward U.S. national belonging, which involve a reclaiming and writing of the groups’ heroic history within the country. However, these claims for citizenship have often championed a politics of respectability that links this heroism with ideals of masculinity and heteronormativity and thereby either explicitly or implicitly elides considerations of women and queers. Common disciplinary practices in Asian American Studies, I contend, continue to unwittingly reproduce this privileging of heteronormative masculinity. Given that camp aesthetics seems to be characteristic of the “Oriental,” which the enunciation of “Asian American” as a political category rejects and disavows, campiness remains that which must be abjected within mobilizations of “Asian American” as political and cultural efforts of organizing and critique.

Analyzing the Chinese railroad work camps to examine the putative shift from slave to free labor in the United States, chapter one argues that campiness mediated the racialization of Asian coolies and their contradictory status as both ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ laborers. Revisiting scholarship on the queer spaces and socialities of these camps, the discussion explores how


various spatial and aesthetic strategies buttressed the coolies’ status as dehumanized labor by regulating the movement and meanings around these bodies. Such regulation is indexed by campiness and the strategies of feminizing, “trans-ing,” and emasculating that differentially rendered the Asian laborer as both disembodied as pure, abstract labor and hyper-embodied as inextricably foreign. Through analyzing Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* (1980) and David Henry Hwang’s play *The Dance and the Railroad* (1981), I argue that camp aesthetics can also reroute failed masculinity to critique exploitative systems of labor and insist upon the bodily capacity to perform otherwise. In this way, the provisional spaces of camps and the campiness of the performing body map the failures and possibilities for solidarity in organizing against racial capitalism.

Chapter two argues that camp aesthetics is central to the contradictory configuration of the “internee” as both the enemy Jap who deserves to be incarcerated and the exemplary American who deserves to be resettled within the postwar nation. I argue that exaggerated popular discourses and putatively earnest official discourses complemented each other in mediating understandings of Japanese/Americans as in/authentic Americans whose political loyalty is always suspect. Newspapers and magazines visualized the enemy Jap by playing on exaggerated features, sexualizing their threat to the nation. Thus, common cultural and scholarly efforts that re-present the “internee” as patriotic citizens through use of photographs, I argue, not only rely upon tropes of masculinity and heteronormativity, but also work within the same terms of what looks like an American that enabled their internment in the first place. I analyze three visual artists to examine how they work within and against these contradictory visual strategies. First, I look at how Miné Okubo’s visual autobiography *Citizen 13660* (1946) pairs images and

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texts that work within the terms of official policies, but uses strategies of humor and doubleness in order to stage subversive critiques. Next, I explore how Roger Shimomura’s artwork juxtaposes Pop Art conventions with caricatured images of Asian stereotypes to interrogate the visual construction of America against the Asian Other. Moreover, he demonstrates the role of camp aesthetics in both upholding and challenging this racialization constitutive of the logic of encampment. Lastly, I examine Tina Takemoto's performance video “Looking for Jiro” (2011) and how it uses camp aesthetic otherwise to explore the (im)possibilities for thinking about queer desire in relation to internment.

Next, chapter three explores how camps mediated the entry and “resettlement” of the Vietnamese war refugees while simultaneously disavowing the terms of U.S. military aggression. The transformation of the United States into the savior and the displacement of trauma away from the material destruction of Vietnam onto the symbolic realm of the U.S. national psyche were made possible by the proliferation of visuals that reworked images of the war through the aesthetic strategies of pop camp. Looking at Tiana’s film From Hollywood to Hanoi (1994), Nguyen Tan Hoang’s experimental video Pirated! (2000), Quan Barry’s novel She Weeps Each Time You’re Born (2015), and Paul Tran’s spoken poem “#1 Beauty Nail Salon” (2014), I argue that camp aesthetics elucidates conditions of (im)possibility for remembering the costs of the Viet Nam War, how it not only managed and sublimated the trauma of war into a question of the embattled American psyche but also serves as a cultural strategy by Asian American artists to resist the erasure of Vietnamese bodies and ruins within the historical re-memberings of the war.

Chapter four explores how understandings of Filipino/a “divas” as spectacular performers are subtended by the dense, shifting ways in which the domain of culture has varyingly configured the Filipino/a body in performance to mediate U.S.-Philippines imperial relations.
Focusing in on the figure of Imelda Marcos, former First Lady of the Philippines, I consider the centrality of campiness in these tactics that obscure the historical and continuing role of U.S. militarization in the Philippines as well as the violence under the dictatorial regime of Ferdinand Marcos. That is, I look at how camp aesthetics elide and enable the prevalent use of encampments as counterinsurgency measures, both by the United States during the Spanish American War and by the Marcoses during Martial Law. In the first instance, I explore the configuration of Filipino “little brown brothers” as culture-less peoples imitative of American culture. Next, I look at how Imelda Marcos capitalized on these assumptions of imitation in her performances that exploit her gendered position straddling the “East” and the “West” in order to launch a strategy of beautification that obscured the brutality of her regime. Specifically, I analyze David Byrne's immersive musical _Here Lies Love_ (2013) as staging the ways in which campiness indexes both the spectacular performances of Imelda Marcos and critiques that mime and trouble these modes of spectacularization. Whereas the other chapters offer an assemblage of cultural objects to explore the entanglement of camps indexed by each figure, this chapter centers and nuances this production, especially since it was largely acclaimed by critics but critiqued by Asian Americanist scholars. Attending to and reorienting these scholars’ caution that this musical not only reproduces the aesthetic modes that rationalized the Marcoses’s violent regime but also in the process occludes other narratives around this era, I analyze this musical through camp to tease out the operations of what is arguably understood as a bad cultural object for Asian American Studies while also asking into what other work this musical can do.

‘camps’ between Third World Internationalism and Asian American cultural nationalism. I interrogate how the privileging of cultural nationalism within these narratives, as well as its continuing influence on scholarly practices, replicates the disciplinary logic of encampment that reifies national domesticity as the political ideal while abjecting the queer and the transnational. Through Suh’s play and Yamashita’s novel, I argue for the possibility of camp aesthetics in underscoring the centrality of queerness and transnationalism to “Asian American” in order to ground critiques against the militaristic sites of encampments as well as the intellectual disciplining of minority discourse into separate camps.

*Ladies with an attitude*

*Fella’s that were in the mood*

*Don’t just stand there, let’s get to it*

*Strike a pose, there’s nothing to it*79

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CHAPTER 1

ALL WORK AND NO P(L)AY?

STRIKING PERFORMANCES OF CAMP AND RACIALIZED LABOR

“Freedom” was constituted through a narrative dialectic that rested simultaneously on a spatialization of the “unfree” as exteriority and a temporal subsuming of that unfreedom as internal difference or contradiction. The “overcoming” of internal contradiction resolves in freedom within the modern Western political sphere through displacement and elision of the coeval conditions of settler dispossession, slavery and indentureship in the Americas.

— Lisa Lowe

[T]he issue with Chinese workers was not that they were inhuman as such but rather that their humanity itself was inhumane, not only in its indifference to the suffering of others (by then an old story) but in its willingness to take its own suffering for granted the Chinese, that is, were like animals but were not animals, which is why so much time had to be spent insisting that they were like them.

— Eric Hayot

In narratives around Asian American history, the Chinese workers on the Transcontinental Railroad often not only serve as the origin story of Asian migration in the

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80 Lowe, The Intimacies of Four Continents, 39.
United States, but also exemplify the injustices central to U.S. Asian racialization: the systematic
disavowal of Asian migrant labor in the physical and symbolic construction of the nation-state;
the simultaneous embrace of Asian bodies for exploitative labor and the exclusion of these
populations from the national body politic; and, the processes by which citizenship is
consolidated based on the violent exclusion of racial and sexual difference. During the Gold
Rush in the 1850’s, the Chinese emigrated to California en masse, propelled in part by famine,
the lack of economic opportunities, and political turmoil in China effected by the Opium Wars.
When the construction for the transcontinental railroad was authorized in the 1860’s, the
industrious Chinese served as the perfect labor source for the back-breaking work that white
workers were reluctant to take on. By 1867, the Central Pacific Railroad Company employed
approximately 12,000 Chinese migrants, who made up ninety percent of the labor force. According to more recent calculations based on archival research of payroll records, William
Chew estimates that the number might actually be as high as 23,000. Chinese laborers
performed the most dangerous and strenuous tasks: felling the trees, clearing paths through
mountains with explosives, and at times digging under tunnels of snow that collapsed and buried
them. From these tasks, countless workers suffered injuries and lost their lives in the process.
The exact number is unknown since the company never bothered to record the casualties of
Chinese workers.

82 For Asian Americanist works that established the centrality of Chinese railroad labor, see
Sucheng Chan, Asian Americans: An Interpretive History (Boston: Twayne, 1991); Ronald T.
83 Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore, 85.
84 William F. Chew, Nameless Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad: The Chinese Workers
of the Central Pacific Railroad (Victoria, British Columbia: Trafford, 2004), 42.
May 10, 1869 signaled the completion of construction as the Central Pacific Railroad connected with the Union Pacific Railroad at Promontory Summit in Utah. The Golden Spike Ceremony commemorated this moment by driving in the last golden spike. In the photograph celebrating this moment, no Chinese laborers are visible. This absence in the photograph visually captures the systematic erasure of Asian laborers from national histories even as they were fundamental to constructing the national infrastructure. Such dynamics emblematize what Lisa Lowe has observed as the contradiction between the political and the economic domains, whereby the Asian immigrant was embraced for pure labor yet denied rights from the civic sphere of belonging. As Karen Shimakawa further adds, such contradiction manifests through a mode of “national abjection” in which the national body politic (and here its literal infrastructure) continually reconstitutes itself through the acceptance and disavowal of Asian labor.85

Despite the frequency with which these general accounts have been recounted and re-envisioned in both scholarly and cultural productions, many of their seemingly evident details have been called into question. The company kept improper records on the Chinese laborers, so the precise number of those working for the railroads, as well as those who were killed doing the dangerous work, is unclear. Still, debates exist around the exact materials and tools used by the workers. Lastly, there are uncertainties as to whether or not the workers’ strike in the Sierra Mountains ultimately proved victorious. Even though the archive is replete with aporias, discrepancies, and inaccuracies, in spite of or because of these contradictions, this event in history has been especially fruitful for scholarly and cultural imaginings. Such accounts contemplate the larger issue of making use of histories that are partial or incomplete. For these

reasons, we might understand that scholarly and cultural accounts around these histories are necessarily improvisational.

This chapter centers an exploration of the Chinese railroad workers to inquire into how their camps, along with the improvisational practices staged within and around these spaces, shift more common understandings about the “biopolitical paradigm of the modern.” I argue that camps, as both spatial and aesthetic structures, regulated the movement and meaning around the Chinese laboring body and, in so doing, mediated the contradictions indexed by the “coolie.” I explore how campsites work to spatialize the processes by which national abjection is continually staged, reworked, and negotiated. In particular, I interrogate how these railroad work camps reframe dominant genealogies of ‘the camp’ while simultaneously illuminating characteristic continuities with its discussions. Such continuities register most prominently in the improvisation of statecraft according to crises in political economy at the time.

The camps inhabited by the railroad laborers occupy an uneasy space within these genealogies, particularly in relation to the more commonly known sites of ‘labor camps.’ In their popular usage, labor camps often designate prisons wherein dissenters and others unlawfully detained by an authoritarian state regime are subjected to compulsory labor. Given this distinction, the camps that proliferated from the mid-twentieth century onward on the Western frontier of the colonial United States housing laborers working in the mines, on the railroads, canneries, and other sites have been increasingly reclassified as “work camps.” Commissioned in part by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), a 2013 study entitled “Work Camps: Historic Context and Archaeological Perspectives on American History,” elaborates upon the rationale for such a distinction: “the term ‘work camp’ has been chosen over ‘labor camp’ because labor camps often are synonymous with internment camps, prisoner-of-war
camps, or other camps operated solely by the military."86 While indeed necessary and useful to distinguish between these different forms of camp, such differentiation can unwittingly elide analysis into the continuities between these two forms as well.

This differentiation between work and labor is both symptomatic and productive of a dominant dichotomy whereby the former implies agency while the latter signifies coercion. While this taxonomical separation occludes analysis into the historically shifting and contested nature of both terms, it further presumes a clear demarcation between the economic and political domains, attributing one set of camps to those of economic opportunities and the other to products of state power. Nevertheless, work camps occupy a crucial if provisional status in conceptualizing and articulating the transitions in labor, state power, and racial capitalism at the time. Indeed, in the transition from plantation slavery and the African slave trade, the use of Asian laborers compelled the rise of “coolie” as a racial imaginary that came to articulate the difference between ‘unfree’ (Chinese) labor and ‘free’ (Anglo-American) labor. Camps spatially managed the mobility of Chinese workers in this process and were used to rationalize these distinctions. Meanwhile, the imaginary of the ‘coolie’ sustained these provisional confinements through racial fantasies that regulated the meaning around the Chinese laboring bodies.

For these reasons, the trials and tribulations of the Chinese railroad workers have often been recounted in dichotomous terms of “misery and triumph” or “abjection and ability.”87 These terms predominantly articulate the dynamic of race and resistance through notions of

87 In many ways, this articulation, like the title of the conference roundtable itself, plays on the larger conference theme of “The Reproduction of Misery and Ways of Resistance.” Nevertheless, this dynamic aptly describes the vast body of scholarship around the Chinese railroad workers. Barbara Voss, “Chinese Railroad Workers in North America: Recovering the Production of Misery and Ways of Resistance,” (roundtable remarks, American Studies Association national conference, Toronto, Canada, October 9, 2015).
masculinity—emasculature and heroic masculinity. In the former, emasculation has been broadly used to encapsulate a range of anti-Asian discourses: the legal measures that excluded the immigration of Chinese women and the familial reproduction of Chinese male workers; the racial division of labor that afforded Chinese workers lower wages, fewer protections, and a greater burden of labor; and, the visual and discursive depictions that configure the Chinese body through tropes of perverse sexuality as a means of substantiating their foreignness. In response, scholarly and cultural efforts have focused on narrating a counterhistory that underscores the Chinese workers’ contributions to the construction of the nation-state via the railroad, recuperating their heroic labor in terms of masculine strength and prowess.

Working through and against this dichotomy, this chapter reassesses the productiveness of masculinity in mediating representations of the Chinese body in configuring the shifting parameters of labor, freedom, and citizenship at the time. It asks how and why masculinity became a flexible locus for managing the Chinese body in relation to the contradictory demands of labor and capital. Camps elucidate the spatial and discursive structures that managed the meaning and movement of these Chinese bodies in accordance with these demands. Attending to these interrelations between camps, I consider how configurations of masculinity within the social domain gained value in understanding and making claims about the role of Chinese laborers in relation to economic and political interests. This consideration begins by reassessing the scholarship around the racialized category of the ‘coolie.’ While this category is often taken up as emblematizing the emasculation of the Chinese worker, in the multiple ways delineated above, and thereby refuted, I instead work through and with this category to see how else we might understand its queer excesses.
In so doing, I reassess how ‘emasculated’ can provide a means for materialist critique in understanding these processes of racism and racialization without maligning the failure to achieve an ideal heteronormative masculinity as inherently a sign of racial injury. That is, without discounting the analytic use of emasculation for apprehending this moment in history, I problematize the heavy reliance on emasculation as a primary means for doing so. Such a reliance risks reinforcing the very parameters of ideal heteronormative masculinity that produced the racism in the first place. Furthermore, the rhetoric of emasculation, while convenient, not only circumscribes our apprehension about the enormity of the racial violence, but also might occlude other forms of violence from coming into view. At the same time, I take seriously how desires for heteronormative masculinity might illuminate fantasies of an ‘outside’ to the dehumanizing work to which the laborers were subjected, without recuperating this ideal or seeing it as entirely encompassing all of these desires. Even so, emasculation all too readily assumes to know the desires and ideals of the Chinese workers, positing a common pre-established given about what constitutes heroic masculinity and how it is achievable or not. But, what if these workers dwelled in and reworked the spaces of ‘failure’ in terms of masculinity?

While much of the scholarship has focused on critiquing the racialized conditions of labor, we have been less able to examine how the workers might have negotiated and negotiated these conditions to form alternative communities. Given the absence of their voices from the archive, it is understandable that this cannot be done. Efforts are currently underway to trace down letters written home that might be stored in various parts of China. In place of this absence, literary and cultural productions have been central in providing us a means of imagining how else these workers might have related to the conditions of their bodily labor and lived within and in spite of deadening labor. Reassessing these cultural productions through camp aesthetics
allows us to make sense of the ways in which the shifting configurations of ‘freedom’ between work, labor, and play were negotiated through the racialized body. Insofar as the racialization of Chinese bodies as ‘coolie’ depended on notions of perverse gender and sexuality to substantiate them as ‘unfree,’ camp aesthetics can provide insight into the various practices by which these Chinese bodies inhabited and negotiated their labor otherwise in ways that re-imagine what ‘freedom’ means while simultaneously envisioning socialities outside the ideals of heteronormative masculinity.

I explore how these questions are staged in literature and drama through analyses of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* and David Henry Hwang’s *The Dance and the Railroad*. By considering these works together, this chapter examines how scholarly interpretations of these texts and their histories may reinforce the privileging of heteronormative masculinities. While these texts depict the ways in which racist legal exclusions operated through the realm of gender and sexuality, they neither call for a claiming of heroic masculinity nor do they repudiate notions of failed heterosexuality masculinity as inherently the cause or effect of racism. Instead, these texts perform campy re-stagings of hyper-masculinity that interrogate the very possibility of owning and claiming one’s body and labor within systems of racial capitalism. *China Men* depicts forms of non-(re)productive labor that imagine modes of reprieve within and against racialized labor based on individual acts of pleasure. The erotic becomes a means for launching a materialist critique against the (im)possibility for social reproduction and generational transmission in the face of legal exclusion from the nation-state and the distinct possibility of death based on the laboring demands of racial capital. Meanwhile, Hwang’s play beckons us to consider how these bodies reimagined the ‘failure’ of achieving masculinity, via heteronormative reproduction, by instead crafting alternative socialities and ways of living. Registered through
these workers’ improvisational practices of place-making and performances of bodily labor, camp signals a queer utopian practice that indexes desires in excess of ideal heteronormative masculinity and the terms that underwrite national citizenship. Hwang stages queer intimacies between and among the workers through a combined repertoire of the corporeal and oral that materializes as a mock heroic drama. Unsettling the dominant terms of masculinity, Kingston’s and Hwang’s works imagine what alternative modes of collectivity are possible in effecting general strikes.

**Improvisational (Hi)stories of the “Coolie”**

How did the “coolie” work as a site of contestation for improvising innovative modes of political economy and what alternatives might it provide as an analytic method for historiography? To pose this question is to call attention to the profound usefulness of the ‘coolie’ in foregrounding race as the grounds for mediating the contested categories of labor, freedom, and national belonging for not only the demands of political economy at the time but also subsequent efforts to make sense of this moment. This section first considers how these processes become varyingly illuminated and foreclosed within common scholarly approaches to the “coolie.” Next, I examine how the spaces of the work camps both speak to and mediate the shifting signification of the Chinese laboring body and its relation to larger categories of labor and citizenship. These work camps compel us to reassess assumptions about “the camp” both in terms of the processes by which state power operates and the various practices of living and communal-making enacted within and against these spaces of exploitative work conditions. Lastly, I revisit the centrality of masculinity and sexuality in configurations of the “coolie” that argued for the exclusion of Chinese laborers from the national body politic.
Etymological tracings of the term coolie cite multiple possible origins: a Chinese phrase for “bitter strength” (pronounced as kuli in Mandarin); a Hindu term for unskilled labor that was then used by the British empire; and, an amalgamation of European languages to refer to common labor. By the mid-nineteenth century, the term then came into prevalence to refer specifically to indentured Indian and Chinese workers on plantations. While coolie labor is a more accurate designation of the laborers working on the plantation systems in Jamaica and Cuba, the interpellation of Chinese miners and railroad workers on the West Coast as coolie served to further anti-Asian objectives. As Mae Ngai notes: “Coolieism imagined Chinese as servile, without individual personality or will, regardless of their actual status.” As a result, early scholarship underscored the falsity of claims that Chinese workers stood in for coolie, as in symbolizing cheap or unfree, labor. In place of the coolie, scholars have proposed the label of immigrant or migrant. Yet, Caroline Yang questions the designation of Chinese railroad laborers as immigrants, suggesting instead the category of worker. The problem with the category of immigrant, Yang asserts, is that it implies a specific political trajectory, which assumes not only that these laborers voluntarily chose to migrate to the United States, but also that they will ultimately be granted entry into the national community through citizenship. For these reasons, Moon-Ho Jung similarly emphasizes that efforts to frame these laborers as immigrants and to refute claims that they were coolie fail to contend with the racialized fantasy surrounding the

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coolie. He astutely reminds us: “Coolies were never a people or a legal category. Rather, coolies were a conglomeration of racial imaginings that emerged worldwide in the era of slave emancipation, a product of the imaginers rather than the imagined.”91 The racialized category of “coolie” registers the various ways in which the Chinese laboring body was made to negotiate the contradictory demands and shifts in U.S. political economy during the mid-nineteenth century. Lisa Lowe further elaborates upon this intermediary role: “The great instability and multivalence of the term coolie suggests that it was a shifting, historically contingent designation for an intermediary form of Asian labor, used both to define and to obscure the boundary between enslavement and freedom, and to normalize both.”92 Especially vital to the crises of racial capital with the abolition of slavery, and to the political turmoil of the United States with the Civil War, Asian racialization played a pivotal function in crafting new articulations and demarcations of freedom in both political and economic terms.

Even within the economic domain, the coolie maintains a fraught relationship to categories of labor. While the expansive geographic scope and diverse players within the coolie trade frustrate any attempts to make generalized statements about its operations, the expansive trade and use of coolie labor throughout the United States and the Americas were largely compelled by a shift away from the African slave trade due to political and economic forces. As abolionist discourses grew, countries needed to find alternative forms of cheap labor that were ‘free.’ Jung, Lowe, and Lisa Yun have shown that coolies were deployed to enfigure a false notion of development from unfree to free labor. Yun writes: “[A] narrative of transition has provided currency for explaining their emergence and function as subjects in slave and free

91 Moon-Ho Jung, Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 5.
92 Lowe, The Intimacies of Four Continents, 25.
economies and as mediums for ‘progress’ and modernization. The utility of Asians in a ‘transition’ narrative goes hand in hand with the racialized figuring of Asians as functional ‘intermediaries’ between slave and free, black and white and has enabled the continued entrenchment of these binaries.”

Thus, this ‘narrative of transition’ not only proposes a step toward modernization through the securing of putative economic and political freedoms, exemplified by labor, but also manages and reframes the fraught racial landscape of the time.

Examining the basic contradictions of coolie labor in Cuba, Evelyn Hu-DeHart observes that the confusion or debate around coolie labor as either free or unfree is not only ideological, but also the result of an often deliberate disjuncture between conception and practice: “The coolie was to be paid during the period of contract, usually a combination of wages and in kind (food, clothing, lodging and medical attention). After completing the term of indenture, the coolies were to regain their total freedom. However, there was an immense gap from the very beginning between theory and practice which was probably unavoidable given the context in which the system developed.”

Following abolitionist discourses and the rhetoric of freedom, the coolie trade provided experimental modes of improvising the extent to which pure labor could be extracted from working bodies toward maximum profit and minimum expense, for both the private companies and the government. In other instances, nativists reframed common practices, such as the use of credit tickets, as evidence of coolieism. The contradictions in these practices were thus racialized and framed as innate to the Chinese laboring body.

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The racial imaginary that coalesces around the coolie both captures and mediates the ambivalent and contradictory figurations of the Chinese body and its labor on the railroads. The influx of Asian laborers during the 1850’s led to mass anti-Chinese sentiment as multiple actors aimed to curb economic competition and impede the entrance of even more Chinese migrant workers. The indiscriminate designation of Chinese bodies and their labor as coolie worked to further both objectives. The full name of the Anti-Coolie Act of 1862 passed by the Californian state legislature makes explicit these connections: “An Act to Protect Free White Labor against Competition with Chinese Coolie Labor, and Discourage the Immigration of Chinese into the State of California.” Indeed, during his campaign for Governor of California, the railroad company associate Leland Stanford referred to the Chinese as the “dregs of Asia.” As I will discuss further below, the construction of the Chinese as “cooly labor” effectively worked to construct free labor as a property exclusive to white workers, who were framed as under threat by unfair economic competition. Accordingly, the call to also “discourage the immigration of Chinese” suggests that coolieism is a racial property inherent to the Chinese and therefore proper grounds for denying them entry altogether.

The widespread xenophobic sentiment, however, was in direct opposition to the demands of political economy at the time. The Central Pacific Railroad Company suffered from a severe labor shortage. Due to the extreme weather conditions as well as dangerous and strenuous labor, a large percentage of its white workers left, often after receiving payment. In response, Chris Crocker initially suggested hiring Chinese workers in 1865, a recommendation that was met with skepticism. In addition to the anti-Chinese sentiment of Stanford, James Harvey Strobridge expressed doubt about their capacity for handling the strenuous labor, noting their smaller stature.

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96 Ambrose, *Nothing Like It in the World*, 150.
Subsequently, the company first introduced a smaller group of fifty Chinese workers as a trial run to make up for the labor shortage. The efficiency of the Chinese workers, and their lower wages, soon led to their massive importation to the railroads, first from mining towns on the coast and then directly from provinces in China. Stephen Ambrose encapsulates the shift in sentiment as follows: “The Chinese were ideal workers. Cheap. Did as they were told. Made a quick study and after something was shown or explained to them did it skillfully. Few if any strikes. The same for complaints. They did what no one else was willing or able to do.”

Despite the political unwillingness of incorporating Chinese bodies within the national body politic, the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad nonetheless served the interests of both capital and the state. Speaking of the support needed for this monumental project, Ambrose writes: “What it would take was the backing of the government, because only the government had the resources—money and land—to finance the project. No corporation, no bank was big enough. In a democracy, it was mandatory to turn to the elected representative body to get the thing done.”

The state not only provided multiple legislations that made possible the construction of the railroad, from land grants to approving importation of migrant laborers, but also stoked economic competition between the railroad companies through monetary incentives such as bonds.

Given that Chinese workers were unwanted in the country but needed for their labor, camps came to serve as a temporary spatial resolution for managing these contradictory interests of the state and of racial capital. In other words, camps were a crucial spatial form for mediating what Lisa Lowe has observed to be a central contradiction between U.S. citizenship and racial

97 Ibid., 162.
98 Ibid., 64.
capital that the figure of the Asian immigrant raises. Colleen Lye has further invited us to see these migrant laborers exemplifying a contradiction within U.S. political economy.\(^{100}\) Camps as well as the racial inequity between Chinese and white workers on the railroads make palpable such contradictions. Despite claims of economic competition, “the hiring of Chinese resulted not in displacement of non-Chinese, but in their upgrading.”\(^{101}\) With the importation of Chinese laborers, white (usually Irish) workers were able to take on more supervisory modes, performing the ‘skilled’ labor that posed less physical risk. On the uneven pay, Robert Chugg writes: “Even though the CP--realizing how valuable [the Chinese workers] were--treated them better than most, they were still not on par with the whites. A white laborer was paid $35.00 a month plus room and board and supplies. The Chinese were paid $25.00 a month and paid for their own food, supplies, cook and headman.”\(^{102}\) The board provided to white workers were usually in cabins on the trains slightly removed from the work site while Chinese workers had to set up their own tent.\(^{103}\) Chinese were mostly relegated to crowded shanties in spaces with rough terrain and extreme weather conditions.

If Asian-raced bodies signal “the symbolic ‘alien’” and serve as “the metonym for Asian who by definition cannot be imagined as sharing in America,” then the spaces of camp can be seen to as geographically managing and substantiating such imaginings of foreignness.\(^{104}\)

Approaching this question of foreignness differently, Barbara Voss argues that studies of these

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camps need to widen the geographical frame of their analysis to see how these spaces were inextricably connected with Chinatown communities in San Francisco and internationally with spaces in China. In many ways, this call speaks to the dense and wide spatial networks of the camps. Chinese workers were organized into gangs of ten to twelve men, with one being the cook and another collecting frees for obtaining provisions such as foods from the outside. In *China Men*, Kingston gives us a glimpse into these networks connecting the regional and international scales: “The food convoys from San Francisco brought tents to replace the ones that whipped away. The baskets from China, which the men saved for high work, carried cowboy jackets, long underwear, Levi pants, boots, earmuffs, leather gloves, flannel shirts, coats.” In additional to the supply and transportation of Chinese migrant laborers, such trade routes facilitated the delivery of provisions of food and medicines from China to San Francisco to the work camps. Even more, these spaces—and their supposed relation to these different scales—facilitated the improvisation of governance and regulation around Chinese. Anti-Chinese discourses incited anxieties and fears by collapsing and shifting between the scales of the body, the camp, the regional, and the inter/national. Such discourses spread ideas about hygiene, public crowdedness, and sexual perversity (given the lack of families) to substantiate notions of foreign Oriental difference that must be contained, segregated, and expelled from the national body politic. These practices of segregation have worked to further fuel abjection through forms of pathologization and discrimination under the terms of hygiene and ‘bachelor societies.’

Ironically, the very same characterizations used to laud the industrious Chinese workers were later used as evidence of their improper, ‘unfree’ labor. Chinese laborers were “biologically

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105 Voss, “The Historical Experience of Labor.”
impossible bodies,” alternately unhuman and superhuman; therefore, their labor was not technically ‘free.’ On the one hand, Chinese laborers were seen as “inhuman” due to what was perceived as their extraordinary capacity for suffering, as Eric Hayot argues, and constant labor. This body, he elaborates, was “[f]igured as enduring, impervious to physical pain, and mechanical or slavish in its relation to freedom, pleasure, and a volitional relation to history.”\(^{108}\)

In this way, a growing labor movement constructed a notion of free Anglo labor that was defined over and against Chinese ‘coolie’ labor. The fantasy of a free, abstract labor of the Anglo workers is belied by its dependence on the materiality of ‘coolie’ labor. The racialized body is compelled to transform itself into an instrument of abstract labor of pure use value without the provisions of political protections or rights. Furthermore, the unfree labor of the coolie was ironically conflated with the unfair practices of growing corporations. “To the extent that labor advocates viewed railroad corporations as the most extreme instances of monopoly capitalism, the Chinese immigrants whose labor helped sustain the railroads became figures—and convenient scapegoats—for the era’s dramatic concentration of wealth and devaluation of labor.”\(^{109}\) Rather than critique this racialized division of labor as unfairly providing protection for some over others, a burgeoning labor movement displaced this inequity upon the Chinese workers, essentially arguing that they functioned as ‘unfree’ labor and that their exploitation led to unfair competition with ‘free’ white workers.

These ideas about ‘unfree’ labor led to calls for their political exclusion on the basis of the social. The larger labor movement advocated for free white labor over and against what it framed as ‘unfree’ Chinese ‘coolie’ labor by drawing upon ideas of gender and sexuality,

\(^{108}\) Hayot, “Chinese Bodies, Chinese Futures: The ‘Coolie’ in Late Nineteenth-Century America,” 139.

\(^{109}\) Hsuan L. Hsu, Sitting in Darkness Mark Twain, Asia, and Comparative Racialization (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 97.
particularly conceptions of failed masculinity and deviant sexuality. Anticipating the expiration of the Geary Act of 1892, which extended the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 by ten more years, the American Federation of Labor published a pamphlet entitled “Some Reasons for Chinese Exclusion--Meat vs. Rice--American Manhood against Asiatic Coolieism--Which Shall Survive?” Emphatically arguing for its objectivity based on reports and experts’ findings, President Samuel Gompers makes a case for why the indefinite renewal of Chinese exclusion is in the best political and economic interest for the nation-state. As the points in the pamphlet demonstrate, the racialized imaginary surrounding the “coolie” pertains not just to the economic category of labor, but also encompasses political notions of freedom as well as notions about what social and civic behaviors are considered modes of proper participation in the larger national community.

That the subtitle of the pamphlet constructs a dichotomous understanding of “American manhood” being under threat by “Asiatic coolieism” speaks to the centrality of gender and sexuality in mediating these various spheres and framing the threat that Chinese laborers posed. In a section of the pamphlet entitled “CHINESE ARE NOT ASSIMILATIVE,” Gompers connects the performance of cultural citizenship with indicators of family life: “It is well known that the last majority of Chinese do not bring their wives with them in their immigration because of their purpose to return to their native land when a competency is earned. Their practical status among us has been that of single men competing at low wages against not only men of our own race, but men who have been brought up by our civilization to family life and civic duty. They pay little taxes they support no institutions, neither school, church, nor theater; they remain
steadfastly, after all these years, a permanently foreign element." Throughout this passage, he reframes the effects of restrictive legislation as signs of the Chinese men’s inability and unwillingness to assimilate. That is, the Chinese men are being ironically blamed for their exclusion from the civic sphere and social reproduction. Although the lack of families is attributed to a sojourner mentality that assumes that all Chinese men will eventually return to China after earning enough money, immigration legislation prohibited the entry of Chinese women into the United States. However, while the passage assumes that these men are heterosexual and married, Gompers underscores their “practical status” as a queer threatening mass of single men preying on the resources of the country away from others. In this way, the government’s exclusion of the Chinese from the national body politic is perversely reframed as an advantage, since the men do not and cannot participate in “family life and civic duty.”

Defining these properties as central to “American manhood,” Gompers and the larger labor movement thus make the case for “Asiatic coolieism” as a foreign element that must be repelled and excluded.

It is perhaps no coincidence then that Asian American(ist) rememberings of the Chinese railroad work center on masculinity as a crucial site of contestation for managing the relationship between racialized labor and the U.S. national body politic. As David L. Eng has argued, the Chinese railroad laborers have been interpreted as exemplifying both the emasculation of Asian American men through restrictive immigration laws that produced bachelor societies and a masculine ideal that privileges hard physical labor. Hostility toward Chinese migrants based

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on anxieties of economic competition manifested in a wide circulation of visual imagery that depicted these men as effeminate and asexual, which has had an enduring legacy. Thus, scholarly and cultural efforts at reconstructing this historical moment often make legible the forms of racial injustice in terms of emasculation. Moreover, many directly counter these assumptions by reinterpreting the workers as exemplifying of a heroic masculinity.

These assumptions operate within scholarship as well. Jennifer Ting critiques how Asian American historiography around Chinese immigrant labor reinforces these dominant ideals of masculinity through common notions of “bachelor societies” and the “sojourner mentality.” Noting the frequency with which scholars invoke these ideas without interrogating the normative assumptions of sexuality that underwrite them, Ting problematizes how the terms of bachelor and sojourner presume an originary heterosexuality, whereby all Chinese immigrant men are assumed to come from heterosexual families with wives at home. Such configurations, Ting observes, further elides the presence of Chinese women in the United States, reducing them to either “wives” back home in China or prostitutes in America. Meanwhile, the ‘deviant heterosexuality’ of Chinese men in the United States, produced by their presumed celibacy and inability to engage in anything other than “non-reproductive and non-conjugal” relations, becomes a mark of injury indicative of historical conditions of racism. Ting observes how sexuality becomes narrated as a teleological development of national belonging: “Like the bachelor society, impediments to assimilation are a past condition, rather than a present reality. Thus, deviant heterosexuality marks out a past, an historical oppression now overcome. ‘Normal’ heterosexuality here is not only a marker of assimilation achieved, it is itself a means to
assimilation.”¹¹² In short, such practices have worked to uphold rather than challenge the dominant ideals of masculinity that have perpetuated such racial injustices. This teleology not only renaturalizes heterosexuality as the means of national belonging while relegating queerness to the past, but also frames queer desires as undesirable and unthinkable. Put differently, these approaches render impossible what Nayan Shah has traced as the “occluded forms of queer sociality attendant on transient labor” by reaffirming and claiming the very forms of heteronormative masculinity that abjected Asian American men from national belonging.¹¹³

These processes have played out through heated debates within Asian American literary studies. Frank Chin has been most famous in reclaiming Chinese railroad workers within a heroic tradition of Asian/American ancestors. In so doing, Chin has been intent on demonstrating a mode of heroic masculinity that refutes and challenges various forms of ‘emasculaton’ varyingly imposed by immigration laws as well as cultural discourses that position Chinese coolies as perverse. Such moves, however, have been heavily critiqued in that Chin explicitly links such a project with the delineation between the ‘real’ and the ‘fake’ and thereby establishing an exclusionary notion of authenticity. As he and the other editors describe in the introduction to their second collection: “We describe the real, from its sources in the Asian fairy tale and the Confucian heroic tradition, to make the work of these Asian American writers understandable in its own terms, we describe the fake—from its sources in Christian dogma and in Western philosophy, history, and literature.”¹¹⁴ Further naming Kingston and Hwang, along with Amy Tan, as key proponents of the fake, Frank Chin elaborates that they “boldly fake the

¹¹⁴ Frank Chin et al., eds., The Big Aiieeeeee! (New York: Meridian, 1991), xv.
best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history” and, in so doing, “contribut[e] to the stereotype” that frames Chinese tradition as sexist and patriarchal.115 That is, they are singled out as such fake, traitorous Asian American writers in that their characters unsettle Chin’s aspirations for a heroic literary paternity based on displays of ideal Asian American masculinity. Meanwhile, Chin notes that these misrepresentations of Chinese masculinity work in tandem with popular American depictions of Chinese men as effeminate, weak, and docile. As such, gender and sexuality signal a key basis for Chin in differentiating between the ‘real’ and ‘fake’ as feminist and queer interventions are often cast as symbols of traitorous white love. Thus, Kingston’s novel and Hwang’s play occupy a central role in theorizations of Asian American literatures generally and cultural nationalist debates over ethnic identity, gender, and sexuality more specifically.

Both texts provide an intriguing inverse approach to questions of paternity in depicting not contemporaries who imagine a heroic tradition of their ancestors, but rather Chinese railroad workers who come to grapple with questions of labor and masculinity as they contemplate their (im)possible futures in the United States. In this way, we might read the temporality of generational transmission otherwise, as responses to the very real possibilities of death. In the case of the Chinese railroad workers, contemplations about the future are inevitably wrapped with the awareness about their inability for making a life in the country, both in terms sustaining a body and creating modes of kinship and community. Thus, these practices do not posit futurity and heteronormativity as equivalent, but rather critique foreclosed futurity in the face of death.

Reassessing these efforts through camp aesthetics allows us to nuance the dense meanings attached to masculinity in relation to determinations of labor and citizenship. Alongside and in contrast to dominant practices, prevalent displays of campiness in cultural productions gesture toward a “stranger intimacy” between and among subjects of racialized labor. Inviting us to explore other desires, intimacies, and ways of being that exceed the oppositions between emasculation and hypermasculinity, between deviant and proper (hetero)sexuality, these intimacies recode assumptions of deviance that stem from the presumed relations of Chinese migrant bodies to one another as well as how they inhabit space. This is not to say that the men did not aspire to or wish to approximate modes of ideal masculinity. In fact, both texts thematize the workers’ engagement with a heroic figure of Chinese tradition, one familiar to Frank Chin’s oeuvre—Gwan Gung. The inclusion and reworking of Gwan Gung as a symbol of Chinese masculinity in both Kingston’s text and Hwang’s play offer an interesting counter to Chin’s accusations. While both writers portray the characters as imagining an outside to the exploitative labor conditions through Gwan Gung, they gesture toward the inadequacy of claims toward Chinese tradition and masculinity. Instead, the characters show a need to re-envision these heroic ideals toward their present conditions in order to illuminate how bodily performances of play, through the erotic and negotiations of masculinity, provide the means for organizing. Within these works, these negotiations register through the aesthetics of camp that make possible collective action through strikes.

The Non-(Re)productive Labor of “Fucking the World”

China Men is often read as an autobiography, a generic category that was further upheld as the book won the 1981 National Book Award for Nonfiction. Kingston has recounted that she originally intended for this and her first novel The Woman Warrior to be part of one book, but eventually decided to separate them into two given the amount of material covered in each. Due to this separation, each book has been deemed to separately take up issues of feminism and emasculation for Chinese Americans. China Men traces a Chinese migrant labor history through father figures, with the characters of father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Yet, rather than symbolizing a faithful recounting of her ancestors, these characters instead point to a collective history of Chinese American labor narrated through the personal and familial. Kingston plays with and revises assumptions about paternity not only to straddle between personal familial ancestry and collective history but also to put pressure on notions of ideal masculinity through invocations of Chinese myth.

The novel explicitly conjures and reworks the shameful histories associated with the derogatory term “Chinaman,” which is intimately linked to the anti-Asian hostility as well as notions of perverse masculinity indexed by the ‘coolie.’ While the appellation of “Chinaman” works to reductively generalize the migrant laborers based on their ethnicity, China Men, as David Li argues, might be understood as a literal translation of “Chinese people” from the Chinese language.\(^{117}\) Significantly, “Chinamen” and “China Men” frequently appear in close proximity within the novel. Through exchanges between the laboring characters, “Chinamen” conveys the racial fantasies that Anglo-American overseers project upon the laborers. For instance: “The demons in boss suits came into the tunnel occasionally, measured with a yardstick, and shook their heads. ‘Faster,’ they said. ‘Faster, Chinamen too slow. Too slow.’

\(^{117}\) David Leiwei Li, “China Men: Maxine Hong Kingston and the American Canon,” American Literary History 2, no. 3 (1990): 484.
‘Tell us we’re slow,’ the China Men grumbled” (134). In so doing, Kingston asks us to ponder the distance and distinction between these fantasies and the workers themselves precisely to illustrate the intimate processes of racialization. In this way, the ‘men’ modified by ‘China’ that are depicted in the work are multiple and heterogeneous.

The story of these men are narrated through a queer genealogy of Chinese labor in the United States masquerading as a personal tale of familial ancestry. In the process, figures of paternity and kinship become archetypes for telling the story of a particular space and time in Asian American history, as noted by the title “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.” The probability of reading the narrative’s development in terms of familial paternity is ironically undermined by the various scenes in which working conditions demonstrate the difficulties of sustaining one’s livelihood much less creating a family. This is dramatized through the following scene, of Ah Goong (the aforementioned Grandfather) laboring to construct the railroad:

One beautiful day, dangling in the sun above a new valley, not the desire to urinate but sexual desire clutched him so hard he bent over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. He tried to rub himself calm. Suddenly he stood up tall and squirted out into space. ‘I am fucking the world,’ he said. The world’s vagina was big, big as the sky, big as a valley. He grew a habit: whenever he was lowered in the basket, his blood rushed to his penis, and he fucked the world. (133)

Debating how to best interpret this scene, scholars have wavered between deciding whether this act is feminist or not. Specifically, they contemplate whether the scene, and the larger novel as a whole, shows the possibility for Asian American literature to simultaneously enact critiques of racism and sexism. Some call attention to the troubling gendered rhetoric, whereby the ground
becomes the feminine, or feminized, object that Ah Goong dominates through the act of ejaculation. LeiLani Nishime cautions against the aggressive act of masculinity in this act and how it might reproduce heteropatriarchy and overwrite feminist concerns. In contrast, David Li sees this act as emblematic of emasculation, with the ejaculation not geared toward the goal of sexual reproduction. Still, Julia H. Lee reads Ah Goong’s autoeroticism as one of independence and joy. In this way, the act becomes emblematic of the desire for propagating a lineage of heteropatriarchy and thus illustrates the risks of reaffirming dominant power relations in terms of gender and sexuality as a means of combatting racism. Accordingly, they conclude that Kingston uses this scene as a means of critiquing Frank Chin and claims toward a heroic literary paternity.

Meanwhile, others contemplate whether or not this act of pleasure can be considered an act of resistance against the demands of racialized labor. Of this possibility, David Eng writes: “Released from patriarchal norms, the unnamed China Man offers the possibility not only of resignifying Asian American masculinity but of envisioning a new set of gender roles outside traditional boundaries.” Thus, we might read this scene otherwise to contend with how Ah Goong’s imitative, and ultimately failed, performance of ideal masculinity in this act of “fucking the world” registers a mode of materialist critique that interrogates system of non-(re)productive labor. In thus linking this act of autoeroticism with the labor of railroad work, the body becomes a vexed site that captures both the compulsive demand that Chinese migrants become ‘pure’

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119 Li, “China Men.”


labor and the impossibility for such demands to materialize. In other words, this act of autoeroticism does not signal a mode of agency removed from and in radical opposition to the demands of compulsory labor. Instead, he ironically gestures toward a non-productive and indeed non-reproductive mode of labor. Suspended in air in a basket that is meant to be the vessel for his labor of dropping explosives to clear the mountains, Ah Goong, in masturbating, transforms the relationship between his body and the earth. By not performing the task demanded of him, he actively enacts small acts of refusal and reprieve that do not ultimately change the system of exploitative labor but nonetheless relish in moments of extravagance from within.

Autoeroticism becomes a response to this system, a mode of survival and management as the physical toll of labor physiologically induces modes of stimulation and arousal, habituating both the desire for and need to masturbate. Much like the ways in which demands of capital induce the transformation of Chinese bodies into pure instruments of labor, the system similarly animates and controls their physiological responses; Ah Goong’s arousal and masturbation become conditioned by the habit of work. Tomo Hattori describes this double bind: “Ah Goong’s autoerotic act may be seen both as an escape from the dominant culture’s notion of proper subject formation under compulsory heterosexuality, and as a pathetic attempt to mimic the imagined pleasure of the dominant male subject.”

What might have originally been an act of defiance, of claiming self erotic pleasure against demands of work, becomes a coping mechanism. That is, these moments of reprieve become folded into the system itself, precisely so that Ah Goong can become a more efficient laborer. In this way, the scene helpfully elucidates the multiple processes by which masculinity works by inscribing demands of racial capitalism.

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onto the site of the body in terms of desire, movement, and labor. That is, “masculinity” indexes how the contradictions of racial capital compel both the desires for and the material restraints against modes of reproduction.

We might then read this act as a tragic comic commentary on and critique of the ways in which Chinese migrant bodies are hyper-valued for labor and production while barred from any means of re-producing community within the United States. Note that his act of autoeroticism occurs in the face of possible death. The threat of mortality and physical death is mirrored in considerations about the impossibility for social reproduction among these Chinese migrant laborers. This moment mocks configurations of the Chinese as sexually perverse by flagrantly enacting what seems to be an obscene display of sexual gratification in public. This act of onanism understands that the system will not change and the pleasure does not lead to any mode of reproduction or generational transmission. It is an act of pleasure in and of itself. Centering queerness in this scene challenges us to approach Ah Goong’s autoeroticism differently, as neither an assertion of power through heroic masculine prowess nor a fantasy of complete agential resistance through the site of the erotic against the powers that be.

If the masculinist rhetoric of “fucking the world” points to a destructive practice of replicating uneven power structures, the scene further beckons us to consider how the demands of racial capital force the laboring bodies to mimic these practices. The ambiguity of ‘fucking’ in all its connotations leads Hattori to ask “whether Ah Goong is fucking the world in a fulfilling and satisfying way, or merely fucking himself in an act devoid of meaning and power.”

Indeed, Ah Goong later resituates the ephemerality and tenuousness of this act of self-pleasure within the context of “being fucked by the world.” We can see this as his ejaculation and the

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123 Ibid.
imagination of sexual intercourse leaves the “world’s vagina” (the earth) fundamentally unchanged. On the contrary, the other tool of explosion that he is responsible for dropping onto the earth—the dynamite—shifts the landscape entirely and, in the process, holds the very palpable risk of endangering his life and the lives of other workers laboring nearby. Ah Goong muses: “The terrain changed immediately. Streams were diverted, rock-scapes exposed. Ah Goong found it difficult to remember what land had looked like before an explosion. It was a good thing the dynamite was invented after the Civil War to the east was over. The dynamite added more accidents and ways of dying, but if it were not used, the railroad would take fifty more years to finish” (136). The destructive yet necessary use of dynamite speaks to the costs of maximizing work productivity and efficiency in attempts to transform Chinese workers’ bodies into instruments of “pure labor.” Just as the dynamite becomes necessary to ameliorating working conditions by speeding up the completion of the construction, albeit at the increased risk of physical harm and death, the act of autoeroticism similarly works to create conditions of survivability. The question remains, however: are such acts of non-(re)productive labor actually allowed as moments of play in order to maximize work. That is, does it work to facilitate the dehumanizing conditions of becoming pure ‘abstract labor’? Or, might it provide a means of rupturing these conditions?

Tracing non-(re)productive labor through conceptions of work and play via a camp genealogy instead of Marxian theorizing can further nuance its operations and effects in these scenes. Admittedly, concepts of work and play index multiple genealogies and disparate traditions across Marxian and aesthetic discourses. Without discounting these works, I draw specifically on ideas of work-as-play articulated by Matthew Tinkcom through engagements with queer camp. Attending to U.S. queer subcultures in the mid-twentieth century, he suggests
that these groups’ practices provide a mode of theorizing about the lived experience of inhabiting and negotiating the contradictions of modernity in its designations of cultural value around gender, sexuality, and race. The necessary strategies of passing under dominant norms of homophobia register a central form of work that remains illegible and trivialized under dominant Marxian accounts. Drawing on Arendt, Tinkcom remarks that “their work is often disguised as precisely through what Arendt calls its ‘playfulness’ and through other forms of negation to labor—laziness, lack of seriousness, indifference.”

Shifting increasingly common associations of camp in terms of reception, as a reading or viewing practice, Tinkcom underscores camp as production, a form of queer labor. This valence of queer labor under camp may be productively broadened to consider the multiple forms of racialized labor that coalesce as queer.

The queerness of non-(re)productive labor in China Men affords us insight into how work-as-play may generate means of striking. The moment of recognition about the shifting deployment of the Chinese body in relation to labor provides the catalyst for organizing. The text juxtaposes a number of quotes one after another. Not identifying the specific worker from which each dissent arises, the discussion suggests a collective of workers gathering around a set of disparate yet interconnected concerns: “A human body can’t work like that…The demons don’t believe this is a human body. This is a chinaman’s body” (140). These depictions try to imagine the reasoning behind a well-documented strike that took place in the Sierra Mountains during June 1867, in which the Chinese workers stopped their work for eight days and stayed in the camps, refusing to work. They demanded an increase in pay from $35 to $40 per month, and a reduced work day of eight hours.

125 Chew, Nameless Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad, 84; Ambrose, Nothing like It in the World, 240–242.
As is generally recounted, the company stopped the shipment of necessary provisions such as food into the Chinese camps. They broke the strike after essentially starving the workers for eight days. While Crocker heralded this triumph, Ping Chiu notes that some of the strikers’ demands might have been partially fulfilled: “The *Alta California* reported that previous to the strike, the Chinese were getting $31 per month, and for ‘reasons best known to themselves,’ the company officials had raised their wages to $35 per month. Probably this pay increase is not entirely voluntary on the part of the company, but was intended to avert the impending strike. Thus, though the strike itself accomplished nothing, the prior threat of a walkout had achieved a pay raise of $4 per month.”

What is commonly noted as the failure of this strike and the defeat of the Chinese workers’ organizing are much more complicated, as Kingston’s text materializes in its depiction of the strike from the workers’ point of view beyond the slogan of “Eight hours a day good for white man, all the same good for China Man” (140).

Kingston imagines the consciousness and mode of organizing that proliferated within the camps. Ah Goong speaks to an understanding of their position as racialized labor: “Of course, of course. No China Men, no railroad. They were indispensable labor. Throughout these mountains were brothers and uncles with a common idea, freemen, not coolies, calling for fair working conditions” (140). Working within and against the ideological function of coolie as a term for stirring anti-Chinese sentiment, Ah Goong connects their laboring conditions with a number of other Asian laborers working across the United States as ‘brothers and uncles.’ Their organizing takes advantage of existing networks of labor as well as dominant ideas of docility. Assumptions about the Chinese as docile were so prominent that a headline from the *San Francisco Alta* on July 3, 1867 read: “End of the Chinese Laborers Strike—The Movement Instigated by Designing

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White Men.” Recast as a ploy to stall construction, the strike and their demands are devalued: “The foundation of this strike appears to have been a circular, printed in the Chinese language, sent among them by designing persons for the purpose of destroying their efficiency as laborers.” Instead, Kingston imagines that the workers passed pieces of paper with information organizing the strike through the provisions and foods transported beyond and within the camps. Significantly, the spaces of the camps, indicative of unequal racial labor conditions of the workers’ national abjection, also becomes a space of collectivity by which the Chinese workers enact and demand other ways of living and communal making. China Men fleshes out and interrogates the more common official accounts of the strike that claim the Chinese workers merely stayed in the camps quietly. Instead, the Chinese workers engage with the arts to imagine themselves in terms of masculine heroism. Much like Kingston’s novel, Hwang’s play also explores the desires and impossibilities for modes of ideal masculinity given the demands of labor. His play gestures toward the possibility that art, through both the oral and the corporeal, can provide a means for challenging this system. Furthermore, it considers the possibility of queer homosocial intimacies as grounds for envisioning, demanding, and enacting alternative ways of being together.

**Intimating Queer Socialities at Work**

While Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, and, to a lesser extent, some of Frank Chin's writing, have received the majority of critical attention, David Henry Hwang’s play *The Dance and the Railroad* has also been significant in pedagogical recovery efforts around the Chinese railroad workers.\(^{127}\) As he recounts in an interview, the production of the play was initially

commissioned by the Department of Education for elementary school students. Moreover, the restaging of the play in 2012 at The Signature Theater in New York City coincides with Stanford University’s large-scale collaborative archival initiative, the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project. Revisiting this historical moment, Hwang’s play begins in media res, during the same eight-day strike Kingston explores. Removed from the camps, the play instead takes place on a nearby mountaintop, where Lone, a twenty-year-old Chinese migrant laborer who has been working on the railroads for two years, practices his Peking opera. Ma, a naive eighteen-year-old who arrived to the camps just two months ago, spies on and interrupts Lone’s practice. He begs Lone to teach him the moves of the opera. In the mentorship that ensures, Ma conveys his idealistic dreams of getting rich from the camps and returning to China with the wealth, while Lone exposes the realities of exploitative labor conditions that render such dreams unobtainable.

Further attending to the relationship between arts and resistance that Kingston explores, the play contemplates the ways in which these two characters, along with their labors and bodily performances, are separated out into work and play, the former seemingly represented by ‘the railroad’ and the latter by ‘the dance.’ The names of the two characters, although based on the last name of the two actors who initiated these roles, give us a sense of these relations between work and play. Sau-Ling Wong, for instance, reads the name “Lone” as suggestive of the character’s solitary pursuits of art for transcendence. Indeed, Lone practices his art in solitude, detaching himself from the rest of the workers. Hearing their names spoken on stage, however, one might also detect that “Lone” registers the Chinese character for dragon, while “Ma” signals

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the character for horse, working in tandem with the play’s extended analogy through nonhuman animals to consider the dehumanizing conditions of labor. Specifically, the play contemplates how the question of humanness and the possibility for human agency becomes bracketed in the demands for racialized labor. These references to animality are not isolated, however. Indeed, they were prevalent in depictions of Chinese migrants and symptomatic of notions of the biologically impossible body. As Hayot states in the epigraph, the shifting inhuman nature of bodies were seen “like animals and not like animals.” Rhetoric and visuals of animals were central to the racialization of these Asian bodies and fomenting anti-Asian sentiment. Mel Chen further notes that “conjoined figurations of animality, race, and queerness were not merely sublimated suggestions, but rather were explicitly rendered, drawn, and illustrated.” Chen notes the visual animalization of the Chinese as rats based on the queue in buttressing calls for exclusion. By naming its characters as animals, the play not only invokes this history, but also contemplates how it is negotiated, reworked, and potentially challenged by the laboring body.

At the same time, the invocations of animality in the play gesture toward fantastical traditions of performance as well as the disconnect from material conditions of dehumanizing labor, a distance between the grandiosity of the mythic dragon and the beast of burden. We see this in an initial encounter when Lone mockingly entertains Ma’s seemingly frivolous orientation toward the opera as a medium for approximating heroic masculinity. Lone gives instructions for Ma to act out. Lone and his ejaculatory commands are the literal calls that control the movement of Ma’s body. In allegedly assuming this role of mentor, Lone makes use of Ma’s naivety by parodying his heterosexual fantasy of twenty wives and also rehearsing the ways in which Ma allows him to control his body, just as the white men do: “LONE: Louder! It’s your mating call!

Think of your twenty duck wives! Good! Louder! Project! More! Don’t slow down! Put your tail feathers into it! They can’t hear you!”

This exchange beckons considerations of questions of work and play in relation to gender and sexuality as notions of heteronormative masculinity stage a site of bodily contestation over agency and labor.

While Ma suggests that Lone contribute his arts to the strike in the camps, Lone dismisses the strike, questioning its very efficacy in changing conditions of work on the railroads. Reluctant at first, he agrees to teach Ma on the condition that Ma acknowledges that the Chinese laborers are all “dead men” (66). Projecting the camps as spaces that index their social death as racial labor, Lone points toward the ‘deadness’ of their bodies since they are being purely animated by racial capitalism: “It’s ugly to practice when the mountain has turned your muscles to ice. When my body hurts too much to come here, I look at the other Chinamen and think, ‘They are dead. Their muscles work only because the white man forces them’” (66). The attempts to maximize their labor productivity come at the expense of deteriorating their bodies. For Lone, the dance presents a reprieve from this deadening: “I live because I can still force my muscles to work for me” (66). Rather than seeing the dance as disconnected from the laboring conditions to which his body is subjected in camp, Lone shows that these performances are part of the labor of enacting survival strategies for managing the deadening work in the camps. Insofar as camp illustrates spaces of confinement as presenting totalizing conditions of oppressive violence, the play gestures toward another camp to underscore the possibility for otherwise. As Lone and Ma’s debates around the possibility of allowing the body to perform

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otherwise manifest through competing notions of masculinity, their simultaneous desire for and failure to approximate masculine ideals register as campiness.

While Lone underscores the work and discipline involved in his practice of the opera, however, he does not see it as connected to the work demanded of racialized labor. Instead, refusing the designation of mere play, he nonetheless locates his realm as a potential outside to the labor system. In other words, whereas the campy act of non(re)productive labor enacted by Ah Goong’s self-pleasuring occurs within the extended spaces and system of railroad labor, Lone’s dance on the mountaintop suggest a needed physical distancing from this space in order to use his body otherwise, set aside from the camp with other Chinese workers. On the other hand, he dismisses the strike as mere play. Significantly, the putative lack of seriousness of the strike is connected to the predominant art form of narrative, story-telling as a collective practice of the strikers in the camps.

In *The Dance and the Railroad*, the play’s depictions of campiness gesture toward queer utopianism through the opera as Lone and Ma contemplate the possibility for the body to perform otherwise under the system of racial labor. For Ma, he sees the Peking opera as a site to enact his idealistic dreams of returning to China rich. “China,” rather than signifying any authentic homeland of return, comes to symbolize the imagined elsewhere of utopia, coded in highly masculinized terms. By insisting upon playing the role of Gwan Gung, Ma approximates this elsewhere through the masculine heroism of Chinese traditions and simultaneously makes clear his distance from this heroic ideal as coolie labor: “I’ll play Gwan Gung and tell stories of what life was like on the Gold Mountain…We laid tracks like soldiers” (61). In the closing scenes, campiness manifests as a utopian practice. In hearing about the

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victory of the strike in obtaining demands for a pay increase and decreased working hours, Lone changes his previous skepticism about the effectiveness of strikes. Contextualized within his thoughts about the ‘deadness’ of the laboring body, the success of the strike causes Lone to see the possibility for agency through “the dance” within the labor conditions of “the railroad.” Subsequently, the victory also inspires a blending of “the railroad” into “the dance.” Rather than assume the role of Gwan Gung, which Ma long desired, he instead demands that they perform an opera that is specifically written about his experience as a migrant laborer in the railroad work camps: “Good. So let’s do an opera about me…I just won a victory, didn’t I? I deserve an opera in my honor” (79). When Lone raises the point that this is not traditional, Ma replies: “Traditional? Lone, you gotta figure any way I could do Gwan Gung wasn’t gonna be traditional anyway. I may be as good a guy as him, but he’s a better dancer” (79). Gesturing toward the impossibility of a filial relation to tradition, Lone and Ma stage a “mock heroic drama,” which performs an ironic juxtaposition between the supposedly heroic form of the opera and the quotidian story of their travels and travails as migrant workers. The mock heroic drama, in dramatizing and intensifying the contradictions of masculinity in terms of the laboring body, collapses distinctions between work and play by enacting queer utopianism not as an unrealistic ideal, but a collective demand for change in the present.

This mock Chinese opera, in claiming a form of masculine heroism through Chinese traditions, illuminates the historical and political conditions that rendered such attempted claims failed endeavors. In campy fashion, Lone and Ma parody the constructed image of the Oriental, speaking in—for the first time—“broken English” and assuming gestures of subservience. Quotidian objects in the form of a tin bowl and wooden stick become a gong for their musical accompaniment. Toward the end of the dance, they mime gestures of attacking the mountain and,
in reenacting its physically exhausting labor, release suggestively sexual moans as they grasp onto each other’s limbs. Resounding Ah Goong’s cries of “fucking the world,” these ejaculatory noises point toward pleasure forestalled as their bodily labor is spent entirely on demands of the work. These choreographed movements ironically point toward the complex circuits of eroticism and intimacy present through the labor of these bodies. In addition to resonating with campy practices of reappropriating genres and convention, this sequence is imbued with humor and sorrow.

This dance also exemplifies the strategies of campiness that pervade the larger play. The homosociality between Lone and Ma, and of the group of Chinese laborers in the camps, speaks to the various ways by which these men have been queered from national belonging. This queering points to the intimate ways in which the system of racial capitalism regulates the very movement and meaning around these raced bodies. Even so, the play points to the inability of laboring demands to reduce these men into pure labor. Campiness, in this play, comes to also illuminate the various modes and performances by which these individuals negotiated the confining conditions to which they have been subjected, working within and against the conditions of camp. That is, camp comes to not only parody their ‘failure’ to perform by demands of masculinity, but also to critique how the camp system intimately regulates bodies in terms of its movements, contacts, intimacies, and desires. More than mere play, camp aesthetics serves as a direct response and refuge from the dehumanizing conditions of work within encampments. While seemingly spatializing exploitative conditions of work, the campsites also staged the possibility for their organizing as a collective body. Thus, akin to the ‘play’ allowed by the opera, these activities of striking illuminate the capacities of occupying and resignifying space toward different purposes.
In thinking through the intricacies between work and play, the characters’ interaction also questions attempts of interpreting this moment as “Asian American.” In other words, the play seems to illustrate how historical conditions show the means by which Asian American illuminates various fractures in the promises of the nation-state and of capitalism. Instead, race, gender, and sexuality indicate the various modes of differentiation that circumscribe and delimit the horizons of freedom. Yet, as these demands come to invest heavily on the body and to articulate how it should perform, there is always possibility for otherwise. Kingston’s novel and Hwang’s play suggest the possibility that campiness opens up an alternative archive of the processes by which Asian Americans aim to challenge, rewrite, and transform the logics of gender and sexuality that facilitate their abjection from U.S. citizenship.\textsuperscript{133} Camp aesthetics within these conditions of racialized labor signals practices of resistance enacted by minority groups by inhabiting stifling spaces and norms in order to challenge them from within. From these spaces, performances of campiness, I assert, have the potential of mapping what Muñoz calls a “queer utopianism,” which, imagines an ideal futurity and demands a relentless critique of the present conditions that foreclose its realization.\textsuperscript{134} Troubling the distinction between work and play, “camp” illustrates the ways in which we inhabit and rework the demands of institutionality, pointing toward these forms of play that are extravagant, indulgent, and vital to our work.

\textsuperscript{133} Shimakawa, \textit{National Abjection}, 87.
CHAPTER 2

CAMP(Y) Archives

Japanese/American Incarceration & the Queer Un/making of “Asian America”

Given the official and popular representations of the internment camps, what Okubo’s drawings contested are not only racist stereotypes of Japanese Americans, but also *the representations and meanings of the camps*.

— Xiaojing Zhou

In the study of popular culture, we should always start here: with the double stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it.

— Stuart Hall

After recently arriving to the relocation camp in Heart Mountain, Wyoming, Ojii San, a grandfather played by George Takei, hangs a set of wind-chimes onto a pole as decoration to his family unit’s barren barrack. A white camp officer comes by and aggressively demands that it be removed. To diffuse the situation, Sammy, the Japanese/American grandson, removes the chimes and hangs an American flag in their place. Approving of this patriotic display, the officer walks away. Glancing to ensure that the officer is out of sight, Ojii San returns the wind-chimes to the pole, this time behind the flag, hidden from both his and the audience’s view. As his hand brushes across the hollow rods, the waved flag flutters to the notes of the chimes jostling into one

another. Pleased, Ojii San offers: “Flag look like America, sound like Japan.” The humor of this putatively U.S. nationalist display providing cover for sounds and desires that echo otherwise offers an apt theoretical point of departure for reassessing what we know about the incarceration of Japanese/Americans by the United States government during World War II. Taking the prompt from these wind chimes, this chapter revisits the archives of the camp, so often coded in silence, from the photographs to the prominence of experimental films, to attend to the noisiness of these captured moments. How might we reassess cultural productions to reanimate the forms of living, crying, laughing, and human toil that persisted within the camps?

Within sets resembling wooden planks and beams taking shape as the outlines of the bare barrack structures—often doubling as cages—the characters of the Broadway musical production Allegiance (2015) compel us to examine the various forms of living and inhabiting the contradictions. On the one hand, the musical elucidates the legal and political provisionality of U.S. citizenship based on racial difference as Japanese/Americans were transformed into ‘enemy nationals.’ On the other hand, it points to the provisionality of the living structures and the lack of necessary provisions—medicine, clean water, furniture—within the camps, leading to the depicted death and burial of a sick infant in the desert. Still, the musical portrays moments of the everyday within camp that fall between and beyond reductive dichotomies of complacency and resistance. As experienced in the everyday life of camp, this is marked in the banal as Sammy

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137 The world premiere of the play, then named with the subtitle “A New American Musical,” occurred at the The Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, California in 2012. It later opened on Broadway in the Longacre Theatre in New York City in 2015. When he was a child, Takei and his family were relocated with the internment. Takei has been a strong advocate for raising awareness about the internment and was crucial in the development and production of this musical. For more, see James Hebert, “George Takei’s ‘Allegiance’: A Refresher,” The San Diego Union-Tribune, February 5, 2015, http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2015/feb/05/old-globe-theatre-allegiance-broadway-takei-primer/.
announces at the beginning of an organized social gathering, “welcome to the first and hopefully not annual Heart Mountain Dance.” These performances illuminate how internees improvised from the sparse conditions to create art, living, and other ways of continuing on through baseball games, dances, and a garden blooming in the dessert. As Sammy reminds other campmates, “We gotta make life livable, enjoyable, fun even.” Thus, we also see the musical working through and interrogating common claims of passive, accommodationist internees that often coalesce around interpretations of ‘gaman.’ Dominant accounts often praise the internees for enduring the camps without bitterness, attributing this fortitude to the Japanese cultural philosophy of gaman. Yet, Allegiance refuses this alleged passivity as the refrain of “gaman” from an earlier eponymous number by the same title reappears amid calls to “resist!” as internees burn draft notices inside the camp. Similarly, this could be said of the poster for the musical, a paper flower blossom in the color of the American flag. Folded by Ojii San, this symbol of beauty adorns the hair of Kei Kimura, played by Lea Salonga, but doubles as a political statement as a crumpled folding of the loyalty questionnaire. In what ways might these alternative portrayals of the Japanese/American incarceration shift or put pressure on assumptions commonly held within the larger (inter)discipline of Asian American Studies?

Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the impact of the World War II Japanese/American internment camps on the historical and epistemological formation of “Asian America.” On

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138 Internment refers to a legal process of detaining enemy nationals, a term that is inaccurate in describing the mass relocation and containment of Nikkei during World War II, given the large percentage of U.S. citizens among the group. At the same time, I choose to refer to the various sites as “internment camps.” The shift between “incarceration,” “internment,” and “camps” can allow us to apprehend the conflicted meanings and slippage in using language and terms by the official authorities. See Roger Daniels, “Words Do Matter: A Note on Inappropriate Terminology and the Incarceration of the Japanese Americans,” in Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest Japanese Americans & Japanese Canadians in the Twentieth Century, ed. Louis Fiset
February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, authorizing the U.S. army “to prescribe military areas…from which any or all persons may be excluded.” Unsurprisingly, the military targeted Japanese/American communities along the Pacific coast, a response to the xenophobia and anti-Japanese sentiment that peaked following the attack on Pearl Harbor. A total of more than 110,000 Japanese/Americans, almost two thirds of whom were U.S. citizens, were uprooted and removed, first to “assembly centers” and then again to one of the ten more permanent “relocation centers” that ranged across seven states, as far inland as Arkansas. Once there, internees were separated into rows of barren barracks, fenced in by barbed wire and under the constant surveillance of armed guards. Their rights to habeas corpus were suspended and they were forced to endure inadequate living conditions, extreme weather, and lack of basic provisions, such as bedding and medicine.

Japanese/American incarceration illuminates central tenets of the trans/national imaginary of Asian American Studies, providing a stark reminder about the racialized violence constitutive of U.S. citizenship as it is “defined over and against the Asian immigrant.”

Kandice Chuh has further argued that this dynamic operated through the “‘transnationalization’ of Japaneseness,” which conflated Japanese and Japanese Americans. This “nikkei transnation” was configured as organized by biological notions of blood and descent that transcend and take precedence over any possibility for allegiance to the United States. The role of the incarceration has been so central to Asian Americanist discourses that it compelled Elaine Kim to entitle a 1993 essay reflecting on the “Past, Present, and Future” of the field “Beyond

\[\text{\footnotesize{139} Lowe, } \textit{Immigrant Acts, 4.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize{140} Chuh, } \textit{Imagine Otherwise, 59.}\]
Railroads and Japanese Internment.” While I concur with Kim’s provocation to broaden our studies of Asian racialization onto a transnational frame, we might also take this as a call for questioning how common methodologies for examining the incarceration shape our understanding of its causes, operations, and effects. How might our approach to select archives of camps naturalize what is thinkable and not about Japanese/American incarceration?

This chapter contends that campiness elucidates the structures of (un)know-ability around the Japanese/American incarceration. On the one hand, I mean this in terms of the discursive practices that precipitated and sustained the material conditions of incarceration. Scholars have repeatedly illustrated the heavy reliance on euphemisms in proposing, sustaining, and placating the consequences of these state practices. Official policies relied on terms of internment, assembly, evacuation, relocation, and resettlement, eventually calling these facilities “centers” rather than “camps.” Even a cursory review of the critical literature will find the frequency of terms such as irony, contradiction, and absurdity describing these discursive patterns. Magazines and newspapers of the era published venomous yet humorous cartoons depicting buck-toothed racial caricatures to establish the menacing nature of the Japanese enemy. How might we situate the operations, objectives, and effects of the euphemistic policies within this larger cultural climate? I suggest that these different discourses, far from being mutually discrete, interact in overlapping ways that are registered in the characteristics of camp aesthetics. Tracing campiness allows us to more closely attend to the complex entangled ways in which cultural and political discourses worked together to make the incarceration possible.

In reassessing the configuration of the enemy ‘Jap’ alongside the racist visualizations of the “Oriental” through campiness, I draw on the work of Saidiya Hartman to explore how the putatively trivial forms of “the fun and the frolic” index both the “ambivalent pleasures” of racist structures and the conjoining of terror and enjoyment. My choice to reassess these very processes through camp aesthetics particularly aims to underscore the ineluctable persistence and entanglement between queer excess, humor, irony, foreignness, and theatricality that subtend the aestheticization of the “Oriental.”

In this regard, the argument is neither that ‘the camp’ is campy nor that camp aesthetics caused the camps. Instead, I contend that campiness, through the disparate sets of characteristics, practices, and discourses that it coalesces, registers the nuanced ways in which state power and racial performativity are both consolidated and challenged through the biopolitical management of the body. Regulating the movements and meanings surrounding these bodies, camps index spatial and aesthetic structures of (im)mobility through which the contradictory relations between Asian/ Americans and the national body politic are played out, fixed, negotiated, and repurposed.

The ambivalent politics of campiness in relation to the internment camps productively elucidates the queer un/making of “Asian America.” By queer un/making, I mean to underscore not only how the campiness of the ‘Oriental’ conditions the making of “Asian America” and its historical relations of racial differentiation, but also how dominant scholarly, cultural, and political efforts collectively re-produce the rubric of “Asian America” by disavowing this constitutive queerness. Through such disavowals, common disciplinary practices unwittingly render certain engagements with queerness unthinkable and improper. By focusing on the

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ambivalent affects and effects that the circulation of racist imagery produces, I aim to reassess the investments in masculinity that underscore analyses of these images as stereotypes. Through this exploration of campiness around the camps, I position myself in collaboration with Tina Takemoto’s inquiry into the possibility of recovering histories of queer sexuality and desire in archives of the camps. Specifically, I engage with campiness in interrogating both the impulse to renounce discussions of queer sexuality as improper for the camps and how such responses unwittingly reproduce the very logics that rationalized the incarceration in the first place. In assessing our methodological practices, I contemplate how campiness might varyingly necessitate, foreclose, and provide openings for what Takemoto describes as “queer archival speculation.”

Reasserting the queerness of campiness can illuminate how “Asian America” might be imagined otherwise in ways that both challenge how we understand the forms that resistance assumes and problematize our investments in resistance.

In the subsequent sections, I first discuss how elements of campiness operate in both official discourses around internment and popular cultural discourses that visualized the enemy “Jap.” Then, I consider the dominant cultural and academic efforts in remembering and representing the incarceration, especially through the use of photography taken in the camps and before, during the processes of ‘evacuation.’ I explore the limits of privileging these photographs as the archive for knowing the incarceration. Specifically, common approaches to these images reflect more general tendencies that inadvertently uphold certain ideals about what constitutes proper gender and sexuality. Working against these common appeals, this chapter looks toward the work of visual artists Miné Okubo, Roger Shimomura, and Tina Takemoto in how they

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respond to the various processes around confinement by mining, playing with, and interrogating its campiness. It examines the visual and textual strategies by which Okubo’s graphic autobiography *Citizen 13660* works through and against the official rhetoric of the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to highlight what Kristine Kuramitsu calls the “exaggerated normalcy [of] the ‘official record.’”¹⁴⁵ Next, I analyze the artwork of Roger Shimomura in his 2012 exhibition *Prints of Pop (& War)*. Mixing U.S. Pop art strategies with Japanese art practices, Shimomura’s prints illustrate the ways in which camp aesthetics both was crucial in the racialized visual construction of the enemy “Jap” and can provide a means for interrogating the logic of encampment that made possible the execution, sustainment, and forgetting of Japanese incarceration by the United States.

Examined together, Okubo’s and Shimomura’s artworks illuminate the centrality of popular culture in upholding and challenging the conditions that made the incarceration possible. As Xiaojing Zhou underscores, “the representations and meanings of the camps” are key sites for contesting the relationship between racial difference and national belonging.¹⁴⁶ In playing with the conventions of Pop art, Okubo and Shimomura engage with the significant role of popular culture in the production, dissemination, reception, and transformation of these representations and meanings. These artworks elucidate Stuart Hall’s contention about “the double stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it.”¹⁴⁷ Analyzing these two artists, I argue that campiness and its production of a queer racialized aesthetic difference make possible this doubleness, which coalesces in both the containment of raced bodies in camps and in the resistance to such state practices of

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¹⁴⁷ Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” 443.
confinement. I close this chapter by analyzing Tina Takemoto’s performance video “Looking for Jiro” and her use of camp aesthetics in interrogating and reinserting the possibility of locating queer intimacies and desires in our figuration of Japanese/American incarceration. In exploring Okubo, Shimomura, and Takemoto’s visual strategies together, this chapter brings to the fore the place of camp aesthetics in consolidating, challenging, and re-presenting Japanese incarceration.

(Re)Visions of the Camps: Between the Enemy “Jap” and “Happy Campers”

Sustaining the “race prejudice” and “war hysteria” that permeated World War II, the American cultural imaginary depended upon a visual economy that dictates what nation, patriotism, and citizenship look like. Representations of the “Oriental” bring into relief how this economy is differentiated by race, gender, and sexuality. The exaggerated visual depictions of Asian bodies construct a sense of unassimilable Oriental foreignness stemming from what appears to be perverse embodiments of gender and sexuality. Inscribing race, in gendered and sexualized terms, upon the body, these images naturalize foreignness onto the Japanese on the basis of blood and descent. In this way, these images work to instruct viewers in reading Japanese bodies as fundamentally disloyal to the nation and always suspect. To be sure, there was no shortage of blunt opinions expressed by those in important political positions. General John DeWitt gave us such words of wisdom as “A Jap Is a Jap,” a seemingly self-evident, constantive statement that requires a series of performative work to gain material power as a truth. In order for this tautology to make sense and convey the proper intended meaning, one must accurately understand what “a Jap” is. Widespread cultural anxiety during the time speaks

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148 Finding no military necessity, these two reasons, along with “failure of political leadership” were attributed as the main causes for the Japanese incarceration in the groundbreaking U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, Personal Justice Denied (Seattle: Civil Liberties Public Education Fund ; University of Washington Press, 1997).
to the impossibility of making such ontological distinctions as supplements were needed to train
the populace. Thus, newspapers and magazines as images demonized the Japanese/American,
(re)producing the necessary aesthetic conditions for incarcerating them en masse.

During such processes, vocal opposition to the incarceration was scant. Gordon H. Chang
forcefully indicts “the limits, even bankruptcy, of liberals who thought themselves passionate
opponents of racism but who also endorsed mass forced relocation of aliens and citizens alike
solely on the basis of race.”149 Along with his adamant criticism of Hitler and his support in anti-
Fascist efforts, Theodor Seuss Geisel was equally vociferous in his critiques of Japan. Like the
general public more broadly, this critique manifested through an emphasis on foreign racial
difference that conflated Japanese and Japanese/Americans. It is no surprise then that his
cartoons circulated the same racist ‘Jap’ caricatures and that he supported the incarceration.150 In
his political cartoon “Waiting for the Signal from Home...” published on February 13, 1942 in
his Leftist magazine PM, Geisel depicts an invasive horde of Japanese/Americans—identical in
their caricatured Oriental facial features—lined up along the West coast to receive supplies of
TNT. The cartoon depicts a gathering point for the “Honorable 5th Column” as one perches atop
the post “waiting for the signal from home,” playing on fears that Japanese fishermen and others
along the coast were receiving instructions from the Japanese military through flashlights and
other signals. This image casts all Japanese/Americans as potential saboteurs, whose allegiance
to the Japanese ‘race’ superseded any possible loyalty to America. The indistinguishability of
their faces reinforces notions of racial commonality, as their national citizenship is supplanted by
Japan, here identified as “home.”

149 Gordon H. Chang, “‘Superman Is about to Visit the Relocation Centers’ & the Limits of
150 Richard H. Minear et al., Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of
As a corrective to both these negative visual portrayals that made the incarceration possible and to the general absence of the internment camps from official knowledge productions, scholars and activists have repeatedly turned toward photography as “a representational battleground” for remembering these histories.\(^{151}\) The narratives built around these photographs illuminate some of the tendencies and limits in our selection and interpretation of camp archives. Featuring the work of Ansel Addams, Dorothy Lange, and Toyo Miyatake, anthologies catalog photographs that capture the history of Japanese incarceration, arguably instantiating real lived experiences against the “phantasms of orientalness.”\(^{152}\) While documentarian photography serves as the favored antidote to counter such imagery, its realist mode is unable to take into account the power and the enduring structures of these phantasms. Instead, the desire to have these photographs dictate a certain type of politics has unwittingly foreclosed considerations of other visual forms and strategies. As Elena Tajima Creef pointedly observes: “That we continue to be drawn to either Adams’s heroic or Lange’s tragic modes of visual narrative tells us much about the appeal of such binary poles of representation and its impact on the selective nature of our national historical memory.”\(^{153}\) The prevalence of these dichotomous representational modes between the heroic and the tragic, in national historical memory generally and Asian Americanist productions particularly, is perhaps not surprising as they most readily evoke forms of major affect such as pride, sorrow, or anger. These affects,


Sianne Ngai argues, hold a privileged place because they are seen as inherently political in that they incite catharsis as “grander passions” that move us toward collective action.\textsuperscript{154} These entangled interrelations between affect, aesthetics, and politics shape how and why certain forms of narratives dominate the productions around Japanese incarceration.

Often deployed for refuting charges of disloyalty, these modes speak to the perfectibility of American ideals of freedom and democracy, eliding examination of racial exclusions as constitutive of these ideals.\textsuperscript{155} Buttressing these tragic or heroic modes, performances of Americanness and national belonging rely heavily on codes of gender and sexuality. In terms of the tragic, Japanese incarceration has been framed as perpetuating a sense of wounded masculinity and of destroying the heteropatriarchal familial formation. Cultural productions register how the internment and exclusion of national belonging played out in the realm of the family, including the disruption of kinship systems, familial conflict, and inversions of normative gender dynamics in the family. In such a way, queerness both serves as the condition for and the symptom of their internment. Aligning this queerness with the claims of foreignness that position Japanese/Americans outside U.S. national belonging, many cultural productions perform modes of hyper-patriotism that stake a claim for masculine heteronormativity, such as through depictions of Japanese/American soldiers of the 442\textsuperscript{nd} battalion. The gravity of this political event incessantly draws upon universalizing tropes of heteronormative families in order to make its impact properly apprehended. In other words, Japanese/Americans’ deservingness of

belonging and rights (as well as its infringement based on incarceration) becomes legible only within terms of masculinity and heteronormativity.\textsuperscript{156}

These efforts contribute to consolidating the implicit understanding that the visual and discursive construction of ‘the Jap’ ensnares the Japanese body as queer, foreign, and thereby undeserving of rights. Challenging these images, popular and academic discourses often resort to designating them as “stereotypes” to elucidate their negative effects. Yet, choosing to reject outright and refuse these stereotypes risks foreclosing careful examination of how the images operate. Drawing on Homi Bhabha, Karen Shimakawa asserts that stereotypes, rather than denoting truth or falsity, indexes processes of subjectification that demand an anxious repetition in order to gain coherence as truth-effects.\textsuperscript{157} The photographs, rather than dispel these stereotypes, can thus refortify them. I would further argue that the very force of the “enemy Jap” that enabled the incarceration \textit{depended upon} these realist photographs. These photographs worked alongside official government rhetoric to normalize and rationalize the incarceration.

In tandem with such provisionality of the Japanese/American incarceration, camps and their meanings oscillated between epitomes of state violence and of state benevolence. In strategizing both before and after the bombing of Pearl Harbor for the possibility of the mass incarceration of Japanese/Americans, President Franklin D. Roosevelt referred to the potential structures of incarceration as “concentration camps” in multiple instances. Yet, its blatant infringement on democratic ideals compelled officials to present these camps as putatively sincere efforts responding to “military necessity.” Following Executive Order 9066 and the evacuation official discourses took advantage of the flexible meaning of camp to control what


was seen and said about the incarceration and to disavow earlier iterations of concentration camps. When greater awareness grew around the Nazi death camps, politicians and War Relocation Authority (WRA) figures increasingly avoided use of the term “camp.” Haunted by the spectrality of Nazi camps, officials started presenting a vision of the campsites as benevolent, populated by ‘happy campers.’ In addition to the War Relocation Authority, Roosevelt established the federal agency of the Office of War Information to produce and disseminate propaganda to bolster American war efforts, including the incarceration, which was presented to the public as an exercise in democracy. In contrast to the popular racist imagery, both agencies authorized photographers to document the incarceration extensively, from the evacuation, to life inside the camps, and eventually when internees were granted work-leave permits. Collectively, these photographs portrayed camps as benevolent programs in Americanization. These photographs worked to sell both the camps and the internees to the national public. Shortly after the evacuation, officials had to start strategizing for resettlement after camp. With these shifting demands of war, the agencies increasingly produced and disseminated photographs and propaganda videos to recuperate the maligned image of Japanese/Americans. These images visualized the internees as loyal Americans, deploying heteronormative tropes of masculine soldiers, industrious workers, and family life in the camps.

These conflicting representations were exacerbated by the contradictory yet overlapping objectives of internment and resettlement. By the time the WRA properly evacuated, relocated, and interned the Japanese/Americans within the camps, officials had to start strategizing and planning for the resettlement of the internees after camp. Therefore, while the enemy ‘Jap’ served as the figuration that justified the evacuation and incarceration, the happy campers served
to recuperate the internees as patriotic Americans to pave the grounds for resettlement.\textsuperscript{158}

Between these two poles, officials presented the campsites as neutral, temporary spaces of crisis management that contained the inmates for the time being under the auspices of national security. Yet, the means of interpreting and framing the provisional nature of these camps and their operations are mediated through the theatricalization of the bodies of the internees and how they become legible to the larger national public. Mediating the crisis of military necessity, the internee was at once ineluctably foreign and exceptionally American; politically suspect and potentially assimilable. Examining the role of photography in reproducing this divide, Jasmine Alinder observes: “the camera created and reinforced the stark terms that divided Japanese Americans into two categories: the loyal or clean-cut ‘Rover Boy’ and the disloyal or enemy ‘Japanese bastard’…[T]he camera served as a kind of visual gatekeeper that determined who was fit to be a part of the body politic and who should be cast out.”\textsuperscript{159} These complementary discursive tactics between the sincere and the theatrical, as well as the rhetoric of state benevolence and vehement anti-Japanese sentiment, managed the oscillating figuration of the internees between the authentic American and the imitative ‘Jap,’ the patriotic citizen and the always suspect traitor.

Indeed, the wink-wink nudge-nudge approach of camp manifests in both state discourses and conversations among Japanese/Americans in negotiating the trauma of incarceration.

Dominant accounts of life after the camps discuss a pervasive shame following resettlement.

Children of internees or those who were too young to recall their time there often speak of the

\textsuperscript{158} Emily Roxworthy signals this central ambivalence and its theatricalization within official discourses as located between “concentration camps” and “holiday on ice.” Emily Colborn-Roxworthy, “‘Manzanar, the Eyes of the World Are upon You’: Performance and Archival Ambivalence at a Japanese American Internment Camp,” Theatre Journal 59, no. 2 (2007): 189–214.

\textsuperscript{159} Alinder, Moving Images, 3.
regularity with which older generations talked of ‘camp.’ The invocation of the benevolent term of camp allowed for a recognition of and management of the trauma suffered in the camps. Meanwhile, younger generations, believing that to mean summer camp, frequently recount not learning about the realities of incarceration until much later. Such remembering is in line with intense efforts by the WRA to disseminate photographs and propaganda videos to show proof of happy camp experiences to the larger populace. Depictions of what appeared to ‘fun and frolic’ in the camps were interpreted as the success of state efforts rather than seen as internee community efforts to make their own conditions of living within structures of forced removal and confinement.

We see this in a series of four images taken by Tom Parker in January 1943 as commissioned by the WRA. Their identical caption reads: “Residents of Japanese ancestry, at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center, were quick to grasp the recreational advantages of Wyoming's cold weather. Ponds were constructed and flooded, and former Californians, to whom ice skating was a new sport, were enthusiastically nursing bruises and enjoying the sport.” We might make note of the campiness of the rhetoric, which is especially legible retrospectively. The language of residents and former Californians elide the processes of forced displacement. Meanwhile, this photo conveys the idea that camp was fun, like summer camps. And so, official discourses portrayed a semblance of state benevolence that provided these happy campers with an opportunity for vacation rather than seeing these acts of fun and frolic as internees’ practices of community-making precisely to ‘nurse the bruises’ of forced removal and confinement. By drawing upon the meanings of camp as fun, official discourses portrayed a semblance of state benevolence by reframing internees’ practices of living and community-making.
Rather than see the sincerity of these official postures as working against the exaggerated style of the racist imagery that circulated through more popular media, I argue that we may see these two tactics as working in tandem with one another. This incongruous juxtaposition between the sincere and the theatrical, a signature of camp aesthetics, is mapped onto the “Jap,” a particular instantiation of a much longer and wider pattern through which Asians have been differentially racialized as “Oriental.” Recall the discussion in the introduction of Chay Yew’s *A Beautiful Country*, which exemplifies this simultaneous sincere and theatrical racial performativity of the ‘Jap’ through its juxtaposition of two scenes. The campy staging of the *Life* article illuminates how the supposedly sincere efforts of teaching one to differentiate from “Japs” and “friends” disavow the theatricalization of the Oriental upon which it relies. The crossing of camps in this scene of Yew’s play complicates the foundational work of David Eng’s *Racial Castration*, in which he questions the primacy of visuality as a regime for regulating and managing the meanings around Japanese/American bodies that led to their incarceration. Eng interrogates the possibilities and violences of identifying with the imago for Japanese/American men when this ideal is premised on heterosexuality and whiteness. In order to identify with this idealized white heterosexuality, from which he is excluded, the Japanese/American man must work through a negative identification that repeatedly disavows queerness.\footnote{Eng, *Racial Castration*, 104–136.}

Alternative texts that work to push against this dynamic of repudiating queerness and affirming heterosexuality include Okubo’s graphic memoir, Shimomura’s extensive artwork, and Takemoto’s performances. They do so, as I detail below, not necessarily through explicit engagements of sexuality but through explicating how these notions of sexuality permeate the distinction of foreignness and national belonging that undergird the racialization of the internee.
Thus, while not disagreeing with Eng’s observations about the constituted ideal of white heterosexuality against the queer enemy ‘Jap,’ I wish to ask: how does the prevalence of photographs that putatively illustrate the internee as exceptional Americans factor within this equation? That is, what do we make of the shifting and contradictory ways in which the internee oscillates between the enemy Jap and the misunderstood American? I postulate that camp aesthetics might allow us to understand the ways in which these shifting depictions and identifications are mediated and negotiated.

Campiness arises as a central product of the technologies that racialize the Nikkei as ‘Jap,’ a figuration that plays on exaggerated features of sexual difference that are not only in ‘bad taste,’ but also perversely abnormal and threatening to the normative confines of U.S. national belonging. It locates Asian/American racial performativity between the real American and the imitative spy. The circuits of production, dissemination, and reception around these technologies of racialization produce Japanese/Americans in abject relation to the material and symbolic parameters of U.S. national belonging. The works of Miné Okubo and Roger Shimomura elucidate how the ‘enemy Jap’ racialization evinces the creative insidiousness of campiness in that its aesthetic ambivalence and queerness might varyingly consolidate or unsettle the conditions of encampment. First, I examine how Okubo works within and against a realist mode to exaggerate the contradictions and instabilities within official discourses on the camps.

Reveling in the Comic(s)

While the government extensively took and used photographs of the camps as propaganda, internees were prohibited from bringing in cameras. Even letters were heavily censored. Produced under these conditions of surveillance, Miné Okubo’s 1946 graphic narrative
*Citizen 13660* documents her experiences in camps—first at the Tanforan Assembly Center and then the relocation camps in Topaz, Utah. It pairs textual accounts with over 200 pen and ink illustrations that she drew during her time in the camps. These drawings served as an improvised means of recording camp life both visually and textually from the materials on hand in ways that countered the government’s visual rhetoric. Its ironic juxtapositions – its campiness – key us into the various forms of queer labor that the text indexes, including Okubo’s use of the popular comics form to bypass surveillance; her intermixing of humor and pathos to critique the contradictions of incarceration; and, lastly, the modes of fun and other practices of survival and communal living within camps.

*Citizen 13660* insistently foregrounds the various apparatuses that mediate the spectacle of incarceration and the ways in which the Japanese/American body is viewed and understood. As Emily Roxworthy argues, processes of spectacularization facilitated the processes of the incarceration. Through an oversaturation of images, discourses, and sensory information, the intricacies of evacuation and internment became a spectacle that invited the nation to watch passively at a distance as audience members and forget their political participation in what is being witnessed.161 Emphasizing “censorship as a condition of [its] production,” *Citizen 13660* turns our attention away from the blatant examples of racist caricatures in the presses to focus on how the more mundane photographs and governmental discourses worked to produce this spectacle.162 In producing the images and texts that ultimately became *Citizen 13660*, Okubo was keenly aware of the obstacles of dissemination and reception given the explicit modes of

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162 Lynne Horiuchi, “Miné Okubo’s *Citizen 13660* and Her Trek Artwork,” in Miné Okubo: Following Her Own Road, ed. Greg Robinson and Elena Tajima Creef (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 114.
censorship that camp authorities imposed on not only photographs produced but also the letters and materials that circulated in and outside camp. In her preface to the 1983 edition, she situates her motivation for her drawings against the censorship by camp authorities: “Cameras and photographs were not permitted in the camps, so I recorded everything in sketches, drawings, and paintings.”\(^{163}\) Okubo conveys the collusion between the photographic archive and state records. In the antepenultimate illustration to the book, she further expresses her frustration at the bureaucratic nature of the resettlement. Posing for the camera, she observes “I was photographed” (207). Even as her departure from the camps is meant to signal a return to the space of freedom in the outside world of the nation, of which the camps are both a part and not, her movement is contingent upon a detailed recording by the government. She portrays photography as part and parcel in the systems of classification and bureaucratic management that made the incarceration possible, depicting the technologies that frame and make legible her renewed identity as a free citizen, ascribed yet another number.

This routinized process is foregrounded in the ironic juxtaposition in the very title of the book, one that highlights the contradiction of U.S. citizenship and its fragility based on racial difference. “13660” denotes the number assigned to the family unit constituted by Okubo and her brother. Appended to the exalted position of “citizen,” this reduction and classification of the internees by numbers underscore the transformation of the Japanese/American citizen who enjoyed state protection to an “enemy alien” who endure state violence and confinement. This general tactic of irony and humor that infuses the book strategically responds to both the dominant climate of racial hostility and the intense surveillance by the state. In addition to the regulation of photography, Okubo also witnessed the exasperating mechanisms of censorship in

letters: “I would get letters from my father. It would read: ‘Dear Miné, Block, block, block’ [blocked out by the censor] and his name signed. So I never found out what happened.”164 The same forms of censorship applied to the news as well. Observing the series of blocks superimposed onto written correspondence, Okubo understood that authorities viewed visual and written information that circulated as suspicious and encoded with secret meaning.

Okubo reworks this encoding by exploiting the inconsistencies and contradictions within the terms of the official discourse. Working through a series of doubled meanings, Citizen 13660 both appears to describe the camp objectively, while subversively critiquing its conditions. As a personal autobiography and a collective ethnography of the camps, the style of the book is crafted with the objective of simultaneously reaching a private and public audience. On the multiple intended audiences, Okubo states: “Citizen 13660 began as a special group of drawings made to tell the story of camp life for my many friends who faithfully sent letters and packages to let us know we were not forgotten. The illustrations were intended for exhibition purposes” (ix). The abrupt inclusion of this second sentence reveals that Okubo is cognizant of and strategic in ensuring that her book can speak to and reach multiple audiences. Circumscribed by conditions of hostility and censorship, she needed to exploit a popular medium that allows for its circulation and acceptable reception.

Using comics-style line drawings, Okubo capitalizes on the possibilities that this popular medium might allow for the circulation of her manuscript after the war while also implicating its role in facilitating the incarceration. In the illustration “Awaiting registration at the Civil Control Station at Pilgrim Hall of the First Congregational Church, Berkeley, California,” Okubo is drawn as reading a comic strip, the ‘funnies,’ while awaiting processing for evacuation in

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Pilgrim Hall (19). Okubo thus explicitly asks the reader to consider not only how her visual strategies are in conversation with the more popular modes of comic strips that circulated at the time, but also their role in relation to the camps. Like Geisel’s cartoon before, comics, with its popular form, circulation, and large readership was a central medium in proliferating wartime patriotism through anti-Japanese racism. We might thus also observe that her rather straightforward rendering of the campmates also works through and against the visual tropes of the Oriental that circulated in these cartoons. Note the visualization of a gun held by the armed guard on the lower left hand corner. Right next to him, is the clerk who is processing all the Japanese Americans and assigning them numbers through the tags she’s holding. Within this image, Okubo subtly juxtaposes these multiple objects—the funnies, the gun, and the tags—to gesture how they work together in transforming and reducing Japanese/Americans into enemy aliens to be incarcerated.

Reveling in the comic, Okubo’s narrative produces an alternative form of comics, one in which its humor derives from unsettling rather than reproducing racist visual tropes. She does so by also invoking the precursors to the Japanese art tradition of manga as well to strategically pass critiques within the comic form. Emphasizing subtle political critique, this form more specifically addresses and gain readership within Nikkei communities. Use of visual images was especially crucial, since any texts written in the Japanese language was treated by the U.S. government with suspicion. In this way, Okubo uses a series of doubleness throughout the book, which, as Pamela Stennes Wright argues, allows for the text to simultaneously offer an overt narrative of Nikkei as loyal American citizens and a covert narrative that criticizes the racial

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injustices of incarceration.\textsuperscript{166} Humor and irony allowed for the balance between these two narratives. Okubo claims: “Humor is the only thing that mellows life, shows life as the circus it is…So may crazy things happened in the camp. So the joke and humor I saw in the camp was not in a joyful sense, but ridiculous and insane. It was dealing with people and situations. The humor was always, ‘It is fate. It can’t be helped.’”\textsuperscript{167} As such, humor facilitates practices of survival and community-making within the camp by exaggerating the absurd contradictions of the camps as well as the parameters of freedom and citizenship. Yet, overtly, this humor can be misinterpreted in a “joyful sense” that is symptomatic of a Japanese cultural attitude of ‘gaman,’ which takes on meanings of endurance, tolerance, and patience. For hostile readers, humor presents a semblance of “objectivity” that is palatable because it supposedly does not demonstrate a critical or ‘bitter’ tone; therefore, the nation is not held accountable and the author is seen as fair and evenhanded.

Yet, another mention of humor in the book tells us otherwise: “The humor and pathos of the scenes made me decide to keep a record of camp life in sketches and drawings” (53). The simultaneity of humor and pathos allows Okubo to signal the oscillating meanings of the Japanese internment camps between the joyous associations of the summer camp and the genocidal brutality of the Nazi death camps. Alluding to resonances with the latter, Okubo figures the specter of Europe and the atrocities under the rise of Fascism into the narrative in multiple ways. Significantly, the narrative begins in Europe. At the start of World War II, Okubo was in Europe on the Bertha Taussig Traveling Scholarship offered by the University of California, where she studied art at Berkeley. Her displacement from Europe and subsequent return ‘home’ is ironically followed by the displacement, from her own country, to the “assembly


\textsuperscript{167} Gesensway and Roseman, \textit{Beyond Words}, 71.
centers” under Executive Order 9066. Okubo visualizes the hostile climate of anti-Asian sentiment immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor. In one image, “Miné with open newspaper, surrounded by anti-Japanese slogans,” Okubo the character conveys an expression of distress as her arms are sketched out over a San Francisco newspaper (10). Like the image before, Okubo juxtaposes the seemingly benign with the more explicitly hostile to see how they worked together to make incarceration possible. We thus see here in the cluster of words arising around her the euphemistic claims of military necessity calling for “evacuation from vital areas” right alongside racist rhetoric like “A Jap Is a Jap.”

In addition to mentioning her double displacement, Okubo alludes to Nazism in her evacuation: “The military police opened the bus door and we stepped into the bus as our family number was called. Many spectators stood around. At that moment I recalled some of the stories told on shipboard by European refugees bound for America” (26). Drawing our eyes and attention to the spectators who passively watched the evacuation on the sidelines—just beyond the frame of the image—Okubo directly implicates the role of the reading public in the rationalization of encampment. Given the immediacy of the publication following the war, the reader would be not separate from but rather a constituent of these spectators illustrated on the page. Moreover, in labeling these Europeans “refugees,” Okubo also draws comparisons to the categorization of internees as “evacuees.” Calling the Europeans “refugees” describes their condition of dislocation and dispossession in ways that can elide discussions of the forces at play that provoked such exile in the first place. Distinctly aware of the spectral knowledge of the Nazi death camps in the American cultural imaginary, Okubo both eerily mimics how the use of such neutral terms makes palatable the enactment of enormous genocidal violence and compels a reassessment of the language and terms used by the U.S. government in describing the
Japanese/American incarceration. We might also note how this image serves as an interesting inverse to Geisel’s cartoon before. Whereas that cartoon showed an Oriental horde lined up awaiting commands from their ‘home’ of Japan to commit violence on the United States, this image shows Japanese/Americans as the victims of state violence, gathered from the coast to be packed into buses that are policed by armed guards and herded into the interiors of the country.

Later, on relocation via train to Topaz, Okubo writes: “The trip was a nightmare that lasted two nights and a day. The train creaked with age. It was covered with dust, and as the gaslights failed to function properly we traveled in complete darkness most of the night, reminding me of the blackout trains in Europe” (117). Notably, the references in both passages occur not in the camps, but rather in the journeys to them, first to the assembly center in Tanforan and then to the ‘permanent’ relocation center of Topaz, Utah. This suggests that even if what happened inside these camps and the Nazi death camps were markedly different, particularly since WRA photographs were intent on capturing ‘happy campers,’ the processes surrounding them of suspended rights, racial hatred, and state-sponsored violence, remain hauntingly similar. As such, the text also reflects upon the physical borders that contain and fence off the campmates from the outside world as well as the processes that produce and fortify this segregation. Depicting the possibility of receiving visitors from the outside, the image “Waiting for outside visitors as they are screened by camp authorities” shows visitors lined up, a by-now familiar image to the reader, resembling the various lines that camp inmates had to endure. A fence bisects the image diagonally as Okubo and a couple others look outward onto the queue and wait. A guard post determines and facilitates the movement of visitors between the outside and the inside of the camp. Okubo relays this humorous account tinged with sorrow: “One day a friend brought a Chinese meal, including my favorite egg-flower soup. After three
hours of waiting in line he was finally admitted at the gate. He greeted me with a dripping carton. ‘Here is your egg flower—the soup is on my pants.’ After this I discouraged friends from bringing food. In fact I discouraged them from trying to visit me” (79). The comical effect of the soup ending up on her friend’s pants point to the absurdity of the bureaucratic procedures screening visitors before they are allowed entry, made especially ridiculous given the harmless nature of this gift. The incident reveals how the partitioning of the camps between friends reproduces the distance between the inmates and the outside world given the unreasonable inconvenience imposed by this seemingly benevolent privilege of visitation.

While this account attributes the absurd inconveniences of the camp bureaucracy, necessitating a three-hour wait, as the primary reason for Okubo’s decision to discourage her friends from visiting again, a later account reveals something markedly different. Published several decades afterward, it imbues added significance to the presence of the cars passing by in the image and the discomfiting yet relatively benign observation that: “The line of visitors was gaped at by passing motorists” (79). In contrast, the later account clarifies that there was more than just staring: ‘When visitors came, they had to stand in the middle of the highway. And all the cars would go by and they would yell, ‘You Jap lovers!’ So I discouraged my friends from coming.”168 In the difference between these two passages, the tangible and pervasive forms of racist hostility, which often manifested in violence, become sublimated into an incident of irony in which the absurd contradiction between U.S. citizenship and Japanese incarceration is translated into the ridiculousness of strict, inefficient bureaucratic procedures by the government.

Analyzing such passages, scholars have pointed toward the value in understanding Okubo’s aesthetic in *Citizen 13660* and its style of humor and irony as both a product of and

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168 Ibid., 70.
response to the pain and sorrow of the political conditions of incarceration. Drawing on a comparative racialization approach, Stella Oh speculates: “Like the musical form of the blues, which laments loss through its jaunty rhythm, the conflicting characteristics of humor and pathos function as instruments through which Okubo simultaneously unmaskes the contradictions inherent in American citizenship and depicts the resilience of the Japanese American community.”

I would invite us to consider queer camp aesthetics rather than, or alongside, blues. Okubo’s strategic compositions of the images as well as understanding of the conditions for dissemination and reception resonate with Matthew Tinkcom’s argument that camp aesthetics represent a historical and material form of labor by queers, which involves not only the affective labor of managing and surviving within the oppressive conditions of homophobia under the closet, but also the labor of creating cultural productions that accrue capital by ‘passing’ within dominant standards of aesthetic value while simultaneously producing encoded meanings that allow for identification and community-making among queers. Thinking camp aesthetics within the context of the Japanese internment camps not only underscores how its processes of racialization are subtended by modes of sexualization but also allows us to think differently about the tactics used by internees in making sense of and reworking the camp’s normative structures.

The focus on camp as queer labor complicates assumptions about what constitutes resistance within these conditions and reframes understandings about strategic negotiations of

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169 Stella Oh, “Paradoxes of Citizenship: Re-Viewing the Japanese American Internment in Miné Okubo’s Citizen 13660,” in Miné Okubo: Following Her Own Road, ed. Greg Robinson and Elena Tajima Creef (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 149.
170 Tinkcom, Working like a Homosexual.
passing outside indictments of complicity and compliance.\textsuperscript{171} Cautioning against celebratory interpretations of \textit{Citizen 13660} as resistant and subversive, Greg Robinson points to moments that suggest possible collaborations between Okubo and camp authorities. Particularly, he sees the text as serving the shift in WRA efforts to transform the public opinion of the Nikkei in order to facilitate their transition out of the camps and resettlement across the country.\textsuperscript{172} Robinson suggests that WRA played a role in facilitating exhibition and publication as well as helped Okubo leave camp more quickly. Even more troubling, Christine Hong’s reassessment of the circulation of Okubo’s artwork after World War II underscores how it worked in tandem with state objectives in rehabilitating Japan as a Western ally. WRA and publications such as \textit{Fortune} magazine insidiously deployed Okubo’s work as proof about the capacity for the domestication of Japanese/American by framing the camps as a successful experiment in democracy.\textsuperscript{173} Indeed, the doubleness of \textit{Citizen 13660} allowed reviewers and authorities like Dillon S. Myer, director of the WRA, to sympathize with the plight of the internees while evacuating the role of the government in this plight, instead blaming misguided individual racist beliefs.\textsuperscript{174} In his 1971 \textit{Uprooted Americans}, Myer captures the general response, suggesting that the incarceration was lamentable but inevitable. He positions himself as a martyr that reluctantly assumed his role

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while reiterating claims of military necessity and protective custody, ultimately exonerating the camps while praising the WRA in proving the loyalty and Americanness of internees. 175

Efforts at shifting public opinion, however, were equally important for Japanese/Americans, who still faced a climate of pervasive hostility and discrimination. Okubo notes that, after the camps, “finding a place to stay was very difficult for Japanese-Americans. When the landlord found out I was Japanese, he wouldn’t rent to me.” 176 The difficulty of resettling exacerbated feelings of displacement with the need to leave the camps that became their homes. Given the hostile era of McCarthyism during the 1950’s, any form of outside political dissent would be costly. Additionally, Okubo’s manuscript already faced obstacles in dissemination, since no publishers on the West coast were willing to accept it given the political climate. The doubleness of Okubo’s book facilitated its circulation. Indeed, it has never been out of print. Even later, the book supported efforts in the Reparations and Redress movement of the 1980s, culminating in the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which awarded $20,000 in redress to surviving internees. In testifying before the Congressional Committee on Wartime Relocation and Internment in 1981, Okubo positioned her role of artist as an objective observer and Citizen 13660 as a documentary of the events in the camp. Meanwhile, she emphasized that the lack of awareness about the incarceration as it unfolded was political and critiqued the continual lack of discussions around internment in the education system. Alongside such claims,

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Okubo presented her book as evidence for the review of the commission, which they happily accepted.177

These instances reframe possible understandings about Okubo’s frequent universalizing claims about the nature of humanity and the power of art in reflecting humanistic ideals of truth, of “reducing the elements to the simplest and most beautiful…so that one could express life universal, timeless, and ageless.”178 Rather than interpreting this as evidence of a false consciousness that speaks to her unwillingness to critique the government and hold officials accountable for the racist policies of incarceration, I contend that this conviction is constitutive of the strategic doubleness in her use of irony and humor. While these statements overtly seem to reinforce a nationalist ideal about the perfectibility of the United States that consigns racism to the past as lamentable tragedies, they are sharply contrasted by her preceding critiques about the ridiculous injustices of the incarceration. For instance, in her testimony to the committee, she offers this explanation about her objective in recording the camp experiences: “I was interested in people and life, so the camp gave me an opportunity to study the human race from cradle to grave and to see what happens to people when they are reduced to one status and one condition.”179 This statement leaves ambiguous the precise contours of this “one status and one condition.” A dominant interpretation might lament without exploring the forces that compel this ‘reduction’ while nonetheless celebrating the resilience of internees as demonstrating a universal human condition or spirit. In an earlier interview, however, Okubo is much more blunt: “We were watching people in the process of being dehumanized and devitalized.”

178 Sun, Okubo, and Oakland Museum, Miné Okubo, 48.
statements together, we can see how Okubo underscores that the universalizing ideals of humanity, democracy, and abstract citizenship are constituted by the material disenfranchisement of racial others, arbitrary practices of confinement, and suspension of rights.

This belief in humanism and its constitutive social inequities shapes her aesthetic philosophy as well, which was profoundly transformed by the experience of incarceration. In her time in Europe, she experimented in colors and styles, shaped by influences of French Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism. In sharp contrast, her illustrations in *Citizen 13660* make use of only pen and ink and is comprised of dark tight lines as well as fairly simplistic shapes. Her artwork prior to these drawings demonstrates that the strategies in *Citizen* are conscious choices. With just black lines in relation to negative white space, the drawings’ simplicity strategically universalizes the illustrated bodies, at times rendering illegible their race. She explains her return to Realism and these simple styles later in life as follows: “In the end, I returned to Primitives; to the flat usage of color and form used by Egyptians, Mayans, and Orientals…Western artists are too mixed up with perspective. I believe that basic elements return to the two-dimensional.”

While these statements can be read as an exoticization of the “primitive,” it can also illustrate her general disillusionment and critique of Western art practices via modes of minority difference. Her inclination toward this ‘primitive’ aesthetic conveys a tension with the popular comic strip style that she draws upon for these illustrations. Okubo’s drawings anticipate what would later become characteristic of Pop Art. This text is unprecedented in its combination of the comic book visual form and the social critique it launches; no work like it will appear until Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* four decades later. She does

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not uncritically embrace this pop form as a site of resistance. Instead, she recognizes how the resistant potential of this style was implicated in reproducing the logic of encampment.

In analyzing Okubo’s visual strategies in *Citizen 13660*, I suggest that we might read her work as beckoning a reconsideration of “camp”—both these militaristic sites of confinement and the performative queer style that have been discussed—and its multifaceted relations to Pop Art. The intimacies and tensions raised between camp aesthetics and Pop are emblematic of concerns about the relationship between normativity and queerness as manifest in assumptions about aesthetic taste and ideas about what we hold in common. The assumed relationship between Pop Art and camp aesthetics is alternately intimate and antagonistic. It has been a critical commonplace to suggest that proponents of each cultural style were in opposition, wherein each side makes a claim to its own elitism and alignment with high taste by disavowing the other as merely appropriative. Emerging in the 1960’s with famous practitioners such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, Pop Art drew upon the style and techniques of consumer culture, mass media, and advertising in ways that challenges the established ‘high art’ of modernism. Queer theorists have argued that the framed hostility disavows the foundational influence of camp on Pop Art, styles which were commonly understood as interchangeable by artists and critics during the 60’s and 70’s.\(^\text{181}\) In the following section, I discuss how Shimomura, by reinserting camp aesthetics into Pop Art via the Oriental, elucidates queerness as an aesthetic means through which state power is variously upheld and contested within the sites of the camp.

Re-Orient(aliz)ing the Logic of Encampment through Queer Aesthetics

The oeuvre of Roger Shimomura’s work animates and is animated by the productive tension between the logic of encampment and campiness. In particular, we can see this in his Spring 2013 exhibition *Prints of Pop (& War)* that he curated as an artist-in-residence with the NYU Asian/Pacific/American Institute. Through an incongruous pairing between his prints and an extensive collection of objects and racist memorabilia portraying the “Jap,” the exhibition seemingly suggests that: “Pop is war by other means.” Inviting us to ask how these seemingly trivial aesthetic objects and images factor into the political event of internment, Shimomura beckons us to consider the logic of encampment that made incarceration thinkable and desirable. The heterogeneity of his work attests to the multidirectional relationship between aesthetics and the structures of incarceration. Shimomura’s hybrid artwork revels in the playful, humorous, and the parodic and, in so doing, reworks the meanings of stereotypes.182 A sansei artist who was interned in Hunt, Idaho as a young child, Shimomura explores “two primary themes: his appropriation of traditional Japanese prints and his depictions of the World War II Japanese internment.”183 While the former gains treatment of its own, especially in Shimomura’s earlier work, it becomes increasingly prevalent in juxtaposition with his explorations of internment. Particularly, his appropriation of traditional Japanese prints drags in elements of supposed foreign difference that were used to racialize Nikkei in the United States as enemies. I argue for engaging Shimomura’s artwork and its incongruous juxtaposition of Pop Art and *ukiyo-e* through

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183 Emily Stamey, Roger Shimomura, and Helen Foresman Spencer Museum of Art, *The Prints of Roger Shimomura: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1968-2005* (Lawrence; Seattle: Spencer Museum of Art, the University of Kansas; in association with the University of Washington Press, 2007), 16.
the analytic of camp aesthetics to attend to how it visually enacts the spectacular racialization of
the Japanese body as necessary for incarceration while also allowing for its undoing.

To analyze this further, let us analyze two images, one from the series Yellow No Same
(1992) and one from Mix & Match (2001), both featured in the exhibition. Through its twelve
images, the former challenges the posited equivalence between Japanese and Japanese
Americans. It calls into question the discursive and visual maneuvers that facilitated this
conflation and made the incarceration possible. Each image follows a similar visual pattern.

Barbed wire cuts across the face of an individual in the background, an Asian-raced face donning
small objects or clothing accessories that signal a form of Americanism. In the foreground, a
kabuki actor, donning elaborate hairstyles and face paint, looms large. In Yellow No Same, No.
11, the stoic expression of the soldier in the background to the right mirrors the ambiguous look
of the Kabuki actor in the foreground. The direction of their eyes suggests that each is obliquely
staring at the other. The Kabuki actor is especially fitting for Japan has historically been trapped
within a “antitheatrical discourse” in which the U.S. framed the Japanese as theatrical,
duplicious, lacking interiority, and focusing explicitly on artifice.184 This figure conjures
discourses of yellow peril that posed the Japanese as a menacing, sexualized threat. Yet, the
image also hints at a commonality between the actor in the foreground and the individual in the
background even as they do not share similar physical attributes. This commonality is linked not
by assumptions of racial or ethnic sameness, but rather through the allegorical function of the
barbed wire. This spatial mode of partition both separates and connects the two in their
experiences of U.S. enemy racialization. Thus, the series refuses to operate by the logics of
encampment to argue for a ‘true’ enemy deserving of incarceration.

The figuration of the actor is part of Shimomura’s prevalent strategy of drawing upon tropes from the Japanese Pop art tradition of *ukiyo-e*, which appeared since the early seventeenth century of the Edo period. By placing it in this context, Shimomura emphasizes both the use of this form as pop art in Japan and the Orientalist construction of Asians that have permeated the popular U.S. imaginary. In so doing, he reworks the very presence of “Asian art.”\(^{185}\) While such practices may be construed as replicating Orientalist fantasies of Japan, Shimomura reorients this reductive visualization by nuancing how these visual techniques circulated as a popular art form intended for the Japanese masses. While this image, and the series more generally, visualizes the Orientalizing strategies that conflated the Japanese and Japanese Americans to make internment possible, other prints draw out how this logic came to define Asian/Americans against the (white) U.S. citizen by juxtaposing Japanese and U.S. pop art forms. In *Mix & Match: No. 1*, two panels of the diptych play on Roy Lichtenstein’s iconic *Kiss* series, which features, in varying positions, a kiss between a white man and woman. Shimomura’s series dramatizes heteronormative romance privileged in popular media of comic strips and movies sealed with a kiss. The negative space between the two images replicate the format of the panels in comic strips. The relationship between these two images, their commonalities and differences, as well as the role of racial and sexual difference in facilitating the conditions of (im)possibility for romantic intimacy is embedded within whiteness. When it comes to heterosexual coupling, this print elucidates the cultural norms that dictate how the races can or cannot ‘mix and match.’

It does so by gesturing toward the distinct ways in which Asian American men and women are sexualized. In the left panel, the golden hair accessories Orientalize the depicted woman. With the majority of her facial features obscured, a hint of her red lips and exposed

shoulder peek out from under the body of the white man, which is almost superimposed onto her. The romantic intimacy of the white man and the Asian woman is only made possible by inscribing her within characteristics of foreignness. Conversely, on the right, the foreignness of the Asian man is not conveyed through accessories. With his suit and tie, he is in decidedly Western garb. Instead, foreignness is inscribed onto his body through his facial features. While his buck teeth and slanted eyes are common to the iconography of Orientalist constructions of the Asian man, this image alludes specifically as well to the character of Joe Jitsu, speaker of ‘broken’ English and subordinate sidekick who briefly appeared in the cartoon series of Dick Tracy in 1961. The physical proximity of Joey Jitsu and the blonde woman, a nod to Lichtenstein, paired with their ambiguous facial expressions suggest potential danger or harm. This pairing reflects tropes of the Yellow Peril that depict the dangers of a large Asian migrant force invading the United States via fears of miscegenation, as predatory Asian men prey on innocent white women. Donning a trench-coat and hat, Joe Jitsu further invokes discourses that framed Japanese Americans as potential spies whose loyalty to America is suspect. Like the Kabuki actor, the spy symbolizes the impossibility of allegiance. As Tina Chen has argued, Asian Americans are seen as impersonators whose loyalty to America is always performative.186

Shimomura draws attention to how specific representations of racist caricatures work to substantiate larger cultural stereotypes and anxieties. He shows that the construction of this supposedly benign sidekick to Dick Tracy relies upon the same images that proliferated the newspapers that demonized the Nikkei and (re)produced the necessary conditions for incarceration. In so doing, this print, and his larger oeuvre, compels us to account for the multiple manifestations and political effects of the “popular.” As a broader strategy of

186 Chen, Double Agency.
incorporating icons such as Mickey Mouse in his works, Shimomura further interrogates assumptions that these cultural figures exemplify a sense of innocence autonomous from questions of the political. In *Dr. Seuss Goes to War* (2008), by superimposing “The Cat in the Hat” onto Geisel’s aforementioned political cartoon, Shimomura asks us to take seriously the roles that such beloved artists played in supporting racist policies of incarceration. Working through the conventions of Pop Art, Shimomura reinserts questions about its historical conditions of possibility by highlighting both the disavowed campy racist illustrations that populated the popular comic strip form and by reasserting the historical labor of queers and disenfranchised groups whose collective cultural practices, which coalesce under the style of camp aesthetics, helped make possible the interrogation of Modernism and its touted values of truth and meaning.

While tropes of campiness facilitated the racial logic of encampment, Shimomura’s artwork indicates that campiness is not associated with an intrinsic form of politics. Rather, its characteristics can be used toward other objectives and the humor, theatricality, and incongruity that is often indicative of stereotypical racial farce may provide grounds for materialist anti-racist critiques. He illustrates possibilities for working through camp to interrogate the discursive and visual fields that naturalize the Japanese as alien Other. His insistence on foregrounding the racial caricature enacts a “temporal drag,” wherein putatively obsolete histories and their ‘pastness’ drag into the present.\(^{187}\) Ann Pellegrini elaborates on camp’s multivalent temporalities: “camp…is both ‘anticipatory,’ in its ability to imagine different social worlds, and a form of historical memory, in its willful retention of despised or devalued love objects.”\(^{188}\)


Shimomura’s practice of collecting and exhibiting racist memorabilia extends the campy practice of reclaiming cultural waste. Relishing in these ‘devalued love objects’ relegated to the waste-bin of ‘past’ racism, his aesthetic conjures the historicity of the Japanese incarceration and, by querying how culture proved a crucial domain for consolidating national consensus around it, illuminates how these representations exceed any demarcated confines of the past. Rather, they intimately shape our present and provide powerful points of departure for demanding a more utopian future.

**Materializing the Unthinkable, Camping the Camp**

Working through and against the campiness that arises from the queerness exuding from the “phantasms of orientalness,” Shimomura’s artwork beckons a consideration of if and in what ways queer sexual desires are thinkable in relation to these internment camps. Given the focus of illustrating and reinvesting the ambivalent queer excesses central to Asian racialization during the incarceration, what is the place of queer sexual desire within these strategies of campiness? Such a question animated scholar-performer Tina Takemoto as she approached the archives in attempt to locate information on queer internee Jiro Onuma. Unable to locate any materials about Onuma in the archives of the camp, Takemoto created the performance video “Looking for Jiro: A Queer Meditation on the Incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II” which features: a musical mash-up of Madonna’s “Hung Up” and Abba’s “Gimme Gimme”; a drag king performance, in which Takemoto assumes “Jiro” in performing durational activities of sweeping and bread-making; and, found video clips of body-building, U.S. wartime propaganda film, and the music video to Madonna’s song.
Centering the campsite of the Japanese/American incarceration, Takemoto’s mode of camp aesthetics operates on multiple levels: her drag king performance; the recycling of found images, especially from popular culture; the incongruous juxtaposition of these objects that coalesce disparate temporal and geographical contexts; and the simultaneity of humor and sorrow emerging from performances of longing situated within queer circuits of (dis)identification and desire. The performance highlights the experience of waiting, of approximating what might have been a desire deferred for Jiro within the camps.\(^{189}\) By reimagining his engagement with these deferred desires, the performance movingly reaffirms Onuma’s queerness through modes of campiness in ways that materialize the unthinkable and chart alternative approaches to the archives that interrogate our disciplinary methods.

The camp aesthetics and hybrid art practices of the performance allow us to question the role of masculinity in paving the processes of racialization and incarceration by focusing in on the possibilities for Jiro to inhabit, negotiate, and rework these processes through modes of queer identification and desire. Through the sequences that combine shots of a bodybuilder flexing and soldiers engaging in military exercise, Takemoto situates Jiro’s queer desires in interrogating the possibilities for identification with and desire for masculinity by the internee. These clips signal both the external contexts that provide the condition of possibility for the camps as well as Jiro’s flights of fancy in imagining another time and place within and against the confines of the camps. While the shots of the white bodybuilder flexing presumably epitomize both the cultural standards of masculinity at the time and Jiro’s object of desire, the wartime propaganda films and their depiction of internee laborers and Nikkei soldiers highlight how masculinity is racially

differentiated. In one sequence, the screen zooms in on the bicep of an internee laborer working in the kitchen, ironizing and reworking the propaganda’s overt masculinization of feminized labor within the camp. This alternative viewing practice highlights the incongruity between this masculinization as Americanism and the prevalent visualizations of the perversely embodied masculinity of the ‘Jap.’ The video further gestures toward the contradiction of these images of Nikkei masculinity against the wider cultural landscape through the repetition of a short filmic sequence in the government propaganda film. In performing military exercises, a Nikkei soldier bumps his head against a hurdle. This moment in the film and his palpable failure suggest a dissonance between the masculinist iconography of the patriot American soldier as defined over and against the racialized visual economy of the internee.

Takemoto’s drag king performance, alongside the video clips, further troubles notions of authentic masculinity by underscoring and reorienting the failures that gender performances entail. Her drag performance as Jiro gestures toward practices of labor and love. In performing the everyday activities of sweeping and bread-making, Takemoto imagines the constraints and possibilities for enacting and approximating modes of desire within the spaces and labor of the camps. In the first instance the broom transforms into an instrument of dance as Onuma taps it to the beat of the song and lip syncs as the broom serves as both dance partner and microphone. Following a sequence of bread-making, the product of his labor becomes a homoerotic vessel for appropriating desires for a masculine ideal. The domestic labor of bread-making is queered as a Crisco can enters the frame. As Jiro applies Crisco on his arm, the substance invokes its queer uses as lubrication for anality. In fisting the loaf of bread, Jiro transforms it from an external object of desire into a performance of self. By donning the bread as biceps, Jiro assumes the object of his desire. In so doing, Takemoto calls attention to her labor in performing Jiro as well
as our labor in the archives and in re-approaching the incarceration as a practice of desire. Juxtaposing the historical camp archives to the present, Takemoto’s performance beckons contemplation about the place of campiness in both the discourses around the incarceration and the practices by which we attempt to remember this historical moment and its long afterlife.

**Conclusion**

I have been suggesting that Okubo, Shimomura, and Takemoto, as well as the multiple discourses surrounding Japanese/American incarceration, allow us to acknowledge critically the central queerness of camp. More specifically, the campiness of camp illuminates not only the processes that authorize and legitimate the structures of incarceration, but also various ways of being and living that are not foreclosed by these violences. To close this contemplation in this chapter, let us return to *Allegiance*, an earnest play that contains warmth and humor. Its production, circulation, and consumption was profoundly shaped, however, by celebrity George Takei, who arguably is most legible as a figure through which the signs of ‘queer’ and ‘internee’ align. Indeed, prior to this project, even still during so, Takei has been known primarily for his role as Sulu in the Star Trek franchise and his increasingly vocal support for LGBT rights. As can be attested to by his millions of followers on social media and best captured by his “Oh myyy,” his distinctly campy humor is particularly well-suited for the desire for irony and laughter on the internet. This Takei is not altogether absent from the production. In his role as the precocious older grandfather, his delivered lines often channel the irony and humor of Takei in perfectly capturing the contradictions of the camps.

The memories of the camp return as ghosts of the past that Sam Kimura does not want to confront. The musical begins as present day Sam Kimura (also played by Takei) dons his
uniform and receives an envelop from his now deceased and long estranged sister, Kei. With her ghost materializing, this envelop prompts Sam to recall the past, starting from a time shortly before evacuation until resettlement after the war.\(^{190}\) While the return of ghosts literalizes most specifically through this visit from his recently deceased sister’s ghost, the relationship between ghosts and memory takes on a larger meaning with special poignancy toward the end of the musical. After a scene depicting soldiers from the 442nd battalion being killed at the battlefield in what is described as a ‘bloodbath,’ the entire cast scatters throughout the stage, each dimly illuminated. A news broadcast announces the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Wisps of light wash over them one by one, from their feet traveling upward. The elegant movement of these wisps, quivering and rising to the air, suggests spirits leaving the body. In so doing, the production powerfully stages the characters and the actors as standing in honor and mourning of the many lives lost and gone. A bright flash of light radiates and all is silent, evocative of the bomb itself. Immediately afterward, bright lines and loud upbeat music proclaim “Victory” as three white men in GI uniforms sing and dance with their mic stands joyfully serve as mouthpiece for the U.S. government. This incongruous juxtaposition between sincere mourning and extravagant spectacle is further underscored by the dark humor of the number as the singers exclaim “Whoopsies” and “We thought you were the enemy, you proved us wrong.”

The tone of this number and its simultaneity of humor and pathos recall an earlier the earlier number *Paradise*, in which Frankie, whose parents were imprisoned for running a Japanese language school and who later resists the draft, approximates a minstrel act as he channels the character Mike Masaoka, National Secretary and Field Executive of the Japanese American Citizens League, who served as a puppet for the administration. Through this

\(^{190}\) When the musical travels to the past, which constitutes the majority of the show, Takei also plays the grandfather, Ojii San, and actor Telly Leung plays the younger Sam Kimura.
theatricalization of his remarks during the camps’ dance party, Frankie dramatizes how Masaoka serves as a mouthpiece for the government by echoing his depictions of camps as demonstrations of Nikkei patriotism and claims of state benevolence. Frankie’s campy performance ironizes and dramatizes the stark contrast in euphemistic terminology and deadly consequences evident in the juxtaposition between the two scenes above.

In another act of ghostliness and ventriloquizing, Sammy and Kei’s deliverance of Ojii San’s line provides the opportunity for conjuring George Takei, and thus the ‘outside’ of the theatrical world, onto the stage. Toward the end of the musical, Kei and Sammy reflect on the memory of their now deceased grandfather in understanding their present moment. As Kei and Sammy are reunited after the war, he from service in the battalion, Kei informs him of Ojii San’s peaceful death in his garden at the camps. They muse that Ojii San said he wanted it this way, “To fertilize ground.” Both deliver the line in a deep voice that is nonetheless inflected with an ironic humor that precociously suggests an unspoken doubled meaning to what is spoken. That the actors in character are ventriloquizing the distinctive signature of George Takei’s voice does not go unnoticed as the audience erupts with a knowing laugh. This knowing laugh and irruption of the extra-diegetic world into the theatre are emblematic of multivalent temporalities registered by camp aesthetics, conjured through the intermingling of humor with sorrow, humor in sorrow.

In this move, we might hear and reassess moments of the musical—like the scenes discussed above—with Takei’s signature “Oh myyy” in mind to register both the multiple ironic contradictions of government during the incarceration as well as the capacity for internees to apprehend, negotiate, and critique these contradictions. Within this desire to fertilize the ground, we might recall Ah Goong “fucking the world.” Instead, invoking Takei’s persona, Ojii San’s wish invites us to consider other modes of queer production aside from the focus on the family in
the musical. “To fertilize ground” also gestures toward the possibility for revisiting and making fecund this past in order to draw connections and make visible continuing operations of state power happening today—to make a garden bloom unexpectedly from the barren grounds of internment history. Accordingly, the conclusion of redemption and the chance for forgiveness between sister and brother become an allegory for the possibility of national memory and righting wrongs. “There’s still a chance for forgiveness…to change the past.”

In this way, we can understand through Allegiance, alongside the above analyses of Okubo, Shimomura, and Takemoto and the multiple discourses surrounding Japanese/American incarceration, the central role of the “fun and frolic” of camp as illuminative of how aesthetics not only works to uphold modes of Asian racialization and state power but also indexes various ways of being and living that are not foreclosed by these violences. The doubleness and incongruities between (and within) the textual and visual in Citizen 13660 highlight the noisiness behind the attempted “straight” accounts of the camp by the War Relocation Authority. Shimomura similarly redirects the nosiness around the racist perpetuations of figure of the Orientalist yellow peril as well as the dissent against it. Meanwhile the noisiness from mashing up the songs of Abba and Madonna provide Takemoto with the means of imagining how Jiro attempted to create a world for his queer desires among various conditions of provisionality and inhospitality. Camping the camp then does not make light of historic and continuing forms of systemic violence, but rather takes seriously the alternative desires, performances, socialities, and place-making that bodies improvise within conditions not of their own choosing.
Toward the end of World War II, the refugee camp, with its spatial concentration and ordering of camp inhabitants, first became a standardized technology of power for the management of displacement, simultaneously caring for and dominating displaced subjects via medical/hygienic programs and quarantining; perpetual accumulation of documentation on camp inhabitants; law enforcement and public discipline; and schooling and rehabilitation.

— Yến Lê Espiritu

In mocking the outmoded, body camp can give the appearance of acknowledging even playing with death. But there is also a sense in which the ‘others’ that give camp its fodder might be said to be put to death.

— Caryl Flinn

Examining the incarceration of Japanese/Americans during World War II, the previous chapter discussed how the competing demands of internment and resettlement led to contradictory configurations of the internee as varyingly ‘enemy Japs’ and exceptional Americans. Camp aesthetics provided an analytic for illuminating and interrogating how such incongruities

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were shaped by contrasting sexualizing and racial logics. Particularly, I contested the ways in which the demonstration of internee loyalty relied upon claims of masculinity, especially surrounding the Nikkei soldier, and claims of injury against the heteronormative unit of the encamped family. This chapter examines the means by which such logics shape and transmogrified in facilitating the mass structural processes of relocating and resettling refugees displaced from the Viet Nam War. Such logics were indeed central to determining which bodies were allowed to enter the United States and why. The following discussions will interrogate how these logics operated to determine not only the terms of legibility around the war but also what can and cannot be remembered about the Viet Nam War within the production of “refugeeness.”

Refugeeness configures Vietnamese bodies within frames of violation, suffering, death, and unfreedom in order to enshrine the image of America as the beacon of freedom. By showcasing the limits and need for humanity, refugeeness promises the possibility of rehabilitation for both the Vietnamese body and the American national body. More specifically, the possibility for a rehabilitated America is defined through and against the continual incapacity for the full rehabilitation of the refugee. Articulating “militarized refuge(e),” Yến Lê Espiritu elucidates the co-constitutive production of the Vietnamese refugee as a passive object needing humanitarian care and the United States as the ideal site of refuge, associated with benevolence, humanitarianism, and care. She argues that these discursive productions serve to erase the military violence that condition their being, both the mass displacement of war that produced the refugee and the aggressive campaigns unleashed by the United States on Viet Nam. The U.S.

193 I am borrowing this formulation from Mimi Thi Nguyen, “‘In the Arms of Pirates, Under the Bodies of Sailors’: Diaspora, Desire, and Danger in Nguyen Tan Hoang’s PIRATED!,” in Charlie Don’t Surf!: 4 Vietnamese American Artists, ed. Viet Le, Alice Ming Wai Jim, and Linda Thinh Võ (Vancouver: Centre A, 2005), 66.
cultural imaginary simultaneously performs empathy for while continually investing in the refugee as the embodiment of bare(d) life: hapless, violated bodies radically removed from the systems and socialities characteristic of political life—national citizenship, bodily self-possession, and familial kinship. The framing of refugees as in need of refuge and ideas that the U.S. constitutes this welcoming benevolent home rely upon the framework of humanitarian crisis, depoliticizing the forces that dispossessed the Vietnamese of their refuge in the first place. Campsites spatially managed the role of the United States as its military bases, which launched the operations that displaced and produced refugees, ironically become the solution to the ‘problem’ of managing the refugee population they created. These camps served as the provisional points of transit that mediate and regulate the processing of these refugees from unfreedom toward freedom. Camps not only produce and manage the refugees but also serve as the screening process of determining which bodies deserve to be processed into the final refuge of host nations and why. Put differently, they become both sites of recovery from humanitarian crisis and a space for rehabilitation into the political community of nation-states.

Gender and sexuality strongly underwrite the terms of refugeness—legibility of violation and suffering, the desire for rescue, and the conditions for rehabilitation. “In delineating who was—and was not—worthy and deserving of resettlement, U.S. family unity resettlement policy actively framed and reinforced ideas of (im)proper family, kinship, and sexuality.”¹⁹⁴ Thus, gender and sexuality provided the scripts for how the United States related to Viet Nam, from the cultural rationales for military intervention, to the savior narratives of refugees, and the juridical processes that determine and regulate which refugees are gifted refuge and why. They undergird the visions and promises of freedom that are gifted ironically both before and after the war: “The

refugee figure from this war is subject to the gift twice over. In the first instance as an object of intervention in the Cold War, and in the second as an object of deliverance in the aftermath of military defeat.”195 These visions of freedom are not only promulgated by the United States army for the multiple objectives of intervention and deliverance. Indeed, they also inform Vietnamese diasporic imaginings through romanticized notions of home linking the heteronormative family and national belonging. Viet Nguyen notes these risks: “But a discourse about refugees is also double edged. If it critiques nation-states, it must also be unsentimental in critiquing refugee aspirations to national belonging, even when those refugees are far from elite.”196 Nguyen reminds us to consider not only the prevalent diasporic nostalgia expressed for a romanticized Vietnamese past prior to the war but also the strong desire for belonging within the nation-state responsible for their displacement.

In considering how the production of the refugee elided its militarized contexts, we may return to the practices of spectatorship to examine how the United States viewed, apprehended, and managed the gendered and sexualized meanings around the violated Vietnamese body. Observing the framing of the war as an American story, Viet Nguyen notes: “there is a consensus that it was a US tragedy featuring US heroes and antiheroes, a blockbuster in which Southeast Asians play the supporting cast.”197 Asian Americanists have observed that the centrality of depictions on the Viet Nam War transformed into a metaphor for mending the traumatized and fractured American national body politic. As Sylvia Chong asserts: “[I]t is not the American body but the bodies of its foreign others—the Vietnamese—that form that bulk of obscenely

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197 Ibid., 913.
violated bodies in the Vietnam era…[T]heir extremely visible bodily violations tak[e] the place of invisible violence done to American bodies and psyches. Even the antiwar movement fetishized the violence done to Vietnamese bodies, at times using them to dramatically illustrate the moral quandaries presented by the use of napalm or aerial bombing.”

Meanwhile, considerations of both Vietnamese bodies and the heavily bombed lands of Viet Nam were occluded. Through tropes of violence and formal techniques, films enacted the contradictory dynamic whereby the body of the white male hero becomes an object through its incorporation of the violence inflicted onto a racialized enemy; the hero (a metonym for the U.S. nation) regains his subjecthood by overcoming his incorporated trauma through the mastery of violence. This dynamic plays out the role of visuality in linking and constructing the sovereignty of bodily borders as an allegory to the body of the nation.

These contradictory relations between the American viewing body and the violated Vietnamese body are managed by what Sylvia Chong theorizes as “the oriental obscene,” a set of racial fantasies for identifying with, desiring, and negotiating the visual representations of Vietnamese bodies and the modes of psychic violation that they index for the American viewer. The obscene, Chong astutely notes, gestures toward modes of improper bodily excess on multiple levels: “I assert that obscenity simultaneously invokes the violation of the body’s boundaries (caenum, or filth) and the display of the violation (scaena, or scene), showing a mutual imbrication of physicality and visuality. Both the anxiety over sexual obscenity and violent obscenity centered on a shared debate over the status of the body as object—as physical object and as object of spectacle.”


199 Ibid., 24.
the relations between multiple Vietnamese and American bodies, both in terms of the corporeal body and the national body politic. Visualized as an “object of spectacle,” the Vietnamese body in pain performs a mode of obscenity for the spectator that teases the boundary between life and death and, in so doing, signals a mode of pleasure and enjoyment afforded by the witnessing of violation.

Noting the incongruously morbid coupling of decay and pleasure within the oriental obscene, I place these conversations perhaps counterintuitively in relation to another scholarly conclusion—on camp aesthetics. Briefly, as mentioned in the introduction, scholars and cultural critics have lamented Susan Sontag’s “Notes on ‘Camp’” as a betrayal of the subcultural style and its communities of queer practitioners. They cite this essay as marking the demise of the style through its popularization and proliferation into mainstream media. Often dismissed as ‘pop camp’ or ‘straight camp,’ this appropriation of the style, they argue, capitalizes on the ironic humor of camp while disregarding its political uses. While the phenomenon under discussion in the this observation as well as those by the Asian Americanists above are contemporaneous, they are not often connected in cultural and scholarly discussions.

This chapter speculates that the latter might have enabled the processes of viewing the Viet Nam War. I postulate that the dynamics of camp aesthetics and its proliferation through pop art facilitated the processes whereby the depictions of violence on Vietnamese bodies figured through tropes of incongruous juxtaposition that induced affective responses of pain or humor in order to mediate the suffering national American psyche. Focusing on camp allows us a different point of entry into the tensions between race and sexuality. As a key scholarly text that most explicitly links questions of the Viet Nam War with LGBT politics, Marita Sturgeon’s Tangled Memories explores the centrality of the war and the AIDS epidemic within U.S. cultural memory.
during the 1980’s and 90’s. Yet, the study implies a troubling equivalence between the modes of trauma indexed by the two events. While this posited equivalence might seem to suggest parallel experiences of suffering coalescing specifically around a racial and a sexual minority population, the grounds for resemblance are made possible by framing both events primarily as traumas enacted upon the victimized U.S. national body and psyche.200

The narrative of the war as one of national injury and recovery is made possible by the fetishization and sublimation of the violated Vietnamese body into the U.S. national imaginary. These processes make explicit what Caryl Flinn has observed as the necrophilic preoccupations with death and decay of camp aesthetic. Noting the campy fascinations with female divas and cross-gender drag performer who demonstrate a wasted femininity, Flinn contemplates how humor around the decaying feminine body in excess provides fodder for laughter and subsequent invigoration of the consuming white male body.201 How might we observe this dynamic of simultaneous laughter and violence in mediating the decay of the Vietnamese body and the enlivening of the American national body? Let us consider two images, which each treats what is arguably the most iconic photograph of the Viet Nam War, Phan Thi Kim Phúc as a child running in agony after suffering from a napalm attack, which burned off her clothes: Dinh Q. Lê’s *Doi Moi (NapalMeD Girl)* (2006) and Jerry Kearns’s *Madonna and Child* (1986). In both artworks, the iconic imagery of “The Girl in the Photograph” is decontextualized and reconfigured, through a discombobulated remolecularization in the former and an embedded superimposition in the latter. Dinh Q. Lê’s *Doi Moi* spectralizes, disembodies, and reconstitutes “The Girl” into an incoherent whole, pieced together through fragments composed of corporate

201 Flinn, “The Deaths of Camp.”
logos. It calls into question the commodification of war trauma and the circuits of consumption that varyingly make possible and foreclose our apprehension of the war’s violent afterlives. The title of the artwork more specifically refers to a set of economic reforms in Viet Nam in 1986 that opened up the country to economic trade and capitalist production under state control. Over and against the iconic photograph of war, spectralized through the “NapalMeD Girl” condoned off into parentheticals, the fragmentary cluster of corporate logos contemplates the grounds that American economic trade capitalizes on.

Meanwhile, Jerry Kearns’ *Madonna and Child* mixes the sacred and the profane by incongruously juxtaposing Kim’s body onto Andy Warhol’s iconic series of Marilyn Monroe. In so doing, the artwork highlights the disconnect between Hollywood images and war photography, contemplating whether the atrocities of war can circulate within the popular. Yet, this artwork simultaneously gestures toward the risks and prevalence of enfolding Viet Nam War, once again, within a narrative of “national trauma,” wherein the grave violation is not on the Vietnamese peoples ensconced in the daily militarized violence of war and its aftermath, but rather the viewing public of the United States, subject to seeing this violence. Lucy Lippard offers the following interpretation: “Kim Phuc’s torso is imposed like a burning mask or tattoo on Andy Warhol’s *Marilyn Monroe*, in a multifaceted commentary on the ‘60s, on our creation of heroines, fantasy ‘material girls,’ the victimization of idolized women, popular culture, the golden gloss of the American dream (in life and art), and the reality of the Third World.”

Rather than fix a specific meaning or politics onto this artwork, I suggest that its contradictoriness elucidates the central ambivalence in the U.S. national memories of the Viet Nam War. To frame this discussion otherwise, this chapter is interested in exploring the co-

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incidence of the popularization of camp aesthetics in the cultural imaginary alongside the proliferation of images surrounding the Viet Nam War. Far from separate and distinct, camp aesthetics, I argue, mediated the depictions of sexuality and violence of the oriental obscene while configuring the Vietnamese refugee in relation to the United States as a privileged site of refuge.

Looking at Tiana’s film *From Hollywood to Hanoi*, Nguyen Tan Hoang’s experimental video *Pirated!*, Quan Barry’s novel *She Weeps Each Time You’re Born*, and Paul Tran’s spoken poem “#1 Beauty Nail Salon,” I show how camp aesthetics elucidate conditions of (im)possibility for remembering the costs of the Viet Nam War. However, camp not only managed and sublimated the trauma of war into a question of the embattled American psyche but also serves as a cultural strategy by which Asian American artists resist the erasure of Vietnamese bodies and ruins within the historical re-memberings of the war. The chapter begins with an examination of the ways in which Tiana plays with and questions the gender politics that frame Orientalist logics of Vietnamese women needing to be saved. Through superimposing both her performances of Orientalist tropes and Hollywood depictions of war upon her personal narrative of displacement from and ultimate return to Viet Nam, Tiana interrogates how such gendered logics inform narratives that first justified American military intervention into Viet Nam and then later the rescue of displaced war refugees. Next, the chapter engages with Nguyen’s *PIRATED!*, which enacts a campy remembering of his refugee passage and, in so doing, both illuminates the queer erotics undergirding American narratives of rescue and questions the fetishization of these scenes of displacement in configurations of the refugee.

The subsequent textual analyses explore the obscured long afterlives of war. First, I trace how Barry’s novel deploys tropes of the supernatural to depict the aftermath of war and
destruction for the Vietnamese who stayed in Viet Nam after the war. Lastly, Tran’s poem questions how the dominant associations of Vietnamese/Americans as nail salon employees displace focus onto the stylistic production of beauty over and against the historical conditions of war and displacement. Collectively, these Vietnamese American artists illuminate and exploit the intermixing of sexuality and violence in the oriental obscene through the perverse mixture of life and death. These artists centralize the body as a screen for mediating and questioning the interrelated scales of the domestic home and homeland. Through their practices, they perform a mode of dark camp that brings to the fore the violence and discomfiting material consequences of death that underlie the fetishistic Western artistic treatment of and gaze onto the Vietnamese body, fixed within the developmental figure of the refugee. Contending with and pushing up against the centrality of the refugee camp as the privileged site manifesting humanitarian narratives of rescue, these artists attend to the passages before, between, and after the camps.

**Campy (Re)turns From Hollywood to Hanoi**

How did gendered and sexualized logics operate within the cultural imaginary to rationalize, obscure, and resolve the destruction and aftermath of U.S. imperialistic military intervention in Viet Nam? Examining a number of films depicting the war, Marita Sturken notes the lack of male Vietnamese protagonists and the fact that “women are emblems of the victimized Vietnam, not the victorious Vietnam but a feminized, passive, violated country.”

Registering and managing the national trauma of the war as a injury on white masculinity, the feminization of Viet Nam not only conveniently recycles familiar Orientalist tropes, but also deploys them as a means of recuperating white(ness and) masculinity. Similarly, as one of the

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most enduring and beloved musicals, *Miss Saigon* (1990) revived the trope of Madame Butterfly in feminizing Viet Nam as the self-sacrificial martyr who commits suicide in order to ensure the flourishing of the American GI. Bringing to fore the uneasy tensions between depictions of race and sexuality, as well as the possibilities for coalitional politics, the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund posed *Miss Saigon* as a fundraiser event. The jarring decision of this national organization advocating rights for gays and lesbians to capitalize on this racist and sexist show demonstrate the fissions between race and sexuality.\(^{204}\) Why might it be that *Miss Saigon* allowed for such alliances with a national LGBT organization? Perhaps a guilty pleasure stems from not only the campiness resonant with the elements of racial farce that elicits humor at the expense of the foolish depictions of Vietnamese bodies, but also its incongruous pairing with a tragic romance.

At one after party for *Miss Saigon*, this dynamic seemed ever more palpable in a playfully ironic exchange in which Vietnamese American actress and filmmaker Tiana confronts General William Westmoreland, donning a conical rice paddy hat, about a comment he made in the film *Hearts and Minds*: “Well the Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as the Westerner. Life is plentiful. Life is cheap in the Orient.” With Westmoreland clarifying his thoughts on the non-value of life in the ‘Orient’ in this venue, Tiana invites us to ask how plays

\(^{204}\) It should be noted that Asian Lesbians of the East Coast (ALOEC) and Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York (GAPIMNY) organized protests against this fundraiser. I raise this famous controversy to highlight the tensions that inhibit and elucidate the need for intersectional analysis and organizing. In addition to the blatantly racist and sexist representations of Asian characters, the musical was also strongly criticized for its insistence of casting Jonathan Pryce (in yellowface) as a Eurasian character. For insightful analyses of this controversy, see Kondo, *About Face*, 229–254; Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 177–199; Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 23–56; Yoko Yoshikawa, “The Heat Is On Miss Saigon Coalition: Organizing Across Race and Sexuality,” in *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994), 275–94.
such as Miss Saigon rely on gendered tropes to rationalize, glamorize, and beautify the inevitable loss of Vietnamese lives during the war. Resonating with Flinn’s observation about the fascination of camp viewers with female bodies in decay, the Vietnamese woman who ultimately sacrifices herself for the survival of the American GI provides a mode of catharsis for the Western viewers, who are absolved from the obligation of remembering and being accountable for the destructive legacies of the war.

Exaggerating the gendered logic that fetishizes and romanticizes the decay and death of Vietnamese bodies, Tiana challenges the dominant practices of viewing the Vietnamese body as a screen to understand the war and its traumas, primarily as they become enfolded into a narrative of American victimhood. Through accounts of the personal and familial, Tiana’s film From Hollywood to Hanoi, from which this exchange with Westmoreland appears, opens up a larger exploration about the histories of the Viet Nam War and the (im)possibilities for apprehending its violent consequences under the dominant narratives popularized by Hollywood as well as putatively objective U.S. news reels and documentaries. In this way, her strategy strongly resonates with Dinh Q. Lê’s photographic art, not only the one above, but more explicitly in his extended series From Vietnam to Hollywood. Tiana’s film, however, provides a unique vantage point into the relationship of history and memory mediated by mainstream representations of Viet Nam insofar as she is both an insider and outsider of Hollywood, an actress who appeared in a considerable number of films but often relegated to minor and/or stereotypical roles of Asian women.

The film begins with clips from videos that she has appeared in, intercut between Hollywood clips, documentary footage of refugees and the war, family photographs, and images

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205 Tiana, Friendship Bridge Productions, and Indochina Film Arts Foundation, From Hollywood to Hanoi (San Francisco: Indochina Film Arts Foundation, 1994).
meant to represent Vietnamese cultural myths and traditions. The campiness of these sequences arises from Tiana’s intentionally naïve narration of these memories, which belies the stark violence portrayed in the juxtaposed images and shots. For instance, following a shot of traditional Vietnamese cultural objects that might strike one as Orientalist kitsch—objects that convey the ‘make-believe’ myths in Vietnamese culture—the film cuts to what at first might appear to be fireworks. After telling of magic weapons that united the Vietnamese peoples, Tiana notes: “In the 60’s, our magic weapons came by air” amid aerial shots of missiles being projected over the country. Rather than explicitly citing the violent destruction of war, Tiana voices what might be read as a detached perspective of wonderment from someone well-versed and indoctrinated in the narratives that America tells about the war, through news footage and Hollywood. Against a clip of American GI’s scoping out villages for the enemy, Tiana observes: “I was a kid when the saviors landed…They were huge. They were handsome. They were American boys and they were there to protect us. I was in love.”

Given this seeming disconnect, Peter Feng invites us to differentiate between Tiana as “author/narrator and actor/performer,” a celebrity persona constructed through the structures of Hollywood. In this way, Feng stresses that it is not necessarily Tiana herself but the conditions with which she contends that compel this film to necessarily engage in “Hollywood mimicry.”206 Building on Homi Bhabha’s conception of mimicry, Feng looks toward the ways in which Tiana both had to contend with assuming and taking on the stereotypical gender roles assigned by Hollywood onto Asian American performers as well as the need for representations of Viet Nam to work within and against the dominant terms laid out by Hollywood. These two threads are explored as Tiana narrates her childhood in Viet Nam, escape due to war, her family’s attempts

to perform perfect Americans, and her ultimate decision to enter Hollywood as an actress. The film features clips from her various performances and film appearances. Significantly, she follows a sequence of different outfits and campy attempts to assume the character of famous American divas at the time with footage of the war and the confession that: “I tried to tune out memories of the war, but couldn’t.” Yet, these narrative threads are not contemporaneous as her appearances occurred in the 80’s, well after the images of the war that flash across the screen. We may read the film symptomatically to inquire into how Tiana allows us, through her own personal journey, to reflect upon the (im)possibilities of remembering the war under camp.

As the rest of the film follows Tiana in her trip back to Viet Nam, campiness registers in the ironic presence of American (consumer) culture. Her arrival to Saigon is greeted with her ambivalent thoughts about the strong influence of American capitalism, remarking that: “The real magic weapon has returned—the dollar.” Tiana shows how the stronghold of the dollar manifests in multiple scales: the informal economy of American goods; the attempts by aging Communist leaders to do business with capitalists; and, the foreign investors for capitalize on tourists visiting the country. After touring a lavish hotel owned by the Japanese and run by Australians, one of two white men interviewed made the following analysis: “Viet Nam is like a beautiful girl and I’m afraid beautiful girls tend to get raped on college campuses and the foreign investors, the foreign colonialists have tended to, over a long period of time, get the best advantage out of Viet Nam.” This analysis is undercut when the two men give a thumbs up for Viet Nam, suggesting that they are willfully capitalizing on the very same gendered logic of the predatory foreign investors that he just mentioned.

Her visit of family members, from whom she has been separated for decades, elucidates the irony of reunification, in which American refuge is conflated by the rehabilitation of the
refugee *through* the restoration of the heteronormative family, precisely because American military intervention caused the dispersal of these families in the first place. Dramatizing this contradiction, Tiana structures various components of her trip to Viet Nam in the film through a spoken letter written to her father, who opposed her trip to Viet Nam: “Dear dad, I wish you were here with us. The war has kept our family apart for too long.” After a tearful reunion, Tiana’s aunt recounts the discrepancy of currency exchange rates and her inability to send letters to family relocated in the United States given the high price for a stamp. In another instance, Tiana reunites with an uncle just released from the reeducation camps. Tiana uses an audio recording machine for his uncle to deliver a note to his relatives in America, in which he relays his longing and hopes to reunite with them in California someday.

Her personal narratives about her separation from and ultimate reunion with family in Viet Nam become a means to explore both the Amerasians who remain after the war and the irony of Americans who disavow these legacies. Ironically, shifting from faces of multiple Amerasian children, the film cuts to footage of American soldiers on the beach during the war who claim that Vietnamese women are “off limits” to them because they are “gooks.” Echoing an opening sequence where she asked mixed-race Vietnamese American teenagers in California about their relationship to Viet Nam, her interview with “Amerasians” in Viet Nam reveals struggles with discrimination and their strong desire to go to America in search of their parents. One teenager confesses: “America is our parents’ home. We have to find them so we can be home and have a good life. They mistreat us here.” In so saying, he sheds light on the impossibility for the good life in Viet Nam and how the war has made refuge untenable. Meanwhile, the film also takes stock of the other neglected offspring of the war: the corpse of deformed fetuses contained in jars following the radioactive consequences of agent orange.
Her return to Viet Nam does not signal a recovery of any sense of origin, but rather is an attempt to search for the truths of the war. Significantly, the end point of her journey is not her hometown, but rather Hanoi, the center of the government and former base of North Vietnamese operations during the war. Arriving there, she notes: “I am now in the center of reality. The history echoes.” Meanwhile, the sequence echoes an earlier one toward the opening of the film. However, the intercuts between documentary footage of air strikes and explosions are not with Hollywood clips (like earlier), but rather shots of Vietnamese peasants working the fields, emphasizing how destruction of these militaristic attacks are marked on the landscape, as people raise fish in bomb craters. Notably, the tone of the film becomes more and more earnest as it progresses with these explorations about the consequences of war in Viet Nam. The forms of incongruous juxtaposition earlier in the film that register as particularly campy take on a graver tone.

This tonal shift might be understood by an observation Tiana makes as she crosses the bridge that signaled the DMZ (demilitarized zone) separating North and South Viet Nam: “dad called it the line between life and death.” In this way, the film calls attention to how the various shots and imaginaries indexed by “Hollywood” and “Hanoi” have and continue to quite materially mediate the dividing line between life and death for the Vietnamese. Camp holds these dichotomies in tension as the death under the humor become more and more apparent. In a final interview, the interviewee declares her decision to make a plea to American mothers using Vietnamese. In order to establish sympathy and to get American viewers to apprehend the grief of violence suffered by the war, she makes a plea to consider a form of maternal solidarity, in which American mothers attempt to imagine and act in response to the trauma of a lost child. Following this plea, the cut toward shots of Tiana’s return home to celebrate Christmas amid
jolly carols provides a stark contrast that underscores American wealth and abundance built over and against these remnants of war.

Whereas Tiana’s relocation from Viet Nam and to California was presumably made with ease, the predominant imaginary around the war refugees centers on the ‘boat people,’ those who clamored and packed onto boats in escaping Viet Nam. What are the implications and stakes of re-presenting these passages through camp aesthetics? If Tiana’s film suggests that campiness arises in the friction between Hollywood portrayals and the material experiences of the suffering Vietnamese bodies that are selectively staged on screen, Nguyen Tan Hoang might be said to rework camp to formally enact and proliferate such frictions toward alternative approaches in remembering displacement.

On the Queer Erotics of “Refugee Passages”

Nguyen Tan Hoang’s experimental video *PIRATED!* (2000) playfully mimes and unsettles the iconography of the “boat people,” refugees who escaped Viet Nam by boat and are often visualized as epitomes of bare life. In her analysis of the video, Mimi Nguyen describes these dominant representations: “Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, images of ‘boat people’ dominated (the few) representations of the Vietnamese in the US imagination as objects of pity, concern, and loathing. Crowded on small rafts and fishing vessels, the refugee body, starved, violated, and traumatized, was perhaps the most common image of the Vietnamese refugee during the Reagan administration.”

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207 As Mimi Nguyen reminds us, such passages encompass not only the literal routes by which refugees traveled and dispersed, but also the symbolic “movement from subjection to subjectivity, and the poisonous promise of this movement.” Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 25.

208 Nguyen, “In the Arms of Pirates, Under the Bodies of Sailors”: Diaspora, Desire, and Danger in Nguyen Tan Hoang’s *PIRATED!*, 70.
refugee bodies, in a state of unspecified violation, becomes the screen by which the Western viewer invests in and imagines himself as the savior. In a state of violation and bare-ness, these bodies become enfolded into the framework of humanitarian crisis and rescue. Accordingly, the political conditions of war and military intervention become evacuated in the characterizations of the ‘refugee.’

Instead, Nguyen’s *PIRATED!* perverts the voyages of the refugee. Refusing to bolster a straight account of these passages, in which the seriousness of the matter is necessarily rehabilitated into a narrative of American democracy, it pieces together a number of footage and text in an attempt to reconstruct his passage from Viet Nam, a voyage he can no longer remember: documentary footage of the evacuation, Hollywood swashbuckling films, music videos that serve as background for karaoke songs, and a hardcore adult video in which two white male actors kiss and perform fellatio on one another. The short eleven-minute video opens with a backdrop of blue waves as the following text appears on the screen: “1978. Three years after the Fall of Saigon. Fleeing from the Communists, my family and I escaped from Vietnam by boat.” Then, “I was seasick for most of the time and do not remember much about the perilous voyage.” Zooming in on a television screen that alternatively depicts waters and footage of refugees, the frame clumsily captures the sides of the television set, in the process underscoring the apparatuses that mediate representations of these images and histories.

The formal fragmentations and pastiche of disparate cultural objects manifest the complex circuits for the erotics of longing. Viet Le writes: “Loss and longing (for a ‘homeland’ or for a lover) are delayed and articulated (as exemplified by the lyrics and images of the
Vietnamese ballads and music videos); desire and nostalgia are sustained and thwarted.\textsuperscript{209} In other words, the video formally manifests both the need for understanding and articulating this mode of longing while indicating the impossibilities for ‘recovering’ loss. On the one hand, in his absence of memory, the disparate archives, from documentary footage to Hollywood movies, work together and clash in making sense of the war and relocation. On the other hand, the experimental video problematizes romanticized notions of mythic origins and homelands that are often conveyed through sentimental narratives of heterosexual love in the Vietnamese diasporic community. The video performs forms of queer diasporic practices that complicate the attachment to both national belonging and heteronormative romance, making apparent the limits of these fantasies in remembering and dealing with passages of displacement.

Considering the ways in which aesthetics and affect of the everyday can illuminate these queer diasporic dimensions in excess of domesticity, Gayatri Gopinath draws our attention to Svetlana Boym’s differentiation between “utopian (reconstructive and totalizing) and ironic (inconclusive and fragmentary).” This distinction facilitates an apprehension of Nguyen’s filmic practice and the possibilities for approaching refugee passages otherwise. Boym writes: “The [utopian] stresses the first root of the word, nostros (home), and puts the emphasis on the return to that mythical place on the island of Utopia where the greater patria has to be rebuilt…Ironic nostalgia puts emphasis on algia, longing, and acknowledges the displacement of the mythical place without trying to rebuild it…If the utopian nostalgic sees exile…as a definite falling from grace, the ironic one accepts (if not enjoys) the paradoxes of permanent exile.”\textsuperscript{210} In relation to


the refugee, ironic nostalgia attends to, proliferates, and reworks the modes of longing that arise around ‘home.’ Camp aesthetics allows for this ironic nostalgia by ironizing the sets of desire and attachments that cohere around nostalgia.

Camping up the experiences of getting pirated on the high seas, Nguyen acknowledges the inevitability of longing by the Vietnamese diasporic communities while making the clear historical and political conditions of war that make impossible the fulfillment of this longing for return. Following Vietnamese ballads and imagery that are evocative of a diasporic longing for home, Nguyen positions his sense of home over and against these longings for Viet Nam with this text that appears on the screen: “At long last, I too found myself. Not among the rice paddies of my ancestors. But on the High Seas: In the arms of Pirates & Under the bodies of Sailors.” Making this distinction palpable, the audio shifts to a movie voiceover that introduces one to the world of pirates. From images of white sailors in movies, the shot shifts to a Vietnamese boy dreaming in a hammock, suggesting that these sailors are part of his fantasies. While this child putatively stands in for Nguyen, there is no clear sense of whether this dream occurs prior to or after his departure from Viet Nam.

As the film progresses, the imagery of sailors shifts from the swashbuckling films to two adult actors performing explicit oral sex on one another. Although the introduction of these white sailors presumably stand in for the German sailors who rescued Nguyen from the Thai pirates, there is no explicit association of these sailors with rescue. Instead, in conflating and rehearsing the memory of Thai pirates along with images of white American gay adult film actors, Nguyen

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211 In working with this helpful delineation by Boym, I also acknowledge that the “utopian” and its approaches to the past, present, and future can be multivalent rather than necessarily “reconstructive and totalizing.” I am especially thinking alongside theorizations of queer utopia by Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*. 

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compels us to question and problematize the fetishization of such passages within the dominant cultural imaginary, which persistently imagines the refugee as in transit and in need of rescue while simultaneously evacuating the historical contexts and political forces of war that motivated such displacement in the first place. In other words, Nguyen asks us to consider both how such passages are fetishized in dominant narratives and the possibilities for a perverse, improper orientation toward journeys that presumably signal moments of loss, sorrow, and trauma. Thus, we may tease out the reservation that Mimi Nguyen raises in the latter part of the following claim: “But it also haunts the hope that queerness might necessarily offer liberation. The video thus suggests that while the geopolitical histories of queer bodies and desires may challenge gendered norms and heteronormativity, these bodies and desires may nonetheless be implicated in transnational legacies of war and colonial discourses of rescue.”

By superimposing stories about the Thai pirates with the iconography of white sailors, the video calls into question the ways that narratives of rescue by the American army are underwritten by predatory motives. These juxtapositions elucidate and call into question how the refugee becomes situated within the queer erotics between rescue and piracy. A state of being displaced and disconnected from the home(land), these refuge passages signal liminal spaces of transit for bodies unmoored from the domesticity of political life. In short, the queerness arising from these perilous waters bespeaks a rupture of multiple liberal fantasies of coherent subjectivity: the nation, the home, and the self.

Mockingly playing with these fantasies, the ironic video title of PIRATED! captures multiple circuits and interpretations of bodily labor performed by the refugee. The addition of the exclamation point exaggerates the experience of displacement, adding an exuberance to a

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212 Nguyen, “‘In the Arms of Pirates, Under the Bodies of Sailors’: Diaspora, Desire, and Danger in Nguyen Tan Hoang’s PIRATED!,” 74.
seemingly traumatic experience. The jarring tone beckons us to consider the implications of mocking or even relishing in these experiences. In so doing, the campy theatricalization of being ‘pirated!’ gestures toward the multiple labor practices of stealing, appropriating, and restaging an experience that might not be one’s own. Inquiring into the effect and significance of having refugee passages ‘pirated,’ *PIRATED!* compels a consideration of the practices that capitalize on the experiences of violation, trauma, and suffering of the refugees. The video’s deployment of camp holds in tension the aesthetic and the material, underscoring the ways in which these modes of capitalization aestheticize trauma by evacuating its historical and political materialities. Meanwhile, by exaggerating these dimensions of a dematerialized aesthetic surface and unrepresented (or unrepresentable) material conditions, Nguyen foregrounds and invites a self-reflexive critique against such elisions that configurations of the refugee body are forced to sustain.

*Nursing the Dead*

Of such elisions, we might contemplate those bodies who could not or did not leave Viet Nam after the war. Shifting focus away from the predominant artistic and scholarly attention on Vietnamese refugees in the United States, Quan Barry novel’s *She Weeps Each Time You’re Born* imagines the treks and journeys of *internally displaced refugees* within Viet Nam following the withdrawal of the American troops and the takeover of the North Vietnamese government. Espiritu observes how the invisibility of these refugees manages the illusion of a benevolent United States: “Together, the hyper-visibility of the post-1975 refugees who left Vietnam and the un-visibility of the internal refugees who had been displaced throughout the war enabled the
United States to represent itself as a refuge-providing rather than a refugee-producing nation."

Within these configurations, Viet Nam can only figure as a site of forced departure and potential return.

Instead, Barry’s novel begins with, in order to displace, this familiar narrative about the ‘return’ of a Vietnamese American adoptee, Amy Quan, to Vietnam. Staging its opening pages as an epilogue set in 2011, the novel depicts this returned adoptee attempting to make sense of what happened in Viet Nam since the end of the war. Notably, she does so neither to recover her own familial histories nor to imagine any homeland. Instead, she aims to make sense of the story of those who are displaced and occluded from the teleological development of refugee passages toward U.S. citizenship. Thus, the narrative subsequently shifts toward the journey of Rabbit, who, born during the end of the war, travels through the different times and spaces of Viet Nam following the withdrawal of American troops. Living through and experiencing various transitions in the government following the war, Rabbit bears witness to the historical processes and aftermaths that exceed the narratives of withdrawal and resettlement. It is for these reasons that Amy Quan pieces together and presents the subsequent narrative that unfolds in an attempt to understand Viet Nam and the costs of war outside the sites that dominate the tours and guidebooks.

In the years to come I will make three more trips to Vietnam, the country of my birth, piecing together the story of Rabbit, of how she was born in the dirt and the sorrows to follow. I have spent the past six weeks touring Vietnam, this place where I was born in the same year as her, our lives diametrically opposite. I have seen everything the guide books speak of—Reunification Palace, the endless

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rubber plantations, tunnels running hundreds of miles under the earth, this is not a story of what is missing. Some things just have yet to be found.\textsuperscript{214}

Born during the same year, Rabbit presents a “diametrically opposite” tale of refugee displacement wherein the illusion of refuge in another country is not possible. In underscoring that this story is not about “what is missing,” Amy Quan gestures toward an ethical call for us to attend to what has “yet to be found” alongside and beneath the tourist sites that are persistently visited and traveled.

Rabbit literalizes the ethical imperative to listen to the ghosts of the war as her phenomenological experience of inhabiting these aftermaths of the war assumes a supernatural character. Her capacity to listen to and talk with both ghosts and animal spirits registers that which cannot be commonly seen, heard, or known by others. As Viet Nguyen argues: “[M]uch of the writing, art, and politics of Vietnamese refugees, is about the problem of mourning the dead, remembering the missing, and considering the place of the survivors in the movement of history.”\textsuperscript{215} Situated within Viet Nam, Barry’s novel contemplates not only how the Vietnamese accomplished this task as they flee for their survival, but also what it might mean for readers to mourn the lives that fall outside the traditional parameters of Viet Nam War narratives. These war narratives are overdetermined by American military interventions, refugee discourses, and the internal fractures between the North and South sides of Viet Nam. One of the tour guides notes: “Rabbit. For Vietnam she gives up everything…She will stay until every little one is heard. The northern and southern dead” (5). Her journey elucidates the movements and uncertainties of internally displaced Vietnamese peoples as well as the brutalities of the North.


government as it regains the South and takes vengeance on its populations for their deemed complicity with the United States military.

Rabbit resounds the voices of the dead and the animals that fall outside but put pressure upon tales of humanness and humanity. These interconnections are embodied in the fleeting presence of a turtle toward the end of the novel: “In the moonlight she could see the open sores on its back, each one the size of a dinner plate, the inflamed skin pink and suppurating. It’s dying, whispered the parakeet. No, said Rabbit. It’s just manifesting the world it lives in” (239). Through her capacity, the animals, nature, and the spirits are inextricably interconnected, materialist—although ghostly—traces of the long afterlives of war and the passages through camps, within which the nation, refugee, or war criminal putatively become rehabilitated and re-incorporated into a national body politic.

Following the epilogue, the first section of the novel detailing Rabbit’s journey is set “Along the Song Ma” in 1972, detailing massive displacement under U.S. military bombing. Whereas this river once gave life to the crops and communities that flourished along its coast, it is now brimming with death, the ashes of bombed homes and the corpses of burnt villagers. “Everywhere the world was charred. The bones of trees stood like primordial signposts warning of pestilence and death. In the moonlight the earth looked blackened like the skin of a fish” (40). The unbridled destruction of these homes and the subsequent displacement of villagers belie claims of humanitarianism by the U.S. army. Unable to distinguish between enemies and civilians, the U.S. army authorized an order of sanctioned violence: “And now the whole fifty square miles west of the river had been declared a free-fire zone. The Americans ordered everyone out. Tu said the Americans were trying to stamp out the Vietcong by banishing the local people. No people meant no food, no aid. In a free-fire zone the Americans could shoot
without asking. Anyone remaining was assumed to be VC” (18). By imposing this militaristic category upon the land, the army installed a policy of dispersal akin to internment wherein the endless practices of displacing, relocating, and spatially fixing civilians become rationalized under the guise of wartime necessity. Meanwhile, the destructive effects of these policies are ironically reframed as humanitarian crises.

Not all civilians were able or willing to abandon their homes, however. Little Mother, in her late third trimester of pregnancy with Rabbit, waits for her child’s father Tu—who is serving as a foot soldier for the Vietcong—alongside his mother Bà. Awaiting his return, Bà persuades Little Mother to stay, hopeful that the army would not hurt two women. After being momentarily detained and then sneaking away from soldiers, Bà learns that Little Mother died and was buried by other soldiers. When Tu returns to what remains of his home with two fellow travelers, Huyen, an old honey-seller with teeth stained from the juices of betel leaves, and her granddaughter Qui, a strikingly beautiful young woman who is pale, mute, constantly producing milk, and noted as seeming slightly “deranged” (51), he learns of Little Mother’s death. In this way, Rabbit’s birth is embedded within multiple forms of death—the deaths of civilians and the death of her mother. Hearing a noise outside, Qui leads them toward Little Mother’s burial site. Digging up the makeshift coffin and opening up the body bag, Tu discovers the birth of Rabbit, raising her up from this entombment as ashes fall from the sky. With the narrative addressed to Rabbit in the second person, it commands: “Wonder why you have been chosen to speak for all of them, tens of hundreds of thousands of millions. In a country full of ghosts, begin learning how to distinguish between the voices of the bodied and the voices of the spectral” (44). Given this task of listening to the ghosts, it is fitting that Rabbit is named after the full moon under
which she was born: “The rabbit with its innocence, its youthfulness, it long bright ears that hear everything in the realms of both the living and the dead.” (51).

Rabbit’s act of listening to the ghosts of Viet Nam also us into its longer histories of colonialism prior to this war. These histories map other circuits of travel based on colonial labor, movements that ironically conclude the more common notion of exodus in the next section, “The Fall [1975].” The group flees en masse, without knowing a clear destination: “The world was fleeing without knowing exactly where, people pushing south as if just the word south could save them” (64). Yet, the novel elucidates how these cartographies have already been marked out and shaped by the routes of French colonialism. As Bà lays dying, Rabbit accesses her life through the contact of a kiss. On 1940, Bà’s mother signs a contract effectively selling her to the rubber plantations of Terres Noires. Vietnamese labor thus played a crucial role during this start of World War II: “War is settling on all the continents of the known world, and rubber is the dark currency that makes it all possible…Due to war profiteering, the rubber companies are legion. Michelin, Mimot, Bigard, Cardesac” (69-70). Bà’s story, however, not only tells of the exploitative labor practices and brutal conditions that Vietnamese workers faced on these rubber plantations. Her romantic tryst with another worker also speaks to other emergent intimacies within the plantation, as he organized workers, sharing with them the teaching of French Communism. Captured by guards in attempt to get her to reveal his whereabouts, Bà opens up a history of French colonialism and revolution through her body, as a guard puts out a cigarette on her breast, leaving behind a scar: “Today the wound on your chest from the August Revolution no longer smells and is starting to heal, though it will never fully heal” (79). Rather than symbolizing defeat, this scar serves as an ethical call toward remembering and acting upon the
visions of the revolution, just like the dialectical linkages between life and death, destruction and birth depicted throughout the novel.

Connected by manifestations of ghosts and souls as “light,” life and death are portrayed as cyclical and interconnected. Little Mother’s passing and reincarnation into Rabbit literalize the profound transformation of the world order for the Vietnamese after the war and the cyclical nature of “life as a wheel.” As Huyen notes: “They were already in the next life” (32). Thus, alongside perverse coincidences of life and death, Rabbit’s seemingly supernatural ability of resounding the dead is inextricably tied to her maternal surrogate of Qui and her labor of nursing, sustaining the hunger of displaced peoples from the endless supply of milk that she produces following an unintentional abortion of a baby produced through the sexual assault of an American G.I. when she was barely a teenager. Qui and Huyen join Tu after a ghostly vision in which Little Mother’s apparition approaches them. While the apparition tells Huyen that “In the next life I will serve you,” she enjoins Qui to “be her mother” (31). Thus, Qui provides sustenance for Rabbit: “The baby suckled on her nipple. The young girl’s face went rapt, the feeling as if a ray of light were being drawn out of her body” (51). Significantly, the configuration of this act as illuminating “a ray of light” both alludes to and reworks the earlier depictions of light as the materialization of ghosts haunting the land. Qui’s maternal surrogacy speaks to the radical disruption of familial and community kinship systems following the war, while also gesturing toward the new modes of collectivity and practices of survival under constant displacement. When Qui stumbles upon a Bana tribe, a mother notices that Qui’s chest is weeping and brings over her emaciated baby. “Qui lifted her shirt. Instinctually the sleeping child took her breast in his mouth. His lips were dry and chafed her nipple. Qui tried to stifle a sigh. The rapture of a foreign mouth on her body, a hunger she could satisfy” (58). Milk, like the
honey she sold with Huyen, symbolizes product of life and life-giving amid hunger, death, and destruction.

This destruction is created in part by the policies put in place by the Northern government following reunification of Viet Nam. “Southern society had been turned upside down. People were dying in hospitals because the northern doctors shipped down to replace the ‘capitalist sympathizers’ had received their medical certificates in less than six weeks” (116). These policies enacted a form of punishment toward the Southerners that had far larger, structural ramifications. The systemic destruction of the society furthered exacerbated the production and displacement of refugees seeking refuge elsewhere. The novel calls on us to apprehend and account for the violence unleashed internal to Viet Nam following the war while not eliding interrogations of the historical context of American military intervention and destruction. In this extended quote, Rabbit contemplates how political interests come to dictate which lives must be mourned and which deaths must be actively forgotten:

Each time she found herself listening to yet another soul, Rabbit wondered at the marvel of it all. In ten years’ time she had become a national treasure. The government trotted her out when they needed to know where their soldiers were buried, where to erect another monument for the northern martyrs. In the American war alone there were more than three million dead, and the end of the war was more than twenty years behind them. But as long as there were unnamed dead left in the ground, it would never be over. What the dead know, what you remember shapes who you are. The government was trying to create one memory, one country, one official version of what happened. Everything else was allowed to disintegrate and fall off the bone. All over the countryside southern remains
were going unacknowledged. One side had been victorious. The other was turning into earth. (209)

Casualties become folded into a heroic narrative of triumph as the task of remembering the dead serves the nationalist project of memorialization. Those who remain un-mourned and unaccounted for by these nationalist imperatives point to the long afterlives of the war. As the new government aims to “create one memory,” the task of remembering the devalued southern lives becomes an ethical task that nonetheless threatens and exceeds the political objectives of reunification.

Rabbit, who is the government’s greatest asset in affirming a heroic narrative that honors certain deaths, becomes its greatest threat when the voices of the unjustly massacred come back to haunt any coherent national narrative. The ghost of a young girl approaches Rabbit within a Catholic church, where Southern Vietnamese were seeking shelter away from the North Vietnamese army: “More and more people coming. Telling us they were rounding up the civil service workers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, the intellectuals. After the monks they went after the families of the southern soldiers, then anyone they suspected of having ties to the Americans” (232). Shooting and throwing grenades into the church, the northern soldiers show how the costs of reunification were premised on the violent elimination of anyone who is deemed to be a part of the American enemy. “In this tiny hamlet of My Kan, the number of people killed is three times the number of people who lived there, four hundred and twenty-eight dead, and they’re all right here where Rabbit is standing, though the government in Hanoi would deny it” (234). Following this incident, Rabbit soon becomes unable to hear the dead, overwhelmed by the history of violence that the (formerly North) Vietnamese government attempts to bury and the deaths that cannot be properly mourned. While Qui’s nursing sustains Rabbit following the
draining task of hearing the dead, it is unable to revitalize Rabbit’s hearing in the face of massacre. The government’s attempts to ‘create one memory’ require an active mode of policing what can or cannot be known. “In the papers and on the TV the government claimed her powers had been a sham” (260). Insofar as what she hears exceeds the proper modes of mourning within nationalist memory, her powers are subjugated and criminalized.

Formally reflecting the Buddhist inspired claim that “life is a wheel,” the novel rounds to an end by a return to the epilogue that opens it, but this time from the point of view of Rabbit encountering the Amerasian refugee, Amy Quan, who returns. Quan’s ‘return’ enacts an ethical act of listening. As the voices of the dead reassure Rabbit: “The woman is not looking for anything or anyone. She is not asking you to listen on her behalf. She knows she does not walk alone and never has. And now in the light of this room where she stands in the presence of one who might bring her face-to-face with her origins, she lets the awareness wash over her” (256). The imperative to apprehend, despite the inability to fully recognize, the origins of violence and death effected by war reignites Rabbit’s capacity to hear and sparks her ability to serve as a surrogate mother as well, as the novel closes with her nursing a baby with two heads, a radioactive aftermath of war. Through the perverse intermixing of life and death, through hearing the dead and surrogate maternity, Barry’s novel refuses the fetishization of the suffering Vietnamese body. Instead, the tropes of the supernatural and the fantastical gesture toward the continual afterlives of war in Viet Nam occluded under dominant nationalist narratives.

**Re-covering the Detritus of War**

How do we apprehend (or not) the long afterlives of war and trauma amid the (refugee) Vietnamese communities in the United States? Queer Vietnamese American poet Paul Tran’s
spoken poem “#1 Beauty Nail Salon” contemplates such possibilities amid the dominant association of Vietnamese Americans with the nail salon industry.\textsuperscript{216} The poem plays with and shifts between the levels of surface and depth to contemplate the resonances as well as disconnect between the surface processes of beautifying the body and remembering the detritus of war. Beginning with a ventriloquization of a Vietnamese employee at a nail salon, Tran performs his poem as the character Chien in a particularly campy fashion, theatricalizing an overly kind and warm tone. In his spoken performance, his face widens into an exaggerated smile, greeting the customer as “honaay,” offering to treat her with services for “\textit{(Only $6 more.)},” and promising a pampering to “make you #1.” Delivered in accented English and theatricality, these lines are reflected on the written page in italics.

While this situation refers to the general prevalence of Vietnamese Americans working in beauty salons, it more specifically invokes a bit made popular by Mexican American stand-up comic Anjelah Johnson. The similarities are unmistakable. In her famous sketch, Johnson tells of her trip to “Beautiful Nail.” Greeted with exceptional customer service, Johnson similarly ventriloquizes the workers in the nail salon, donning a Vietnamese accent to excessively compliment the customer. Tran’s parenthetical aside of “only $6 more” alludes specifically to the one of the main comedic elements of Johnson’s skit, wherein the salon employee “Tammy” pressures Johnson to agree to an additional service, only to slyly mention the cost of such service under her breath afterward. At the end of the skit, when Johnson confronts Tammy about one of the nails not being filed properly, “Tammy” launches into a string of unintelligible “Vietnamese” dialogue with presumably another Vietnamese employee. Asked about how she is able to capture the cadence of both the accented English and putative Vietnamese language with such realism,

Johnson mentions that she grew up around a large Vietnamese American population in San Jose, California. The thrust of her skit relies on not only the comedic effect of her ‘realistic’ racial ventriloquizing, but also what might be seen as the aggressive and unknown sentiments (Oriental inscrutability) of the nail salon employees behind their exaggeratedly kind performances of customer service.

Invoking this popular skit, Tran’s performance instead draws upon and questions what the comedic surface of such ventriloquizing buries. Following the opening dialogue, Tran assumes a notably serious tone in stark contrast to Chien’s public performance toward the customer. This second, more explicitly earnest voice might be understood as a form of interior monologue, performing an unmediated (unaccented) glimpse into the psychology of the employee behind the external performance toward the customer. He methodically explains his labor in performing a manicure:

   Wash your hands. Remove any dirt
   from the land. Scape off the native
   coats with acetone. Rinse thoroughly.

The enjambment in the stanza builds tension in highlighting and shifting back and forth between two surfaces: the corporeal skin of the body and the geological earth, along with the bodies it carries. The appendage of “from the land” to the command of “Remove any dirt” in the second line widens the focus from the localized site of the hands to a larger, albeit unspecified, geological scale. Meanwhile, the subsequent enjambment similarly gestures toward the larger allegory of race and war explored through the manicure with the command of “Scrape off the native,” only to momentarily incorporate the focus back onto the object of the body by modifying native with “coats of acetone.” In this way, like the processes of a manicure, the
speaker subtly gestures toward the hidden memories of war before covering them up again with acetone.

Alternating between the imagery of the body and that of war, the poem shifts between practices of covering and exposure as the ephemera of human detritus that can be cleaned from the hands both illuminate and displace the refuse of war. Whereas the Vietnamese body provided the viewing American spectator the possibility of mending his/her psychic excesses, this ironic reversal literalizes the service provided by laboring racialized bodies to clean the detritus and beautify the American body. The intermingling of these bodily labors recalls the doubleness that Mimi Nguyen excavates: “The Gift of Freedom thus haunts empire, not just with mournful ghosts but also with beautiful visions.” Bringing these mournful ghosts to the fore, the number of stanzas performed in the second voice increases with just a few lines of the ventriloquized irrupting periodically to highlight the contrast between surface and depth.

Along the way, the hidden depth more prominently erupts and cracks through the surface of beauty. Alluding to without explicitly mentioning histories of imperialism prior to the war, the speaker provides instructions for the ironically named “French tips,” in which the “cuticle foliage” of customers becomes the main enemy for employees to clean and scrub away. Shifting to the use of third person half-way through the poem, Tran reveals that this second earnest voice does not signal the interiority of his character Chien. Instead, Tran imagines rather than assumes and appropriates the toll and labor of these Vietnamese employees in the nail salon:

…She is bent over

scrubbing your fingers, eliminating the dead

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skin. The cuticle foliage stir in her memories of slaughtered soldiers, bodies washed away, a sister buried alive—

An inverse of the previous stanza introducing the plan for manicures, the formal closure of this stanza is unable to enfold the memories of war and death. At first, the labor is imagined as able to contain and fend off these memories. The process of “eliminating the dead / skin” of the customer becomes a means of forgetting, of ridding memories of the dead. Yet, the minor detritus of bodily waste opens up a larger scale of bodily abjection, of corpses. The processes of cleansing, of rejuvenating “bodies washed” recall haunting ghosts that cannot be dispelled.

With the brief reintroduction of Chien paying compliments to the customer, the stanzas offering commentary on war intensify in their invocation of and attempts to disavow militaristic terms. The mention of bombs, trenches, and chemicals increasingly blur the experiences of war and the labor of beautification. The greater the intensity of these war memories, the more imperative the demand to clean, scrub, and polish. Reassuringly, the speaker offers that a manicure pen can fix any mistake. In so doing, he shifts this tendency toward a commentary about narrative and writing: “A pen is all you need to be #1, to make an ugly truth / look beautiful.” By bracketing manicure in this second mention of the instrument, Tran implicates writers and scholars who absorb the war and the Vietnamese (refugee) body to buttress liberal visions of freedom and beauty.

These visions are enabled, the speaker further suggests, through incorporating the refugees into circuits of racial capitalism, whereby cheap labor affords Americans a consumption of the Orient. Shifting once again to the introduction of a collective “we,” the speaker discloses that the form of amnesia that this consumption of the Orient allows is a luxury that the
Vietnamese cannot enjoy: “We remember the men who raided our villages—who promised / us freedom— who dragged us here like dogs.” In this statement, the “we” connects a larger Vietnamese diaspora across time and space. Excavating the historical present for the refugee, this ‘we’ bears the memory of military destruction and the myriad violences enabled under the guise of ‘freedom’ that forced the relocation of the Vietnamese. It is with these memories that the speaker imagines a future in which these practices of empire might cease:

when this empire collapses onto its knees,
spooling in a pool of its own blood, we will be ready
to make you all so beautiful.

The pronouncement that “we will be ready” is both a threat and a promise, portending and intimating both the desire for the collapse of U.S. empire and the potential of the Vietnamese diasporic communities rising to take revenge. The speaker alludes to yet disavows this sentiment once again by closing the stanza with the service of beautification, promising a future in which Vietnamese bodies will remain as laborers for the glamor of the United States. The campiness of this performance holds these sentiments and promises together, elucidating how these services are necessary performances of gratitude to sustain lives within these spaces of refuge. These queer productions rely on yet evacuate the historical materiality of racialized labor in constructing and maintaining the gloss of beauty and freedom that embellishes U.S. empire.

The next chapter examines another intersection between the United States and Southeast Asia, through historical and ongoing structures of militarization and (neo)colonialism that have been central to the constitution of American empire on the global stage but are hardly remembered. The discussion will trace the numerous campsites that managed these shifting
colonial relations since the Spanish American War in 1898. Moreover, I look at how domestic policies of the Philippines during the 1970’s-1980’s, under the Ferdinand Marcos regime, transmute, occlude, and replicate these relations. Attending to the exuberant figure of former first lady of the Philippines Imelda Marcos, the chapter further explores how camp aesthetics can collude with dictatorial regimes of state power by mediating the dimensions of surface and depth to manage the distribution of life and death.
(EN)CAMPING U.S. EMPIRE AND MILITARISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

PERFORMING DIVAS AND THE SPECTACLE OF IMITATIVE FILIPINO/A BODIES

In this picture of the Marcoses drunk with power, pursuing their delusions of
grandeur, the Philippines appears to be a country dominated by misplaced dreams.
It is a place of ironic contrasts and tragic contradictions, where politics is a star-
studded spectacle set amid the gritty third world realities of hunger and squalor. A
third world place in first world drag. — Neferti Xina M. Tadiar

The Philippines are, so to speak, ‘in the closet’ when it comes to American
history. — Viet Thanh Nguyen

[T]he Philippines was key to U.S. power projection capabilities in the Pacific
Basin, serving as its prime military outpost and stepping stone to China and the
Asian mainland. — Yến Lê Espiritu

The previous chapter explored how camps mediated the entry and “resettlement” of the
Vietnamese war refugees while simultaneously disavowing the terms of U.S. military aggression.
The transformation of the United States into the savior and the displacement of trauma away

218 Neferti Xina M. Tadiar, Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine
Consequences for the New World Order (Hong Kong and London: Hong Kong University Press,
2004), 1–2.
220 Espiritu, Body Counts, 27; emphasis added.
from the material destruction of Vietnam onto the symbolic realm of the American national psyche, I asserted, were made possible through the proliferation of visuals that exhibited and artistically reworked images of the war through the aesthetic strategies of pop camp. In such a way, I argued that camp aesthetics elucidates conditions of (im)possibility for remembering the costs of the Vietnam War, how it not only managed and sublimated the trauma of war into a question of the embattled American psyche but also serves as a cultural strategy by Asian American artists to resist the erasure of Vietnamese bodies and ruins within the historical re-memberings of the war. With these discussions in mind, we now turn toward a longer history of U.S. aggression in the Asia-Pacific, what Luzviminda Francisco has called America’s “First Vietnam”—the Philippines. Through such an appellation, Francisco aims to not only draw out a longer history of American military intervention but also shed light on a largely forgotten and invisible imperial relation. In stark contrast to the hypervisibility of trauma during the Viet Nam War, trauma is illegible with the Philippines. Instead, the historical and enduring violences inflicted by American militarism are read and understood as symptomatic of an ontological condition, that is, as an expression of Filipino ‘cultural difference.’ The role of camps as structures mediating this displacement and the continual amnesia of Philippine postcoloniality ground this chapter’s inquiries into the shifting terrain of American empire.

In describing the place of the Philippines in American history and the potential structures undergirding its perpetual invisibility, Viet Nguyen deploys the spatial metaphor of ‘the closet.’ Teasing out the queer implications of this spatial metaphor, I propose that we instead think through this imperial relation in terms of the material and aesthetics structures of the camp. This chapter explores the Philippines as a camp, a pivotal military outpost for the United States in the

Asia-Pacific region. By thinking through the camp, I aim to reassess the historical conditions and shifting articulations in the juridico-political structure of unequal U.S.-Philippines relation whereby the unfettered use of the archipelago for U.S. economic and political interests relied upon and perpetuates a necropolitical regime of compromised livelihood for the Philippine nation and its peoples. I look at how the long history of U.S. imperialism of the Philippines encodes the nation within a perpetual state of provisionality, now rearticulated under global capitalism and the terms of economic and political (under)development. This chapter asks: in what ways does the Philippines, an extension of but not a part of, the United States serve to localize and expand its economic and military interests? What are the spatial and discursive structures that rationalized this imperial project? How does the status of Philippine subjects and their ambivalent status in relation to U.S. citizenship reflect this broader dynamic? How do the political and juridical conditions undergirding U.S.-Philippines relation both reflect and complicate dominant scholarly notions around ‘the camp’?

Key to this encampment were contestations around what constituted the “Filipino,” contestations that took place over the Filipino body and its performances. I inquire into the spatial and discursive structures of “camp” that mediated and were mediated through the biopolitical management of the Filipino body in order to justify their flexible incorporation into the U.S. body politic. The encampment of U.S. empire in the Philippines operated through the simultaneous territorial containment and population control of Filipinos. As such, the use of concentration camps by the U.S. military during the Philippine-American war served as a primary counterinsurgency effort that not only aimed to attack the rebel force but also productively code the U.S. army as a benevolent source. Camp aesthetics elides and enables the prevalent use of encampments as counterinsurgency measures, both by the United States during
the Spanish American War and by the Marcoses during Martial Law. In the first instance, I
explore the configuration of Filipino “little brown brothers” as culture-less peoples imitative of
American culture. Camp aesthetics operates as a system of signification that both enables and
occludes this protracted history of neocolonialism and militarization in the Philippines. The
linkage of these two camps underwrite the structures shaping the continual “unrepresentability
and unrecognizability” of U.S. imperialism in the Philippines.\(^{222}\)

Exploring the long afterlife of U.S. empire and militarism in the Philippines, I examine
the reiteration of camp under Martial Law of the Marcos regime as a state strategy and tactic for
approximating modernity within the global economy. I argue for the importance of the “diva” as
a site of contestation for Filipino bodies and the ways in which this contemporary index of
Filipino theatricality varyingly works to enable and occlude or illuminate and critique violent
modes of state power. The “diva” opens up dense histories, divergent politics, and disparate
effects. In what follows, I first chart how current iterations of the ‘diva,’ of Filipinos as
exceptionally theatrical and performative, draw upon while obscuring the long colonial
figuration of Filipinos as culture-less and imitative. Playing with this Western gaze, however, the
Filipino both looks back and performs otherwise. Filipino bodies have mimed, reworked, and
exploited on these assumptions of mimicry to gain entry into global circuits of capital. Yet, this
recycling of colonial mimicry into the spectacular diva is not intrinsically resistant or
oppositional.

The center of focus in this chapter and what I argue is the pivot point between the
imitative colonized Filipino and the spectacular Asian diva is Imelda Marcos. The American
cultural imaginary seems to remember Imelda Marcos primarily, if not exclusively, for the

\(^{222}\) Allan Punzalan Isaac, *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America* (Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxx.
extensive shoe collection she left behind when fleeing the Philippines. For many, her accumulation of well over three thousand pairs of shoes underscores the rampant corruption and abuse of power under her and her husband President Ferdinand Marcos’s regime (1965-1986), during which the vast majority of the country was relegated to poverty and destitution. Among the many other crimes they committed both during and outside the declaration of Martial Law from 1972-1981, crimes that the former First Lady vehemently denies, are assassinations, executions, disappearances, secret detentions, torture, censorship, political repressions, extortion, and fraud. The shoes, along with the persistent fixation on them, speak to these larger structures of forgetting. Through their incongruous juxtaposition, the shoes and the skeletons become dialectically linked within the figuration of Imelda and competing narratives around the legacy of the Marcoses’ regime. If the former seems to index the cultural programs and aesthetic performances that Imelda promulgated and the latter the violent consequences of brutal politics, figurations of Imelda illustrate that culture and politics come to enable, inform, and shape one another. The figuration of Imelda Marcos—her own stylized self-presentation as well as popular and academic discourses around her—is especially rich for examining the inextricable entanglement between these two domains and the fraught nature of cultural representations in relation to this historical violence. It is against these larger questions about the relation between aesthetics and politics in the context of the Marcos regime that I situate this chapter. Specifically, I ask: what are the possibilities and risks of representing this moment in history given the ongoingness of its legacies and consequences? How may we do justice to examining the violence and trauma during the Marcos regime, understanding the inability of cultural representation to undo such violence?
In particular, I argue that the crossing of camps between the two flashpoints of the Philippine-American War and the Marcoses’ regime of Martial Law elucidate the striking ways in which camp aesthetics enables while obscuring mass militaristic violence under the benevolent guise of counterinsurgency. In other words, I am interested in exploring how camp aesthetics functioned in tandem with campsites as counterinsurgency measures. Given these fraught histories of camp aesthetics, both deployed for the violent projects of U.S. empire and by Imelda Marcos for a brutal dictatorial regime, it is often figured as a conservative style that dangerously aestheticizes history and obscures the material legacies of state violence. To explore the possibilities of camp aesthetics as a strategy that can both reinforce and potentially disrupt historical amnesia of militarism in the Philippines, this chapter follows the enfiguration of Imelda Marcos in David Byrne’s highly publicized and acclaimed Off-Broadway production *Here Lies Love*.

Ushering Imelda Marcos into the new era against these histories, the musical raises concerns about the motives for performing Martial Law and whether such performances may actually uphold amnesia rather than insist on remembering the violent crimes of the Marcoses. Produced in collaboration with Fat Boy Slim for its score, *Here Lies Love* began as a concept album that centered on the relationship between Marcos and her domestic caretaker from childhood, Estrella Cumpas, and was later adapted into a ‘poperetta’ immersive musical, which opened in New York City’s The Public Theater in April 2013. Touted for its immersive nature—audience members partook in the literal shaping and reshaping of the staged theatrical world resembling a dance club, “Club Millennium”—the musical follows the “rise and fall of Imelda
Marcos” and is told through music reminiscent of the 70’s-80’s New York City disco scene.\footnote{After opening Off-Broadway at The Public in April 2013, the run for Here was extended four times. The musical received praise from a number of outlets and Time named it number 2 on its list of “Top 10 Plays and Musicals.” Here tied in breaking records with 11 nominations for the Lucille Lortel Awards and went on to win in five categories—the most of any show that year—including directing for Alex Timbers and Outstanding Lead Actress in a Musical for Ruthie Ann Miles. Awards were also won for costume design, sound design, and lighting design. Actors Jose Llana and Conrad Ricamora, who play Marcos and Aquino respectively, were also nominated. After closing, there were talks that the show would reopen in a venue farther uptown toward Broadway. This attempt proved unsuccessful and the show eventually reopened at The Public as a for-profit commercial production, essentially renting out space in the non-profit theater. See Adam Hetrick, “David Byrne-Fatboy Slim Musical Here Lies Love Ends Extended Off-Broadway Run at the Public July 28,” Playbill, July 28, 2013, http://www.playbill.com/article/david-byrne-fatboy-slim-musical-here-lies-love-ends-extended-off-broadway-run-at-the-public-july-28-com-207907; Richard Zoglin, “Top 10 of Everything: Arts and Entertainment,” Time, December 4, 2013, http://entertainment.time.com/2013/12/04/arts-and-entertainment/slide/top-10-plays-and-musicals/; “Fun Home, Here Lies Love & More Honored at the 2014 Lucille Lortel Awards,” Broadway.com, accessed April 13, 2016, http://www.broadway.com/buzz/175775/fun-home-here-lies-love-more-honored-at-the-2014-lucille-lortel-awards/; For more on the contradictions of not-for-profit theater and its multiple commonalities with for-profit theater, see Donatella Galella, “Performing (Non) Profit, Race, and American Identity in the Nation’s Capital: Arena Stage, 1950-2010” Ph.D. diss, The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2015.} Featuring a predominantly Filipino American cast, the musical was seen as a further welcome by theatre critics and performance groups given the stark dearth of theatrical roles for actors of color generally and Asian/Americans more specifically.\footnote{In an extensive report released for the 2011-2012 theater season, The Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC) found that Asian American actors constituted only 3% (the same percentage for Latinos; 14% for African Americans) of those cast on Broadway and non-profit theaters in New York City during the six year span from 2006-2012. This number is not representative of casting practices across all productions, however. Consider that the 3% also includes the occasional plays that mostly feature actors of a specific racial group, such as David Henry Hwang’s Chinglish (2011). AAPAC has also served as an important platform for raising awareness about casting practices that inhibit diversity in theater. In July 2012, AAPAC released a statement—and held a panel—regarding the production of “The Nightingale” at La Jolla Playhouse. Under the guise of nontraditional casting, white actors were mostly cast for the parts, even though the text is set in China. More recently, in March 2014, AAPAC issued a statement on the production of “Julius Caesar” at the Lantern Theater Co. in Philadelphia. It inquires into the directorial decision to appropriate and incorporate elements of Japanese culture in a fantastical vision of feudal Japan’s invasion and colonialism of Rome, especially given the extremely low number of Asian Americans cast in the theater’s productions. I offer this}
The overall production of this musical, not to mention the possible intentions of David Byrne, raises vexing questions about cultural appropriation, the politics of representation, historical amnesia, and the role of aesthetics in remembering historical violence. Thus, while theatre critics have mostly lauded the musical, scholars have cautioned against this emphatic embrace. As Luis H. Francia incisively reminds us in the title of his review: “She danced while the nation burnt.” He questions the “enjoyable spectacle” of Byrne’s production and its overemphasis on pop psychology in zeroing in on Imelda Marcos’s insecurity as the cause for her policies.

Anticipating these critiques as he developed the album into the musical, Byrne went out of his way to distance the production from the shoes. In interviews, Byrne repeatedly dismisses the fixation on Imelda’s shoes and insists that they do not find their way into the musical. As mentioned in his story with Vogue: “The collaborators wanted to avoid anything that smacked of camp (Byrne: ‘We don’t even mention the shoes’).” Even as he disavows the shoes, however, extensive note not to make any claims about what Here Lies Love means or does not mean for the state of Asian Americans in theater more broadly. Rather, I ask us to contemplate this larger problem about the institutional lack of diversity in theater so that we may better attend to not only problems of representation onstage, but also to the production aspects of casting as well. Smaller theaters such as the Ma-Yi Theater Company, the National Asian American Theater Company (NAATCO) and the Pan Asian Repertory, which all carry missions to predominantly feature Asian American actors and/or works by Asian American artists, serve as one form of response to the lack of diversity in mainstream theaters. See AAPAC, Ethnic Representation on New York City Stages: Stats Season 2011/2012, February 2013, http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/1/9/4/11949532/aapac_stats_2011-2012.pdf. These sobering statistics trouble theater critic Patrick Healy’s optimistic claim that “Here Lies Progress,” in which the exceptional casting of this one musical is inductively used to substantiate a semblance of “progress” in terms of casting actors of color in theater. See Patrick Healy, “Here Lies Progress: Asian Actors Fill the Playbill,” The New York Times, June 22, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/23/theater/heres-lies-progress-asian-actors-fill-the-playbill.html.

the spectability and excess that they symbolize thoroughly infuse the production. The neologism ‘Imeldific,’ captures her distinctive style, which “connotes grandiosity, campiness, and excess.” Filipino American studies scholars have shown how this aesthetic was part and parcel of her politics, working to facilitate, occlude, and rationalize her dictatorial regime. Christine Bacareza Balance thus questions how Byrne, in his interviews around the concept album and its live performances, insisted upon the separation of arts and politics, dwelling in and reproducing the spectability of Imelda Marcos. Taking up Balance’s critique of Here’s use of “ironic detachment,” Denise Cruz notes “Byrne’s claims to apolitical universality” and that the album “relies on the screen of structural ironies to attenuate its complicated politics.” In addition to concerns about Byrne's intentions, the formal qualities of Here Lies Love as not just a musical, but one that is set to disco club music have been called into question for its appropriateness in remembering this era of brutal violence. How can we understand the relationship of this cultural production to Imelda Marcos’s mode of spectacular politics that relied on aesthetics and cultural excess to sustain brutal politics? (How) can we understand the musical as not merely reproducing this troubling dynamic, but rather offering an alternative way of engaging the relation between culture and politics?

In contemplating these questions, this chapter argues for engaging the musical through discourses of camp aesthetics in order to attend to how the play enacts the aestheticization of politics while simultaneously allowing for its own undoing. Similar to his disavowal of the shoes, Byrne’s insistence that this musical is “not camp,” I argue, hints at the striking intimacy between

the production and campiness. Rather than refute such claims, I am more interested in sitting
with this declaration to explore why such a disavowal is so necessary and why the specter of
campiness persists. Structuring the Western colonial gaze, camp aesthetics enfigures the
Filipino/a body as ‘copies’ whose performances of American culture are not only characterized
by excess and theatricality but also seen as simultaneously imitative and spectacular. It is
through camp aesthetics, I argue, that the musical thematizes the impossibilities of doing justice
to this moment by enacting and negotiating the structures of representation through the formal
mechanisms of an immersive musical. As a musical that putatively portrays both “the rise and
fall of Imelda Marcos” and “the resilience of the Philippine people,” the musical stages camp
aesthetics to demonstrate how the figuration of this individual person comes to have much larger
significance in the contested meanings around “Filipino.” Elaborating on the various effects of
this contested style, I see camp aesthetics figuring multiply in this musical’s contemplation about
Imelda Marcos: how Imelda’s performances rely upon camp aesthetics; how camp serves as a
key interpretative schema shaping Westerners’ reception of this cultural icon; and, lastly, how
the musical mimes the ambivalence of campiness to interrogate its operations and effects.

By attending to campy ambivalences, I argue that Here Lies Love stages Imeldific
enfigurations that not only formally enact the political apparatuses that both enable and obscure
the violences under the Marcos regime but also facilitate a potential awareness and interrogation
of these power structures through the realm of the fun and pleasurable. The production and
marketing of the musical focused in on a distinctly queer camp sensibility to formally enact the
operations by which Imelda Marcos constructed and disseminated a massive branding campaign
that aimed to obscure and sustain the brutal policies under the Marcoses’ regime of Martial Law.
In so doing, it illuminates ways in which cultural productions can map out and critique the
branding practices of state power that deploy camp aesthetics to legislate and obscure its violent policies. First, I trace out the history of U.S. imperialism to explore how its militarized and discursive configurations of the Philippines and Filipino bodies as “unincorporated territories” provide the historical conditions undergirding the production and reception of the Marcos regime as well as how practices of militarized violences can(not) come into view.

**Pacifying the “Unincorporated Territory” of the Philippines**

This section examines the historical conditions that allowed for the United States to transform the Philippines into its primary military outpost in the Asia-Pacific region, inquiring into the discursive and legal maneuver that occluded the archipelago’s material realities as an American colony. The Philippines occupies a central role in scholarly discussions about the transformation of the United States into an imperial power. Arguing against the neglected examination of empire in American Studies, Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease point toward 1898 as a crucial turning point, during which the full conquest of the Western frontier led the United States to look beyond the continental landmass to expand its Manifest Destiny to the Philippines. At the time, Philippine revolutionaries organized to stage a coup against the Spanish empire, which has colonized the islands since the sixteenth century. The United States saw this political instability as an opportunity. Thus, the Spanish American War became a battle between two empires, one trying desperately to hold onto its colonized territories and the other looking to expand its frontier. Less commonly remembered is the extended Philippine-American War (1899-1902) that followed, in which the U.S. army killed more than one million Filipinos and defeated the independence movement led by nationalist Emilio Aguinaldo in order to enable

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annexation.\textsuperscript{230} The resultant compromise, a fractured unincorporation in which the Philippines became both a part of but apart from the U.S. national body politic, installed a juridico-political structure that resonates with and thickens the historical conditions of what scholars commonly raise in terms of “the camp.”

The annexation of the Philippines required innovative discursive and legal maneuvers to justify and recode understandings about its fundamental existence as a colony, antithetical to the self-image of the American nation as a democracy founded on anti-colonialism and self-determination. Through a series of decisions made in the \textit{Insular Cases}, the U.S. Supreme Court debated the means of dealing with the acquisition of territories from the Spanish empire following war: the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. Fundamentally different from other territorial acquisitions outside the continental landmass, Alaska and Hawai‘i, the ambivalence of these new territories stems from their inability to obtain statehood. As Mae Ngai observes: “The American acquisition of the former Spanish colonies thus required a break with the tradition of incorporation and its promise of statehood. It meant expanding American sovereignty over territories with permanently unequal state that is to say, it meant establishing colonies.”\textsuperscript{231} In this way, the decisions in the \textit{Insular Cases} are a notable departure from the logic set forth from the Northwest Ordinance of 1798, which established that newly occupied territories will ultimately become incorporated as states of the nation, pending approval from Congress. Instead, ineligible for the teleological development toward statehood, the unincorporated territories are suspended in a provisional nature, their exact relationship to the U.S. nation-state and citizenship unclear.

\textsuperscript{230} Espiritu, \textit{Body Counts}, 27.
The establishment of the legal nomenclature “unincorporated territory,” encamped this “permanently unequal state” by guaranteeing unfettered access of the Philippines for U.S. economic and military interests while denying Filipinos the political and civil rights of citizens. Due to the lack of provisions in the Constitution regarding the occupation and annexation of new territories, the *Insular Cases* provided a platform for reinterpreting and adding new legal provisions to rationalize the annexation of these territories as well as the ineligibility of their inhabitants to enjoy the provisions and rights guaranteed to U.S. citizens. As Bartholomew H. Sparrow notes: “In short, the inhabitants of the US territories enjoy—suffer?—a political status between that of citizens of the states and foreign nationals. They occupy not only a murky position in the US Constitution…but also an uncomfortable and vulnerable position.”²³² It is precisely due to the juridico-political structures underwriting this murky position that Charles R. Venator Santiago argues that the territorial jurisprudence in the *Insular Cases* illuminates crucial yet neglected historical antecedents to the state of exception and the camp. These historical antecedents, Santiago importantly argues, emphasize the settler colonialist and imperialist logics driving the state of exception, which has been constitutive to the projects of nation-building for the United States as it acquires new territories while suspending rights and incorporation of racial Others that inhabit these lands.²³³

²³³ Santiago argues that we may also see the state of exception at play in the occupied territories under the Northwest Ordinance insofar as the settlers enjoyed civil rights but were unable to enjoy national political rights until Congress officially granted status of statehood. Some territories lingered in this indeterminate status for decades before Congress officially approved statehood. Charles R. Venator Santiago, “From the Insular Cases to Camp X-Ray: Agamben’s State of Exception and United States Territorial Law,” *Studies in Law, Politics and Society* 39 (2006): 30–31.
This state of provisionality of the Philippines as a camp for the United States relied upon the use of actual camp formations, spatial structures of containment, to maintain its imperial structure. In 1901, Brigadier General J. Franklin Bell’s implementation of a concentration order in the Batangas province targeted the civilians within a larger extended military campaign for “pacification.” As part of its counterinsurgency measures against Filipino revolutionary leaders, the U.S. officers implemented camps as “concentration zones” for civilians, putatively as a form of protection against these leaders, deemed as guerilla warfare bandits, but also a means of preventing the use of civilian support toward the insurrection efforts. These camps are part of a larger transformation in warfare that mixes military action with putative humanitarianism and humane treatment. The use of the concentration camps signaled a key effort for the U.S. army to frame its military intervention in the Philippines based on “the idea that imperial policing should be humane, set against practices of warfare that are anything but. This constant seesawing between the idea of violently deterring the civilian from supporting the insurgents and the notion that these civilians would be best persuaded to disavow the insurgents is vastly different from the nineteenth-century counterinsurgencies.”

These states of provisionality recode military interest as humanitarian effort and concern with civilian safety. Yet, the camps’ makeshift nature and lack of provisions led to tens of thousands of deaths due to disease and lack of nutrition. The displacement and high rates of deaths belie the American army’s claims of benevolence through public programs such as the building of roads and public infrastructures. As Vernadette Gonzalez trenchantly notes: “In erecting and gifting infrastructures of development American imperialism in effect substitutes a narrative of benevolent paternalism for a history of expansion,

dispossession, and genocide.” 236 The “benevolent paternalism” evidenced through the simultaneous constructions of these architectures of destruction and development further points to a decisive shift toward what Laleh Khalili calls “liberal counterinsurgency,” in which military actions and warfare have been increasingly recoded in terms of humanitarianism. 237 Vicente L. Rafael further notes this conjoining of murder with altruism: “Intervention was understood, in official accounts, as an altruistic act motivated by America[’s] concern for the natives’ welfare on the part of the United States. U.S. troops did not shoot Filipinos to kill them but to save them from killing one another.” 238

These maneuvers spoke to the difficulties that the United States needed to overcome in order to justify its protracted war for the Philippines. In terms of appeasing popular national opinion, a case had to be made for entering the war in the first place. In a famous and oft-quoted interview, William McKinley expresses what many note as the civilizationist rhetoric of the white man’s burden, which recodes imperialist ventures as humanitarian gestures of folding nations and peoples within the domain of Western modernity: “that we could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government—and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain’s was; and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them.” 239

Arguing that U.S. colonialism of the Philippines ultimately disavowed an ideology of Anglo-

237 Khalili, Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies, 3.
Saxonism, which connected and justified both British and American imperialist ventures based on a notion of racial superiority, Paul Kramer notes that such rhetoric framed race in terms of *culture*, rather than blood, and points toward the possibility that colonial natives might approximate the learnings of a putatively superior Western culture: “Americans had a mission to teach the world how to govern ‘dependencies’ on the basis of unprecedented selflessness, uplift, benevolence, assimilation, and the promise of eventual self-government.”

To further deflect claims of imperialist intervention, the United States needed to strip recognition of the Philippines as a sovereign nation. Racial difference and the terms of tribalism, Mae Ngai argues, facilitated this process. “[C]asting Filipinos as ‘tribal’ was essential because it denied them the status of nationhood. ‘Denationalizing’ the Philippines justified annexation and cast the American mission as benevolence—the United States had not denied national self-determination because no nation existed.” American claims regarding Filipinos’ incapacity for self-rule insidiously suppressed their anti-colonial revolution for political self-determination. These configurations of the Philippines as tribal consolidate what Allan Isaac terms the American Tropics, which “constitute a set of controlling metaphors or tropes of imperial tutelage and containment that separate the primitive from the civilized, chaos from order, property from the proper.” Contemporarily, we see how US occupation of the Philippines depends upon reproducing mutual co-constitution of tourism and militarism, whereby the former provides the ideological condition of possibility and structures of desire for securing militarism.

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243 Gonzalez, *Securing Paradise*. 
In both cases, U.S. military presence and efforts are framed as protection for the political, economic, and national security of the Philippines. During the Philippine-American war, the deadly use of concentration camps was key to the destruction and containment of Filipino revolutionaries, paving the way for the United States to establish multiple military bases throughout the Philippines. Naturalizing the imperialist presence of the United States, the camps were coded as sites of protection for civilians, with the revolutionaries as the main source of violence and the U.S. army as the key protector for Philippine national security. Meanwhile, the numerous existing army posts were transformed, with new ones created, decades later with the 1947 Military Bases Agreement. While the agreement was signed a year after the Philippines was granted independence, the terms of the agreement were drafted while the Philippines was still a colony of the United States. Among the twenty-three air and naval bases, the Clark Air Force Base and the Subic Naval Bases remained central to the Cold War. These military bases served as storage for weapons, a way station in the Pacific for refueling U.S. vessels with necessary supplies, training facilities for soldiers, sites for weapons testing, and a launching pad for attacks. The Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951 further secured U.S. military control of the Philippines with its terms of joint defense between the two countries given any external attacks. In 1998, the Visiting Forces Agreement allowed U.S. troops to continue conducting military exercises and training in the Philippines. As Mark Padlan observes: “The VFA practically turns the entire Philippines into one big military base.” The terms of the agreement also allow for

unfettered entry of U.S. troops into the Philippines and states that any crimes committed by U.S. military personnel would be under U.S. rather than Philippine jurisdiction. Such militarized presence works to continually undermine Philippine sovereignty, ensnaring it within the camp structure of “unincorporated territory” from histories of U.S. imperialism. Meanwhile, new iterations of Filipinos both draw upon while disavowing the colonial legacies that enfigure them as “Little Brown Brothers” in order to maintain these structures that reproduce American political and economic interests. As the next section details, camp aesthetics provides an apt means of uncovering the tensions within such enfigurations.

Campiness in/of “Filipino” Performances: From Little Brown Brothers to Asian Divas

The configuration of the Philippines as a tribe, rather than a nation, subject to the sovereignty of the United States was mediated through the bodies of the Filipino natives. The derogatory term “Little Brown Brother” raises not only the more commonly framed relation of benevolent paternalism, but also a form of affection and homosocial fraternity between the United States and the Philippines, an intimacy that bespeaks aspirations of a potential similarity (brother) in spite of and through difference (of brownness). Thus, the familial relation framing the imperialist structure conveyed a sense of what Vicente Rafael terms “white love.” As Rafael describes: “White love holds out the promise of fathering, as it were, a ‘civilized people’ capable in time of asserting its own character. But it also demands the indefinite submission to a program of discipline and reformation requiring the constant supervision of a sovereign master.

245 Padlan, “U.S. Militarism in the Philippines.”
Conjoining love and discipline, benevolent assimilation was meant to ennable the colonizer as it liberated the colonized. This ideology of white love ensnare the Philippines under the perpetual subordination of the United States through the terms of benevolence and security that sustain the continual dominance of U.S. militarism on the archipelago.

Meanwhile, Allan Isaac observes how the term of ‘unincorporated’ links both the land and the people to “connote the excess assigned by the U.S. nation-state to the culturally secondary and politically dependent state of a state, nation, or people.” This produced excess, which relegates Filipinos as subordinate to the American ideal, opens up the fraught and contested discussions around colonial mimicry, following the seminal work by Homi K. Bhabha. In his two connected essays “The Other Question” and “Of Mimicry and Man,” Bhabha explores the central ambivalence and instability of colonial discourse’s compulsive need to fix the racial Other. The former essay reassesses conventional approaches to “stereotypes” that are premised of judgments of truth and falsity or positive and negative effects. Instead, in emphasizing the ambivalence of stereotypes, he demonstrates the need for constant repetition in ‘fixing’ meaning onto the racialized bodies to produce their difference and how such production is rife with slippages. In a connected manner, the latter essay examines the compulsion for mimicry by the colonized Other, as seen through civilizing missions and colonial educations that cultivate natives to become just like their colonizers. This compulsion is ironically belied by its impossibility as their racial difference render them unable to approximate the colonizer.

Engaging with Bhabha, Allan Isaac observes how the colonial mandate “to mimic a fantastical projection of the American subject” presumes an ideal original American culture that in fact only

coheres around the necessitated construction and disavowal of the Filipino native as copy.\textsuperscript{249} Problematizing the surveillance of the totalizing colonial gaze then, natives can stare back, perform with a difference, and subversively parody the demands for mimicry.\textsuperscript{250} As such, this strand of postcolonial thinking that also deeply engages with postmodernist thought has been taken up widely based on the optimistic possibility of decentering the primacy of the Western gaze.

Irony has been of central importance to these ideas of mimicry, substantiating the idea that natives can be performing one way but with intentions different from the demands of colonial discourse. Irony, as scholars perennially note, is a double-edged sword. Particularly, with its most common understanding as denoting the doing or saying of something while meaning something else, it is often rendered a conservative, ahistorical practice that privileges surface and evacuates depth. Alternatively, in emphasizing this dissonance between surface and depth, appearance and meaning, form and content, irony can also be seen as a productive means for interrogating that which is seemingly evident through a proliferation of possible meanings. Given the increasing popularization of irony in the contemporary era associated with a hipster aesthetic and seen purely as doing or saying something that one does not mean, irony seems also well suited for pure commodification. Thus, Filipino/Americans studies scholars have noted the ways in which discussions of mimicry, along with its corollary associates irony and camp, can unwittingly reinforce assumptions of ontological difference, exaggerate a narrowly defined notion of agency, and flatten the complex historical and continuing structures of (neo)colonialism.

Clarifying on the different uses and effects of irony, Neferti Tadiar cautions: “To be

\textsuperscript{249} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{250} Homi K. Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture} (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).
ironic (a deliberate act) is after all quite different from being in an ironic condition (an unwitting state). The view of ironies of third world existence comes with a long history of delighting in the contradictions that colonials/traditional peoples represent when they bear the trappings of an alien modernity.⁵²¹ In thus further highlighting the ambivalence of irony, Tadiar not only underscores Bhabha’s point about the processes by which mimicry and the impossibility of pure repetition work to reinforce hegemonic colonial discourses but also casts greater doubt on the potential for irony to disrupt and unsettle these forces. In other words, what are the means by which performances can simultaneously “be ironic” while emphasizing “being in an ironic condition”? (How) might such performances illustrate the uses of irony in both delimiting and potentially making possible the dreams of the Filipinos to come through?⁵²² Moreover, what accounts for the continual associations of Filipinos with irony and mimicry? While Bhabha’s theorization of mimicry relates to colonial discourse, the persistence of these tropes around the Philippines begs us to question the transformation of such ideas of colonial mimicry, given the more than one hundred years of U.S. imperialism, within the contemporary era of globalization.

To explore these questions about the transformation of and potential interrogations of irony surrounding the imitative colonial native, I argue for engaging camp aesthetics as both symptomatic and productive of the configuration of the Filipino within U.S. imperial relations. Camp aesthetic raises some of the fraught tensions emblematic of Filipino/America, posed at histories of imperialism and racism as well as the precarious entry into transnational

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⁵²¹ Tadiar, Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order, 2.

⁵²² To be clear, Tadiar is not calling for a wholesale condemnation of or turn away from irony. Instead, she calls attention to “the devastating masculinist implications of ironic critique,” especially when irony reaffirms the boundaries it putatively unsettles, eliding over the contradictions and differences of gender. Instead, following Naomi Schor, she practices a mode of “feminist irony.” See ibid., 265.
circuits of labor, capital, and culture. Yet, campiness pervades discussions around the production and consumption of Filipino performance. In discussing strategies of campiness used by Filipino American artists, Sarita See notes: “‘queer’ in Filipino America denotes a structure of feeling that always is routed through another, usually dominant form or medium.” Such queerness is emblematic of the overdetermined and vexed dominance of U.S. culture in the Philippines as well. Along with neocolonial involvement via economic policies and military bases, Hollywood cinema and U.S. popular culture pervaded the Philippines. The extent to which American popular culture has permeated the Philippines has led to assumptions that Filipinos are purely imitative and lacking in a cultural identity.

Scholars of performance studies, however, have pointed attention how Filipinos, in taking up, playing with, and reworking many of these popular cultural productions speak to crucial ways of inhabiting and highlighting histories of imperialism. Articulating “puro arte,” Lucy Burns notes the various forms of everyday and theatrical performances by which Filipinos ‘put on a show,’ relying on playful, theatrical, and excessive displays of spectacle as modes of resistance. Burns highlights the connection of this generalized style with the cultural practices discussed of Filipino queer subcultures. Filipino/a scholars’ discussions of such practices point to how they both resonate with and fail to align neatly to common understandings of campiness. Tracking the practices of Filipino gay drag queens in New York City, Martin Manalansan examines bakla as a capacious term that exceeds Western binaric terms of sexuality in terms of

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253 She continues: “Characteristic of the ‘well-organized evasiveness’ that defines camp aesthetic, Paraiso’s strategy of indirection is a product of a powerful combination of forces in Filipino American history out of which have emerged the colonial structuring of the family as well as the familial structuring of colonial relationships.” See Sarita Echavez See, *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 106–107.

gay identity to also encompass effeminacy, drag, and mimicry.\(^{255}\) Similarly, in examining transvestism in the Philippines, Rolando Tolentino discusses the practice of *gaya* along the lines of mimicry, following Judith Butler’s analysis of drag and gender performativity.\(^{256}\) Moreover, drawing attention to “the power of appearances,” Fennella Cannell illustrates how performances of glamor and beauty work to appropriate forms of an imagined America that simultaneously illustrates the incongruity between Western wealth and Third World poverty.\(^{257}\) These practices point toward questions of the transnational on multiple levels, in terms of the diasporic linkages between practices of Filipinos in the different sites of the Philippines and the United States as well as how these vernacular practices make use of and negotiate claims of American culture on global modernity.

The complex colonial legacies that shape these cultural hybridities, along with the playful, subversive uses toward which these styles are deployed, are often misunderstood under a Western gaze. To acknowledge these cultural practices within the category of camp aesthetics risks replicating structures of imperialism that exoticize these practices as objects of Filipino cultural difference while evacuating the historical and political conditions from which they emerge. Moreover, to call these practices campy may reinforce accusations of Filipinos as mere ‘copies’ of an originary American culture. In an intriguing reversal of the stance he takes in negotiating nativist and universalist positions by assuming a “certain kind of equivalency” between Western and Filipino sexual categories in his seminal *Philippine Gay Culture*, J. Neil


Garcia posits that the Western practice of camp, with all its attendant associations as postmodern pastiche, is fundamentally unable to capture the historical specificities of kabaklaan. Thus, while entitled “postcolonial camp,” Garcia’s essay is devoted to explicating the risks of this formulation and, arguably, why it cannot exist. He argues that the (mis)recognition of Filipino (performance) as campy leads to a dangerous form of commodification that fetishizes cultural differences based on a queer style.

Yet, this ‘copy,’ the performance of U.S. culture with a difference also affords a means for cultural capital to Filipinos that may allow for their circulation within a global marketplace. The assumption of American popular culture has allowed Filipinos to enter the transnational circuit of labor and capital, as Stephanie Ng discusses of the prevalent labor force of Filipino musical bands traveling and performing internationally. As Ng argues, the desirability for the production and consumption of Filipino performance point toward the means by which the sign of the “Filipino” assumes various meanings and expectations. In part, the desirability, it seems, comes to focus on the ability to approximate forms of Western cultural production with a difference. Moreover, in an era where the bakla is increasingly disavowed as a sense of parochial Filipino pastness that must be consistently disavowed in order to achieve the futurity of Western queerness, Bliss Cua Lim locates specific practices of “folklore as camp” that reinvigorate and reinvest meanings into familiar myths, thereby refusing the designation of pastness while also unsettling any notions of cultural authenticity. In other words, we may

260 For the temporal tensions between kabaklaan and queer, see “The Specter of Kabaklaan,” chap. 3 in Bobby Benedicto, Under Bright Lights: Gay Manila and the Global Scene
understand campiness as a site of contestation within which Filipinos’ affective performances become a means of gaining entry and value within global circuits of capital. In this way, it might highlight what Garcia articulates as “the nonconvergence between neocolonial power’s intentions and the affect of those who receive them—which is to say, between the globalized influence of conventions coming from Western Camp and the creative ways that they are fashioned and refashioned by, in, and as Philippine gay culture.”261 That is, I mime the campy ambivalences around Filipino performance not to evacuate, but rather underscore the fraught conditions of postcoloniality that haunt each iteration and configuration of the Philippines as well as the possibility for critique. I argue that camp aesthetics is symptomatic of this postcolonial condition and potentially productive of something else.

The figure of the “diva,” I submit, tracks these multiple iterations of the “Filipino” in approximating and recycling the terms of queer modernity. In Global Divas, Martin Manalansan demonstrates how Filipino drag queens and gay men rework and recode assumptions of a global queer identity through swardspeak and other vernacular practices that speak to experiences of Filipino cultural specificities, hybrid histories of colonialism, experiences of immigration, and navigating the everyday and public systems of racism and homophobia. He writes: “Prevailing racist assumptions about Asian men and women relegate them to passive, asexual feminine, exotic, or oversexed individuals. Recognizing the parameters by which these Orientalist assumptions operate, Filipino gay men create strategies by which these very boundaries are transgressed, if not reconfigured.”262 These queer performances become a means of rewriting assumptions of colonial imitation and racial excess into spectacular theatricality. As such, the

262 Manalansan IV, Global Divas, 187.
figure of the diva capitalizes on notions of feminine and performative excess. Thus, on one level, campy mimicry speaks to the affective labor of everyday performances of survival enacted by postcolonial Filipino subjects that make use of and rework these dominant ideals of U.S. culture. On another level, campiness also translates to the processes of immaterial labor that seize upon and play with the ‘original’ as a means of gaining mobility within circuits of capital. Campiness points to the various negotiations and tensions between the global and the vernacular in claims to modernity for the Philippines given its histories under colonial and then imperial rule. Campiness mediates not only the enactment and challenge to structures of U.S. imperialism, but also how the entry and dissemination of the “Filipino” into transnational circuits of capital may further complicate, obscure, and commodify the histories and continuing legacies of imperialism.

Yet, how do we attend to queerness and diaspora when commodified into the form of visual spectacle and excess? Between the possibility of resistance and commodification, campiness points toward the insistent need to contextualize uses of aesthetics and cultural spectacle and to query the ends toward which these strategies are used. The anxiety around the politics of camp aesthetics, especially when in relation to the histories and contexts of the Philippines, manifests in the varying responses to Imelda Marcos and her legacy. If campiness speaks to the Western consumption of “Filipino” as a cultural commodity evacuated of historical and political context, Imelda Marcos played a pivotal role in these processes. In light of this, Burns alludes to the ambivalent politics of puro arte when she asks: “If the Marcos dictatorship

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deployed cultural spectacle, the Marcoses’ own version of *puro arte*, to successfully sediment ‘compassionate’ rule, then what were the forms of resistance and opposition against it?”

**Enfiguring the Excesses of the “Imeldific”**

The alignment between Imelda and campiness is addressed both explicitly and implicitly in the scholarly and cultural productions around her. One could observe the frequency with which Imelda Marcos has been performed by men in drag, from RuPaul Drag Race’s season three runner-up Manila Luzon to Andoy Ranay in the production of Jessica Hagedorn’s play *Dogeaters* staged in Manila in 2007. Moreover, discussions of Marcos regularly draw on metaphors of the stage and the theater, framing her as a larger than life diva fallen from grace. The association of Imelda to campiness is not incidental but rather constitutive to her campaign and policies. Explicitly referred to as Ferdinand’s “secret weapon,” Imelda Marcos played a crucial role in securing Ferdinand Marcos’s dictatorial regime, complementing what was framed as his masculine power with a feminine beauty and grace. Moreover, as Ferdinand became increasingly ill toward the latter half of his reign, Imelda assumed a greater role in politics and diplomatic relations.

Taking charge of numerous cultural projects, Imelda’s campaign of “The New Society” focused on beautifying the image of the Philippines, mainly through a number of construction projects of buildings dedicated to culture and the arts. Imelda Marcos framed herself as representative of the Philippines, using her image of beauty to promote the ‘pretty face’ of the country. Through such a conflation, Imelda’s style assumes significance in both the national and international politics of the Philippines. Her distinctive style, captured through the neologism

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265 For more on the latter casting, see ibid., 100–103.
“Imeldific” coined by the press, “connotes grandiosity, campiness, and excess.” Imelda’s political style relies upon the spectacularization of her body that manipulated and exaggerated gendered ideals. On the national level, Imelda’s spectacular politics, as Balance argues, worked through a performative power of affective acts, such as singing and crying in attempting to establish a sense of kinship with the Philippine people. On the international level, Imelda’s image captivated, Caroline Picart suggests, because she was able to approximate cosmopolitan ideals of femininity while retaining and playing with stereotypes of exotic Asian femininity. This “construction of Imelda’s hyperfemininity” resonates with and may be best understood through vernacular practices of bakla. We may register campiness in the production of her style as well through the literal styling of her body. Tolentino observes: “Similar to artists and in the service of national power, Imelda Marcos had a coterie of gay hairstylists, make-up artists, fashion and interior designers that trailed her in social events. This group of gay fashion artists legitimized Imelda’s appearance, being and use of beauty, validating the apotheoses of the conjugal dictatorship.” Thinking alongside discussions by Tinkcom and Steven Cohan of camp in the musicals, we might consider how her entourage provided a form of queer material labor that is both registered and disavowed in the consumption of her excessive aesthetic style. Her style speaks to queerness without queers, as the labor of the latter becomes sublimated into a form of aesthetic distinctness and difference that exudes in her excessiveness. The popularization of the

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266 Tolentino, “National Bodies and Sexualities,” 71.
267 Balance, “Dahil Sa Iyo.”
“bomba star” in the Philippines in the 1960’s, which aestheticized scandal through the woman’s body, Rafael argues, also made Imelda’s body readily available for consumption by the nation.\textsuperscript{271}

Byrne’s musical raises questions about whether camp aesthetics works to not only reproduce Imelda Marcos’ politics but also further commodify her image particularly and the “Filipino” more broadly. There are suspicions about David Byrne's political agenda and the risk of commodifying these histories purely for consumption and entertainment.\textsuperscript{272} Many have called attention to the convoluted history of this production, partially recounted in the opening of the concept album's booklet under the subheading "Prologue, Introduction, Explanation, Why?"

Byrne locates the origin of his project to reading about the extravagance and pageantry of power in the book \textit{The Emperor} and its depiction of Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie. His fascination with these depictions reigned when reading an article about Imelda Marcos and her visits to clubs and penchant for dance. Byrne’s claims clearly position this musical as following in the tradition of the likes of \textit{Evita} (Peron), with whom Marcos was sometimes compared. The cogs turned and he realized that she would be the perfect subject for a musical that centered on club

\textsuperscript{271} Rafael, \textit{White Love}, 133–157.
\textsuperscript{272} This is an urgent concern indeed for the musical and its production can easily be folded into a narrative of the progressive white male savior shedding light upon the horrors of the Third World only to commodify it within the realm of politically conscious art. Indeed, we can see some of this troubling dynamic at play in the commentary around the musical. In the extensive liner notes for the cast album released on May 2014 alongside the reopening of the musical, Oskar Eustis (Artistic Director at The Public Theater) poses David Byrne as a counterpoint to Imelda Marcos. He states that, unlike the celebrity-inducing personality of Marcos, Byrne is humble and modest, disavowing any claim to celebrity status. He writes: “David himself has escaped, in almost miraculous fashion, the pitfalls of contemporary stardom…I came to see his fascination with Imelda as a counter to his own example, a warning of what awaits down the road of celebrity he has so resolutely refused to tread.” The effect of such statements is such that, even if Byrne does not claim this celebrity status (or perhaps precisely because he denies it), others interpellate him as this progressive white cultural producer. While keeping these tendencies in mind, I invite us to bracket the intentions and figure of Byrne from the musical itself in order to explore what other work it might do. David Byrne and Fatboy Slim, \textit{Here Lies Love: A Song Cycle about Imelda Marcos & Estrella Cumpás}. Todo Mundo: WEA International. Originally released in 2010. Liner Notes.
music and disco. Hear the excitement in Byrne’s stream-of-consciousness narrative: “Could one, as if by osmosis, absorb an emotional story, a narrative even, in the course of a night out dancing? Could one bring a ‘story’ and a kind of theater to the disco? Was that possible? If so, wouldn’t that be amazing!”

Through this account, Byrne identifies the various forms upon which it draws—the musical and the disco nightclub scene—and the subject matter of Imelda Marcos as a perfect match. The forms of the musical and disco point toward a distinctly American genealogy of camp. Since Susan Sontag’s infamous “Notes on Camp,” scholars have debated the relationship between the sensibility and queers. Scholars have critiqued Sontag for distancing camp from queers and, in a problem also endemic to scholarly and cultural productions organized around rubrics of ethnic and racial difference, struggled to articulate the constitutive role of queers in camp aesthetics in a non-reductive way. Steven Cohan and Matthew Tinkcom convincingly establish a link between conventions of the musical characteristically seen as campy—emotional excess, visual spectacle, exaggerated femininity and heterosexuality, longing—and the industrial conditions of production. Particularly, they focus on the MGM film musical, examining how Vicente Minnelli and the queer employees he recruited under the Freed unit were central to infusing film musicals with a distinctly camp sensibility in the late 1940’s. This sensibility, recognizable to closeted queer subcultures at the time, also allowed for a fan base to coalesce.

\[273\] He did a year of research into materials and ultimately produced a concept album with Fatboy Slim that was mostly performed by white women singers. This concept album was performed live several times in Carnegie Hall and the musical drew from many of these songs. Some of the songs were cut and lyrics were revised. The most notable additions of songs in the musical are those performed by Aquino and the final song of the People Power Revolution. As told through this prologue, Byrne expresses interest not so much in the effects of the Marcos regime, but the motivation and exercise of power by Imelda Marcos. Perhaps gaining a better sense of skepticism around his intentions, Byrne goes to great lengths to supplement the songs with a plethora of textual materials.
around the films, as theatre did. And yet, this very same form that provided modes of queer community and survival via camp are also deeply enmeshed in racist practices of visualizing the Other, as long histories of minstrelsy, Blackface, and Yellowface elucidate.

Just as the film musical did, the disco later served to coalesce and gather queers. As Tim Lawrence notes, the disco became an open space that allowed for queers and others to experience democratic ways of inhabiting space and interacting rhythmically with other bodies as the emerging dance culture shifted away from the traditional one-on-one opposite-sex pairing of dance partners. Capitalizing on the popularity of the disco, nightclubs proliferated, often separately serving niche clienteles, and increasingly catered to the wealthy, high elite, excluding many queers and working class individuals. Disco ultimately came to be condemned, highly associated with hedonism and deviancy of queers. The “queerness” of camp aesthetics then points to both the possibility of a resistant practice of survival as well as the commodification of difference that become especially vexed in consideration contexts of race and empire.

With the union between the musical set as a disco nightclub and the subject matter of Imelda Marcos and the Philippine people, the divergent genealogies of campiness come together in vexed ways in Here Lies Love, which capitalizes on this queerness as the disco becomes the medium for experiencing, as if by osmosis, ‘the rise and fall of Imelda Marcos.’ In its marketing posters—awash in rainbow colors—the musical appropriates the capital of political rhetoric, advertising the production as “a revolutionary experience” and exclaiming “power to the party!” Thus, in what ways does the musical (re)produce a circulation of Filipino-ness that buttresses the interests of capital? How might it obscure campiness as a mode of cultural hybridity that indexes

274 See Cohan, Incongruous Entertainment; Tinkcom, Working like a Homosexual.
the enactment of and resistance to histories of colonialism and US imperialism? Insofar as the
production, circulation, and consumption of Imelda’s image overdetermine understandings about
the “Filipino,” destabilizing configurations of the Imeldific is crucial to any possible anti-
imperialist critique of the Marcoses. While the musical purports to allow for an immersion and
participation into the ‘Filipino’ experience of the Marcos’ regime, it uses the formal mechanisms
of the immersive musical to illuminate the political structure of spectacle Imelda Marcos
enacted. Infusing both her image and the larger structuring post/colonial conditions of U.S.-
Philippine relations, camp aesthetics remains a necessary point of contention for
Filipino/American performance. Working through spectacle, Here Lies Love uses campiness to
stage the conflicting grounds between cultures of and cultures against Martial Law.276

Experiencing “The Rise and Fall of Imelda Marcos”

The formal elements of Here Lies Love as an immersive musical allegorize the
problematic of re-presenting history. At The Public Theater, one ascends several flights of stairs
into a dance club with the neon sign “Club Millennium” hanging above the entrance. Upon
entering, one sees a family portrait of the Marcoses projected onto the walls, staring over
attendees. The disco ball shines overhead and at the center of the floor is what will become the
stage. Before the action begins, this stage serves as a gathering place for audience-participants,
like a table at the bar. Waiting for something to happen, they chat in anticipation and bob to the
beat of the music, following the lead of the multiple ushers who—dressed in bright pink
jumpsuits—are strategically placed around the venue. They too are bobbing, shifting between

276 Here, I am drawing on Burns’ differentiation between “cultures of/for Martial Law” and
“cultures against Martial Law.” See Burns, Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire, 80–
105.
fellow audience members and instructors who militaristically regulate the flow of bodies along with the transformation of the platforms.\textsuperscript{277}

Through the trafficking, interpellation, and regulation of these bodies, the production beckons participants to negotiate the constitution of the “Filipino.” At the very beginning, the disco jockey provides us with rules that further contemplate the audience members’ role in producing a ‘Filipino experience.’ He states: “We want to give you an experience of the Philippines, from every angle—360.” The venue becomes the space through which audience-participants both produce and consume this all-around experience of the Philippines. And so they follow the DJ’s instruction, which coordinates the movement of these peoples, who are not merely immersed in the theatrical stage, but actively part of shaping the forms that this theatrical world assumes.

The staging draws upon the putatively democratic participation that immersion affords in order to formally enact Imelda’s mode of politics reliant on spectacle. Spectacle has been theorized as the processes by which visual and musical elements combine to create overwhelming sensory experiences that rouse forms of patriotic identification with the ruling party and, in the process, transform the people into passive spectators rather than active participants in politics. In turn, these aesthetic practices turn the populace into a complicit audience that passively witnesses the dictatorial power that culminates in extraordinary violence.\textsuperscript{278} Immersed in the re-staging of Marcos’ spectacle, the ambivalent role of the audience-participant might be further nuanced through the formulation of the “spect-actor.”\textsuperscript{279}

\textsuperscript{277} Seating is also available for spectators on a second level, which affords a more detached view of the action that would undoubtedly alter the spectatorial experience.

\textsuperscript{278} Guy Debord, \textit{The Society of the Spectacle} (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

articulating the “spect-actor,” Augusto Boal imagines a radically altered dynamic wherein the theater transforms spectators into actors who shape what happens on stage. The immersive musical brings into relief the ambivalence of the “spect-actor” for the form is actually very circumscribed even though it makes one feel democratic and agential in determining the narrative of the production. Yet, insofar as the production illuminates the very mechanisms of control, it holds a potential for spect-actors to become critically aware of the apparatuses of power.

Each iteration of *Here Lies Love* is a singular moment that participates in remembering the Marcoses’ legacy. Audience-participants are both witnesses and participants in Imelda’s rise to power, encountering Imelda as she wants to be seen and remembered. The formal elements of the production are also the technologies of power by which she manages her image. The production uses mixed media, from a roaming camera that projects the filmed image onto the walls, to archival materials, to audio recordings of Ferdinand Marcos. Intensified through the DJ as a figure of power, these media all grant a sense of democratic participation that in fact reproduces the Marcoses’ power. Josephine Machon thus reminds us: “Where an event is wholly immersive the audience-immersant is always fundamentally complicit within the concept, content and form of the work.”

Accordingly, this musical renders the individual viewer-participant as simultaneously a passive observer and an active participant to the transformation of the stage. This individual is culpable yet guiltless in that she or he inherently has a relationship to the formation of this body politic but the very existence of this relationship might not be one of her or his own choosing or awareness. In such a manner, the audience participates in the un/making of the body politic as well as how the Marcoses’ role is remembered and represented.

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They experience the processes by which politics works through aesthetics in sweeping up the masses, as the actors of Imelda, Marcos, and Aquino each interpellate the masses for their individual causes through song.

Enacting the Marcoses’ apparatus of power, the production simultaneously elucidates how structures of historical representation mediate the ways in which we apprehend this moment. Partaking in immersion leads to an uneasy spatiotemporal tension as the ‘here and now’ becomes immersed into the then and there of the Philippines, bookended temporally by ‘the rise and fall of Imelda Marcos.’ The musical plays with this tension with the opening number “American Troglodyte,” which features the entire cast minus Imelda in sleek leather and sunglasses. Prefaced by the DJ introducing karaoke as a Filipino invention, the number seemingly substantiates a cultural hierarchy whereby Filipinos consume and imitate American forms. Bopping along, audience members consume this putatively derivative Filipino cultural difference. On the surface, the number serves as an ode to American consumer culture. Yet, a twist occurs in the last line: “Americans are livin’ like troglodytes.” This line reverses American culture as the apex for modern globality, indicting Americans for these consumerist practices. Serving no particular function to the plot, this number instead immerses the audience-participants and foregrounds questions about both the relationship of U.S. capitalism on the Philippines and the subject position of the viewers as Americans. This framing facilitates their immersion in the diegetic world, while illuminating the conditions that mediate this immersion. As “American Troglodyte” comes to a close, the walls on either side of venue display years traveling back in time, transporting the audience elsewhere. The countdown stops at “Tacloban, Philippines 1946.” Imelda, in a plain dress appears seated, her face downcast.
Starting off with the title song, the character Imelda is not yet rich or famous. Instead, what we get is a presumably anterior moment of the political figure she would become, the beginning of a rags-to-riches arc for a common young woman. Reflecting on her sad state, “Imelda” sings: “The most important things are love and beauty. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor.” Used to reassure herself, these lyrics forecast the privileging of style over economic security that will ground her ideology of love. She sings: “To prosper and to fly, a basic human right. The feeling in your heart that you're secure.” Feeling secure is the priority here, regardless of whether or not one has the conditions of security to sustain one’s livelihood. Significantly, this song is sung with Estrella, her caretaker and foil to her narrative development. As Imelda rises to power, her ultimate abandonment of Estrella underscores the disconnect between professed love and material support. The song stages the theatre as the space for examining the very production of this feeling of security in her ideology of love. Prior to the chorus, Imelda asks: “Is it a sin to love too much? / Is it a sin to care? / I do it all for you / How can it be unfair?” These rhetorical questions frame her selfless commitment of love as self-evident common-sense, rendering any possible critiques irrational and unjustified. Exemplifying her ideology of love, these inquiries resemble a “non-performative” commitment. What the non-performative suggests is not that a statement does not do anything or that it does not have its intended effect. Rather the utterance about a commitment—in this case, toward love—is one that is not followed by material actions that actualize this commitment.

It relies instead on repeated utterances that manifest through Imelda’s affective labor of performing love. With lyrics drawn directly from Imelda Marcos following her exile, Imelda the character sings with excitement: “I know that when my number’s up / When I am called by God

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above / Don't have my name inscribed into the stone / Just say: / Here lies love.” As the chorus continues, each repetition of the line “here lies love” further detaches the “here” from the symbol of her imagined future tombstone. The performative utterance of “here lies love” effectively effects the ‘here-ness’ of love whether or not it actually exists. Meanwhile, the nightclub as theatre becomes this ‘here’ as Imelda interpellates the audience-participants as both evidence of and witness to her love. Inhabiting the multiplicity of this ‘here,’ they enact the bodies that installed her into power during her reign and the bodies that must make sense of her legacy now in the present.

**Campy Romances**

Given that Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos promoted a mythic image of national romance based on their conjugal union of masculine strength and feminine beauty, the form of the musical seems especially well suited for teasing out this operation for its conventional focus on achievement of heterosexual union. Insofar as musicals stage the trials and tribulations leading to such a union, heteronormativity is staged to a campy excess that beckons us to consider its privileging and desirability. This excess plays out in Imelda’s profession of love—both toward romantic partners and toward the Filipino peoples. Imelda’s ideology of love and the politics it indexes is staged both on the level of the interpersonal and the national. In keeping with her self-presentation, the progression of the musical stages Imelda as a self-proclaimed martyr who sacrifices herself and ideals of romantic love for her greater love of the nation.

The contradictions within her ideology of love suggests two different approaches to material support, which operates throughout the musical as the structural antagonism among a

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number of narrative doubles and parallels. In addition to Estrella as foil, this antagonism is depicted through Imelda’s choice of romantic partners between Ferdinand Marcos and Benigno Aquino, Jr. (“Ninoy”). Although individualizing this problem onto Imelda, the melodramatic romance plot also elucidates two radically different understandings about the relationship between the state and its peoples. Specifically, in conjunction with Ferdinand Marcos, Imelda’s ideology of love transforms into a destructive form of state policy. This policy manifests a campy romance that prioritizes public relations and a form of branding that professes love for its people, which does not in fact translate into material terms of security and protection.

In contrast, first introduced as a candidate for the senate, Aquino directly follows with “Child of the Philippines,” which serves as a counterpoint to Imelda's non-performative love by vowing to work on behalf of the people. Campaigning to become a senator, he declares: “We have waiting so long—a change has to come soon / And if you put me in charge— Well that's what I would do.” He speaks of dreams, the conviction that “you know that those miracles…they might—-come true,” which seems especially romanticized as Imelda joins into the song as his romantic pair. As the song concludes, however, he directly ties this nationalist sentiment with the materialization of tenable resources, stating: “I think they can come true. We can educate our people. We can unionize the workers. We can give our people a break.” This emphasis on the need for material resources and protection draws the line between Imelda and Aquino, both romantically and politically. This song proceeds into “Opposites Attraction,” a duet that signals both the contradiction and the resolution between the two contrasting visions offered in “Here” and “Child.” While Imelda insists that these two opposing views compel their romantic attraction, her words devalue his position, aiming to absolve it into her own: “I say—ev’ryone needs love- and to love in return / But you say--- you've got to change the world- well that's /
alright / & I say--- no-one lives by bread- bread alone / but You say- people got to have a home-
that’s what you say.” Imelda dismisses Aquino’s vision as too idealistic and too impractical.
Aquino disagrees and instead posits that Imelda does not account for material needs: “You say-
you say that love is all- is all we need / But I say- ooh girl--- we're living in a world- a world so
real.” Understanding that Imelda’s vision is detached from the real, Aquino separates from
Imelda, suggesting a parting of ways between the ideology of love and a platform for
redistributive social economic justice central to his politics.

In contrast, the romance that ensues between Imelda and Ferdinand as the glamorous ‘it’
couple becomes integral to the construction of a fantasy of state love. We are introduced to
Ferdinand Marcos who also runs for the Senate, but under the guise of a World War II hero. A
crew with a roaming camera projects his image onto the screens of the walls, as if a direct
newscast. Marcos aims to sway people to his campaign and Imelda seems to be the answer: “It's
a winning combination / If a lady understands…that the / King and the Queen of Hearts / Could
be a perfect hand.” Together, they constitute “the perfect hand” and their quick marriage only
fortifies their image. As they strut in bathing suits on their “Sugartime Baby” honeymoon in
front of the fawning paparazzi, a press attaché notes: “What a picture they make…And the whole
world can see / They're our Jackie and John.” This invocation of the Kennedy’s draws parallels
to U.S. politics to underscore the primacy of image and popularity to political favor. Imelda’s
work in cultivating an image of glamor, benevolence, and love represents a gendered and
sexualized affective labor that constructs an image of care and love under a glamorous,
spectacular veneer. This feminized labor in turn ensures that the ideology of love can secure
hegemony through not just coercion but also consent. As demonstrated during a song set during
the campaign, Imelda asks: “Don't you agree? Agree with me / Don't you agree? Don't you
agree?” The insertion of “agree with me” between the repetition of the questions function much like the rhetorical questions in the song of “Here Lies Love,” transforming into an imperative that you must ‘agree with me.’ When the DJ announces that Ferdinand Marcos has won the election, the songs “Pretty Face” and “Don’t You Agree” become mashed together, pointing to the ways in which the cultural efforts to beautify the Philippines through the “pretty face” of Marcos consolidated the consensus of their policies.

The Spectacular Un/Making of “The Fabulous One”

Camp provides us with a way of understanding this incongruous juxtaposition between proclaimed love and lack of material support expressed through her non-performative commitment in thinking about the relationship between the state and its peoples. Her marriage to senator turned president Ferdinand Marcos signals her transformation into “Imelda” as a cultural icon and First Lady, which is encapsulated in a moment of campy excess. Halfway through the musical, in a spectacular reveal, Imelda removes her trench coat, uncovering a flashy dance dress made of golden sequins. She proceeds to sway her body flamboyantly, among half naked club-goers dressed as if attending a hedonistic masquerade party. “Dancing Together” depicts Imelda's penchant for frequenting nightclubs, such as the famous Studio 54. The activity of “dancing” brings her into an elite circle of cosmopolitan American public figures. This moment beckons us to inquire into the means by which the circulation and popularization of Imelda rely upon camp aesthetics—both as a result of her performance and of modes of interpreting her. This campiness sets up the later song “Please Don’t” and provides the ground for how she imagines conducting international diplomatic relations. Pleas of “Please Don’t” dismiss valid critiques of the Marcoses made by political opposition and student protesters as attempts to sully the image
of the Philippines to the international community. Hence, Imelda forges friendships with political figures as a way of diverting their attention away from the systemic violence under their regime.

Directly following “Dancing,” Aquino sings “The Fabulous One (I’m a Risin’),” which embodies a voice of dissent against the corruption of the Marcoses’ regime. The juxtaposition between the two numbers illuminates how camp aesthetics varyingly works to secure and critique state power. In the first number, the audience members relish in Imelda’s reveal, cheering her on in this moment of ascent from her modest origins by literally “Dancing Together” with her. “Fabulous,” however, presents the first moment in which the audience members are informed of the rampant corruption under the glamor. Aquino sings: “Out ev’ry night in New York and Paris / Champagne and dancing – while back here at home People barely surviving – they’re living in shanties– but the party goes on!” In this song framed as a “speech to the Senate,” Aquino shifts back and forth in juxtaposing Imelda’s excessive extravagance and the realities of poverty on the streets. Projected onto the walls are images of emaciated, poor citizens in shantytowns. The specter of Imelda eerily haunts these images as the actress slowly walks down the stage, spinning around in a fur coat with a martini in her hand. Like the ironic vocal inflection Aquino gives in singing “The Fabulous One,” this display emphasizes the violent consequences of Imelda’s campy excess. In addition to the juxtaposition between her singular overly adorned body to the multiple emaciated bodies of the masses, the song points toward how this registers in the very architectural structures of the Philippines. Constructing an “edifice complex,” Marcos lavishly poured funds into constructing a number of buildings and

Campiness registers the stark contrast between these “faces” of the Philippines and in Imelda’s strenuous efforts to conceal such differentiation by imposing her “pretty face” as representative of the country. The modernist aspiration in Imelda’s “war of beautification,” Bobby Benedicto forcibly argues, works in tandem with a queer logic of constant self-improvement and self-transformation: “Imelda’s vague, rags-to-riches personal history legitimated her role in reshaping the city by turning her into an embodiment of possibility and transformation, of overcoming or rewriting the past. It has also made her, like the buildings she brought into being (and like the \textit{bakla}), a figure that elicits contradictory sentiments and feelings, an object of both derision and admiration.”\footnote{Bobby Benedicto, “The Queer Afterlife of the Postcolonial City: (Trans)gender Performance and the War of Beautification,” \textit{Antipode} 47, no. 3 (2015): 593.} In this way, the contrast of these two songs and their images in the musical highlight the continuity between Imelda’s self-actualization with her campy reveal and the rampant construction of building complexes. The specter for Imelda’s body spinning amid the imagery of the shantytowns elicits sentiments of ambivalence in the spectators by underscoring the material conditions of death and deterioration underwriting her ascent. Moreover, it demonstrates that these structures simultaneously demand the production of displaced bodies and shantytowns. The vast rates of urban development under the Marcos regime displaced large number of Filipinos from their homes. Despite intentions that they would serve as a labor force for the cities, and especially for building projects, their existence in slums speaks to the failure in such intentions as the cities are unable to fully absorb these incoming
migrants. “The Fabulous One” borrows from the very terms of camp to question and critique the disconnect between form and content, professed love and material neglect. As we bear witness to these images, Aquino asks us to contemplate the role that cultural productions such as this one play in fortifying Imelda’s image: “& I have risen at the risk of her fury / While a monument rises - for The Fabulous One.” In addition to critiquing Imelda’s excess, indexed by the moniker “the fabulous one,” he calls on the audience members to “rise up,” reversing the audience’s earlier identifications with and pleasure in Imelda’s rise. In the process, this protest song conjures a sense of the Filipino body politic that resists the Marcoses’ empty rhetoric of love and instead demands justice. This political opposition anticipates how his assassination foments the mass uprising of the people in the nonviolent People Power Revolution that overthrew the Marcoses.

These antagonisms frame the drastically more serious tone of the last third of the musical that follow the Martial Law era. The musical stages the disappearance of actors from the stage as a way of indicating the violent means by which the Marcoses detained, eliminated, and murdered those who rebelled. Actors in riot gear storm the stage to forcibly beat and drag away portrayed protestors. Moreover, Estrella screams as Imelda signals for her two bodyguards to drag her away, following a televised interview in which Estrella reveals the humble origins of Imelda. After the portrayal of protests, the venue turns dark, as nothing but the voice of Ferdinand Marcos resounds with his imposition of Martial Law through Order 1081. Such announcement replicates the actual event, during which the government overtook all television and radio stations. Framing protestors as terrorists unleashing violence, the declaration of Martial Law allowed Marcos to claim emergency powers, suspending habeas corpus and sanctioning the

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285 Benedicto, “The Queer Afterlife of the Postcolonial City”; see chap. 2 in Tadiar, Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order.
forms of censorship, imprisonment, and torture that had already been taking place. As Albert Celoza notes, Marcos further went out of his way to legitimize his regime and the increase in power by not only reinterpreting and imposing new legal measures, but also including (sham) elections to provide a semblance of democracy under Martial Law. Furthermore, American support legitimated the Marcos regime. The United States government and the Marcos regime maintained a strong partnership throughout his reign, whereby the latter provided military and economic aid in exchange for Marcos’s support of U.S. interests in maintaining the military bases, vital during the Viet Nam War and the Cold War. Given the centrality of the Philippines, the United States heralded Marcos’s regime for upholding a democratic nation amid other nations falling to Communism throughout Asia. Meanwhile, although well known, the blatant human rights and political abuses rampant under the period of imposed Martial Law largely remained unchallenged by the United States.286

The song “Order 1081” includes not only the specific orders outlined in the proclamation but also critiques of the logic of the proclamation through Aquino’s brief monologues spoken between the sung verses. He states: “The tragic bombing in Plaza Miranda almost wiped out the entire Liberal party...and yet ...Mr. Marcos is implying that the Liberals bombed themselves!! And he is using THIS as an excuse to gag and arrest them.” This number transitions into the imprisonment of Aquino, reflective of the many opposition leaders who were silenced, tortured, and disappeared by the Marcos regime. These staged events make unconvincing what is portrayed as Imelda’s psychological fracturing following the reveal of Ferdinand’s adultery. Nor does her declaration that she is the “Star and Slave” of the Philippines elicit sympathy. Instead, the musical highlights the sharp contrast between her stated intentions and the grave violence

under her rule. The impossibility of sympathy for Imelda is solidified with the portrayed
detention and assassination of Aquino, as audience members partake in witnessing his funeral
procession. The mourning channels into mass public anger and uprising as The People Power
Revolution against the Marcoses rouses the audiences.

By the conclusion of the musical, the question Imelda asks in response to these
protesters—“Why Don’t You Love Me?” —can only be viewed as melodramatic excess, campy
and laughable in its absurd disconnect with reality. The very asking of this question signals that
the collective voices of the people cannot be heard. Imelda Marcos appears atop a stairwell, as if
a balcony, looking down at the protesting people with an expression of clear anger. As the
musical transitions into the number, tension builds in a stare down, with the staccato striking of
piano cords. This tension is undercut when, in singing these words, the actress turns her palms
upward, contorts her face into an exaggerated pout, and assumes a notably whiny tone. The
campiness produced through both the content and performance of this question invokes laughter
from the audience. Simultaneously, this song stages competing claims of love. Sung by Estrella,
“Why Don’t You Love Me?” demands a vision of love that is not detached from the material.
Estrella’s scream, along with Aquino’s ecstatic shout after his calls to “rise up,” are moments of
radical dissensus, cries from the people breaking through Imelda’s image-machine. Others join in
this cry, symbolizing “the people,” who, rather than being representative of the body politic,
perform what Jacques Rancière “the part of those who have no part,” a group with grievances
who are not counted for. The seemingly irreverent characteristics of camp aesthetics stage
these structural antagonisms and the conditions of (im)possibility for the bodies and the voices of
the people to appear within and against the dominance of Imeldific figurations.

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New York: Continuum, 2010), 60.
This possibility manifests in the concluding song “God Draws Straight,” which embodies the voice of the revolution. After “Why Don’t You Love Me?” the entire venue is cast in a glaring white light as the sound of helicopters are heard. Projected on the screen, barely visible due to the light, is the headline that the Marcoses have been safely removed to the United States following the revolution. This transition is reflected in the transformation of the space. All the technological means responsible for sustaining Imelda’s image are stripped away. The entire space is lit with white lighting without gels. The actress playing Imelda makes a concerted move of removing her earplugs and microphone to tell the audience that the song draws on actual testimonies from the Philippine people after the revolution. As a performance of unmediated authenticity, “God” acoustically strips away the dance music, suggesting that the ‘fall’ of Imelda Marcos requires a breaking through of the cultural technologies that (re)produce her image of love. Significantly, the main singer holding the guitar also plays the disco jockey. Formerly the mouthpiece of the regime, he is now the voice for the revolution. This decision demonstrates the capacity for seizing upon the very mechanisms of the Marcoses.

Conclusion

*Here Lies Love* and its surrounding debates invites us to contemplate the persistence of Orientalism in shaping the conditions of production, dissemination, and reception of cultural productions within Asian diasporas. It raises questions about the risks of well-intentioned depictions of historical violence elsewhere aestheticized and commodified with the capitalist demands of (Off)Broadway. As Deborah Wong reminds us: “The risk of reinscription, appropriation, or orientalist misreading is ever present in Asian American performance; the possibility of empowerment stands side by side with the susceptible audience that consumes with
the greedy expectation of orientalist pleasure and is inevitably gratified.” Understanding commodification as a structuring condition for cultural productions, we might consider what modes of critique are possible within spaces of complicity. As *Here Lies Love* highlights the mode of spectacle and politics through which the Marcoses consolidated their dictatorial regime, we may interrogate how a focus on Imeldific figurations forecloses other possible examinations. Neferti Tadiar critiques how scholarship that focuses on irony as either depoliticizing spectacle or transgressive mimicry renders impossible the Philippine peoples’ dreams, which are always subordinated to the hegemonic forces of U.S. culture. The fixation on Imelda Marcos and her image in relation to irony speaks to the success of her efforts. It is fitting that *Here* ends not with “God Draws Straight,” but instead the reprised feel-good version of “Here Lies Love.” This jarring return, over the song of revolution, underscores her image’s dominance and the persistent forgetting of Martial Law and postcolonial histories.

In closing, we might return once again to the question of ethics and what it means to witness and consume historical violence. Scott Magelssen astutely asks: “Does an event or attraction that purports to witness the suffering of a disenfranchised group commit double violence by catering mostly to white leisure-class tourists, erasing the cultural differences that instigated the initial suffering and affirming the hegemon’s desire to appropriate the traumatic memory for questionable gain (or to soothe its own guilty conscience)?” The varying responses from audience-participants after the show speak to these uncertainties. In attending this production, I have heard mixed responses, from enthusiastic declarations of “that was fun!”

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289 See Tadiar, *Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order*.
to suggestions that there was something unsettling about the experience. Still others have told me that the show motivated them to further research into Imelda Marcos and the Martial Law. Still, perhaps we can imagine alternative responses to the musical, potential counterperformances from the audience-viewers that mirror the outrage from Ninoy and Estrella in the musical. The perception of moments and the configuration of Imelda Marcos as campy does not produce any straightforward response from the audience. Disaffection can instead signal a collective act of dissent from the audience, a refusal to engage with and reproduce the effects of Imeldific configurations over and against state violence.\textsuperscript{291} Alas, based on my knowledge, no such collective disaffection occurred during the performances. Nonetheless, attending to camp aesthetics and its ambivalences can nuance the reception of these performances without exonerating their subtending conditions of racism and historical violence. Working through the pleasures and spectacles that the production affords, rather than refuting these sensations, might allow us to productively reassess the “object(ive)s” of our scholarship.\textsuperscript{292}


\textsuperscript{292} Chuh, Imagine Otherwise, 9.
CHAPTER 5

ASIAN/AMERICANIST CRITIQUE BETWEEN CAMPS

QUEER GENEALOGIES OF (BE)LONGING

It seemed that every film, every article, and even many novels had to be a unidimensional documentary filled with literal and solemnly delivered history lessons. Given the magnitude of general ignorance about Asian Americans, it was difficult to do anything but play a dead straight part.

— Elaine Kim²⁹³

In tracing these historical entanglements between camps, this project has contemplated the limits and uses of what “Asian American” as an analytical category—which is always also to say political and aesthetic category—can do. A number of factors compel the exigency for this exploration. Within the academic field itself, there has been an increasingly expanding number of sub-fields and areas of specialization. Indeed, the historical flashpoints that are the focus of these chapters have each generated distinct areas of specialty; some even constitute fields of study in and of themselves. The revived attention to Chinese railroad labor across the North Americas, as shown with the Stanford University project, has become increasingly interdisciplinary, expanding from its initial groundings in historical archaeology. Studies on the World War II Japanese American incarceration have long spanned across the social sciences and humanities. The burgeoning field of critical refugee studies has productively reoriented studies of the Viet Nam War toward other lines of critical affinities, bringing into focus neglected

histories and experiences of those throughout Southeast Asia. Finally, the emergent formation of critical Filipino/American studies has staged conversations outside and within Asian American Studies that think through transnational questions of race and empire across the Filipino/a diasporas. The chapters here can only briefly touch upon the rich complexities and scholarship around these fields. Instead, by juxtaposing them with one another in this study, I consider the possibility for Asian/Americanist critique to reanimate productive cross-talk across these clusters.

Meanwhile, a number of external factors compel not only the reassessment of Asian American Studies, but also the role of ethnic studies in the university more broadly. Decades after the social movements of the Third World Liberation Front advanced the institutionalization of interdisciplinary studies of race and sexuality across the country, we are confronting the need to interrogate the limits and insidious effects of institutionalization, including especially those processes that reduced struggles for racial justice to issues of representation. As has been well-established, institutionalization has been accompanied by the occlusion of redistributive social justice. For example, the establishment of ethnic literary studies has, albeit inadvertently, facilitated the consolidation of liberal multiculturalism: the battle for systemic institutional change transformed into the politics of representation focused on the inclusion of ethnic literatures. It is all too clear that such inclusion operates as proof of diversity and thus obscures the ways in which the institutional structures of the university actively inhibit the address of racism.  

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While this self-reflexivity is ongoing, interdisciplines such as ethnic studies and gender studies are also pressed to prove their utility and success in terms legible to the neoliberal corporate university. How can ethnic studies – here, specifically Asian American studies – effectively advance anti-racist work within this context? This question is at the heart of this closing chapter. In what follows, I delineate a queer genealogy of Asian American Studies, and by doing so, offer ways of imagining and elaborating the horizons of Asian American Studies that reactivate its founding commitments to social justice. Drawing on the insights of Lloyd Suh’s play *Charles Francis Chan Jr’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery* (2015), which stages the self-articulation of “Asian American,” and Karen Tei Yamashita’s novel *I Hotel* (2010), which thematizes the founding of ethnic studies, this chapter addresses and refigures the story of the institutional entry and survival of Asian American Studies.

Yamashita helps us to recognize how concepts commonly used to narrate the history of institutionalization – activist, community, academic, among them – operate within a logic of reproductive futurity. Specifically, her work enjoins us to recognize the ways in which narrating Asian American Studies as unfolding through successive *generations* indexed by differing relations to activism and “the community” occludes the apprehension of other trajectories through which institutionalization proceeded. Meanwhile, Suh’s play considers how common narratives about the birth of “Asian American” establish and disavow a filial relation to histories of Oriental racialization, thereby also foreclosing other trajectories that can be possible from these histories. I suggest that within these other trajectories – what I refer to as a *queer genealogy of (be)longing* – lies a possible future for the field. Such a genealogy brings to bear relations, affinities, and contingencies that cannot be contained within a generational model of the history
of the field. It thus affords the reactivation of the horizons of Asian American Studies as laying well beyond the institution.

My attention to generation follows Judith Roof’s cogent observation of its use and effects in feminist studies. Roof argues that “generation is neither an innocent empirical model nor an accurate assessment of a historical reality. Rather, generation reflects and exacerbates Oedipal relations and rivalry among women, relies on a patriarchal understanding of history and a linear, cause-effect narrative, and imports ideologies of property.”\footnote{295} This seemingly benign term, in short, “import[s] the full force of Oedipal rivalry, recrimination, and debt.”\footnote{296} I consider how familial logics of (inter)generationality play out in fortifying notions of competing formations – e.g., academic versus activist, theory versus practice – within Asian American Studies and I investigate what forms of past, present, and future solidarities this logic forecloses. These familial dynamics resonate with what Eve Oishi observes in how the historic struggles to secure the future of the I-Hotel have been mobilized in service of narratives about the Asian American movements. According to Oishi, this narratives models Asian America as a “cultural organism,” which presumes “relations of interiority” that are manifest in the assumption of identity,

\footnote{296} Much of the theorizations around queer temporality and futurity have centered on the figure of the Child. Lee Edelman asserts that the Child oversaturates the symbolic realm and both futurity and politics are inevitably heteronormative. Thus, he argues that queers must abandon the future. This essay interrogates the logic of generation that in fact refortifies assumptions that the future is always inevitably linked to heteronormative reproduction. See Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); For critiques of the Oedipal, see Judith Halberstam, Judith Halberstam, “Forgetting Family: Queer Alternatives to Oedipal Relations,” in A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Studies, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 315–24; For an examination of how queerness and the Oedipal take on new affinities in the increased privatization of kinship under queer liberalism, see David L. Eng, The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
community, and history as shared grounds of Asian Americanness.297 In other words, this organicity registers, as Kandice Chuh has described, as the tendency to anchor “a common, understudied object, the ‘Asian American,’ whom we narrate into legibility through a narrative of identity.”298 This model of the cultural organism, I argue, explains the operations by which groups are said to concretize into distinctive “camps.” By now, the dismissals are well known. Demands for redistribution have become understood fundamentally as a fight for representation and inclusion. Dematerialized from conditions for social change, these claims are dismissed as “identity politics” or “political correctness.” In this way, claims that dissenting groups cohere into rigid ‘camps’ work to effectively contain and partition out various lines of thought and critique.

The first section of this chapter examines how different narratives articulate “community” and studies of “Asian America” as separate and oppositional in both spatial and temporal terms. Particularly, I assess how notions of (inter)generationality undergird both formal and informal ideas about the origins and development of Asian American Studies. These narratives, I contend, often unwittingly delink the community and university by narrating a generational conflict between a radical, activist past and an institutionalized, academic present. My genealogical approach to assessing the conditions from and within which the category “Asian American” emerged follows Foucault, who reminds us of the disruptive potential, or in other words the political potential, of genealogical thinking.299 More immediately, this project is

298 Chuh, Imagine Otherwise, 149.
aligned with David Scott’s call for an “internal reconstruction of generational social imaginaries” that mines what was thought, practiced, and dreamed in projects of decolonization in spite of their defeat.\textsuperscript{300} Genealogy as method, moreover, helps to elucidate the multivalent queerness covered over by models of linear time marked by the succession of generations. Doing so offers the possibilities of attending to “non-Oedipal logics [that include] a focus on the ephemeral, the momentary, the surprise, simultaneity, contradiction, intergenerational exchange.”\textsuperscript{301} It also affords acknowledging that the elision of such moments in the narration of oppositional movements is not disconnected from the occlusion of sexual desires, affinities, and practices that are central to but often dismissed from the domain of the political. The tracing of (be)longing thus stresses how desires for otherwise—for an eros that compel feelings of the political and the sexual as not separate but deeply intertwined—articulate contingent collectivities. This longing, following José Esteban Muñoz, might be said to be a deeply utopian one: “This is to say that the field of utopian possibility is one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity.”\textsuperscript{302} In this spirit, I attend to how collectivities of queer (be)longing cohere in Asian American Studies through the enactment of utopian desires for a more just future. This envisioning of futurity beyond the quagmire of institutional survival reanimates our present with the intimacies—the desires, politics, relations—of the thens and theres of the past.

Queerness thus refers to both dissident sexual socialities and the structures and frameworks which require their disavowal as, for example, in narratives of cultural nationalism that often dominate in the histories of the burgeoning social movements surrounding the

\textsuperscript{301} Halberstam, “Forgetting Family: Queer Alternatives to Oedipal Relations,” 319.
\textsuperscript{302} Muñoz, \textit{Cruising Utopia}, 20.
institutional establishment of Asian American Studies. From these considerations the remainder of this chapter organizes its sections around analyses of two texts, Suh’s play and Yamashita’s novel, and their reconsiderations of Asian American literary paternity through queer camp. Through its juxtaposition of the incongruous, camp launches a form of “dis-organicity,” to borrow from Fabio Cleto, by reframing that which might initially seem to be oppositional as intimately related. The disorganicity of the camp aesthetics arising from both texts unsettle the relations of interiority secured by the generational models of intellectual camps, precisely because it playfully revels in and questions the contradictions within these relations. Especially as these relations are sutured by normative notions of family, camp attends to and proliferates the queerness that are constitutive of yet threatening to such coherence. Instead, camp gestures toward alternative modes of relating to, desiring, and working with and between histories of racialization and resistance.

In contrast and in response to what Elaine Kim notes as the overwhelming impetus to offer realist documentarian history in Asian American cultural productions, Suh’s play and Yamashita’s novel “do anything but play a dead straight part.” Instead, they irreverently resist this impulse in order to mine occluded queer genealogies. Suh’s play revisits the centrality of Charlie Chan to Asian American literary formation. Rather than disavow the paternal influence of this figure and the larger racial construction of the “Oriental” to “Asian America,” however, Suh stages a campy intimacy between these two genealogies in order to reconsider earlier histories of Asian American performers who worked within and against these racist figurations.

304 Cleto, Camp, 22–23.
Also playing with and disassembling the enduring trope of normative familial relationality that underlies narratives about the origins of “Asian America,” Karen Tei Yamashita’s epic novel *I Hotel* draws attention to and critiques models of Asian American literary paternity that surround the Yellow Power movement. I examine how her first novella *Eye Hotel* depicts Professor Chen Wen-guang and Paul Wallace Lin as allegorizing Third World Internationalism and Asian American cultural nationalism and uses their relationship to explore the ways in which these two ideologies come to embody the narration of Asian American Studies as a history of intergenerational conflict. I argue that *Eye Hotel* provides the methodological means for narrating forms of queer (be)longing that rewrite ethnic studies’ epistemological, political projects of social justice as productive, erotic exchanges of intimacy, rather than reproductive legacies of filial transmission. Staging Asian/Americanist critique between camps, I will show, allows us to proliferate these possibilities for queerness.

**Generating Asian/American(ist) Pasts and Presents**

Contemplating periodization in ‘Asian American History,’ Ellen D. Wu assesses the limits of the field’s heavy reliance on 1965 as a reference point for the massive shift of demographics for Asian Americans. Wu argues that while the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act clearly had an impact on Asian American demographics, the privileging of this year effectively demarcates a before and after that might overemphasize change and rupture over continuities in Asian American history. Viet Thanh Nguyen likewise reflects critically on

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1968, another milestone date in the field. He notes that “1968 forms a clear of moment of self-articulation on the part of Asian American intellectuals that concerns the constitution of an Asian American body politic as a diverse but unified group engaged in a struggle for racial equality.”

In brief, “1965” signals the shifting demographics that will come to comprise the Asian American community and “1968” marks the birth of Asian American studies. I contend that the stories unfolding from 1965 – i.e., the centrality of immigration – have shaped how we understand 1968 – i.e., the development of Asian American Studies. The narratives used to make sense of immigration vis-à-vis familial reproduction, as signaled by the use of generation to mark the passage of time, impact the ways we understand the discursive changes characterizing Asian American Studies. We might in this view read the durability of the “between worlds” paradigm, which configures Asian Americanness as defined by irresolvable tensions between East and West, past and present, tradition and modernity, community and individualism.

Similarly, dichotomies regularly posed within Asian Americanist discourses also register the form of generational conflict, which often serves to index a putatively growing divide between activism and academia: identity/difference, domestic/transnational, immigrant/diasporic, and the split engendered by theory—what Sau-ling Wong describes as the “‘pre-post’ period” and the field after prevalent engagements with postmodernism and poststructuralism.

Generations, however, are by no means neutral entities. How we define a generation—where one begins and ends, who (does not) belong(s) in which one, how one relates to another,

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the assumed commonalities and differences within and between generations—has material consequences. As erin Khuế Ninh reminds us, generation constitutes an axis of power that yields tremendous discursive and psychic force. Insofar as the parent makes sacrifices for the child, the child is always trapped within a structure of indebtedness for her expression of filial gratitude can never suffice in addressing the original sacrifices made. This view elucidates the relations of debt that structure generational narratives of Asian American Studies. Birthed from the radical grassroots organizing of ‘the community’ in 1968, the field formation of Asian American Studies is always ensnared within a structure of indebtedness to that origin. While reminders about the importance of serving the community putatively work to underscore the responsibility for academic knowledge production to its material and social implications, they can also prescribe and delimit the ways in which this obligation is repaid, by enjoining Asian Americanists to prove how and why their work counts as labor for the community. As mentioned above, we may understand these dynamics as operating according to what Eve Oishi describes as a “cultural organism,” which presumes “relations of interiority” based on assumption of identity, community, and history as shared grounds of Asian Americanness.

In this light, we may recognize how the familial trope of generation that organizes conceptualization of Asian American Studies reflects its centrality as a mechanism for suturing and naturalizing the “relations of interiority” assigned to “Asian America.” Borrowing again from Roof, such an insight compels us to ask, how might Asian Americanist discourses unwittingly “privileg[e] a kind of family history that organizes generations where they don’t exist, ignores intragenerational differences and intergenerational commonalities, and thrives on a

paradigm of oppositional change." In delineating heterogeneity, multiplicity, and hybridity as key analytics for apprehending Asian American differences, Lisa Lowe cautioned that the trope of familial intergenerational struggle “essentializes Asian American culture” in terms of parent-child conflicts, in which the pastness of Asian tradition embodied by the parents stands in tension with the child’s supposed inhabiting of an individualistic American modernity of the present and future. Lowe further outlines the consequences of this paradigm: “The reduction of the cultural politics of racialized ethnic groups, like Asian Americans, to first generation/second-generation struggles displaces social differences into a privatized familial opposition.” Not merely a response to dominant uncritical readings of Asian American literatures, Lowe’s insights, I contend, serve as a cogent reminder to Asian Americanists against reproducing these dynamics within our methodologies.

Generationality deployed in this way may thus be understood as a key disciplinary mechanism for maintaining the cultural organism model. It does so by stabilizing seemingly inevitable divisions and regulating the coherence of Asian America(n Studies) in temporal and spatial terms. For example, the presumed spatial dynamic between the private interior and the social exterior haunts implied or explicit understandings of academia as an insulated ivory tower detached from “the community,” positing a divide that erases the function of college campuses as sites of Asian American communities and community work. Instead, this divide comes to see the university as the exclusive space within which theoretical work is performed and assigns activism to the community in ways that disavow the intellectual activities that take place outside

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312 Roof, “Generational Difficulties; Or, the Fear of a Barren History,” 72.
313 Lowe, Immigrant Acts, 63.
of formal educational institutions. Conceptions of the field as working on behalf of ‘the community’ may also counterproductively erase efforts to mobilize “Asian American” as a model for panethnic solidarity, and simultaneously have the effect of bolstering the homogeneity of Asian America connoted by the “model minority.” At the same time, anxieties about the work of theory within the university risk obscuring the ways in which the university remains a central institution that mediates and could potentially challenge interests of state and capital. Accordingly, we may foreground the important symbiotic relation between ‘the university’ and ‘the community’ as fronts for waging projects of social justice rather than separate entities ensnared within an Oedipal logic of competition.

This spatial dynamic of inside/outside upon which the cultural organism paradigm relies continues to unfold in more contemporary field debates. Timothy Yu’s two blog posts that ask “Has Asian American Studies Failed?” have provoked heated assessments about the state of the field, its goals, and its effects. In his follow-up blogpost, Yu clarifies that he is not staking a claim for returning to “activist roots.” Rhetoric that biologizes the field, like attachments to the organic, radical past, manifests longing for a return to a state imagined as being more activist and connected to the community than the present. While Yu challenges such romanticization, his critique inadvertently solidifies a gap between the “then and there” and “here and now,” and does so in ways that iterate the organicity of Asian America(n studies): “Asian American studies has its origins in activism and in service to the Asian American community. We might say it has

316 Chuh, Imagine Otherwise, 23–24.
historically looked *inward*, toward the Asian American community, because that is its natural audience. Is it also now time for us to look *outward*, toward ‘mainstream’ audiences?\(^{318}\)

This articulation of temporal origins, along with their allegedly inward functions and effects consolidates and naturalizes the ‘relations of interiority’ among identity, community, and space within Asian America(n Studies) as cultural organism. Within this teleological divide between the private and the public, conveyed as inward and outward, if past efforts were too confined within the realm of identity (politics) based upon an assumed Asian American sameness, the present moment must imagine a broadened community that looks toward the national public as its audience. This difference in objective and effect serves to concretize past and present into discrete generations that reinstall a “‘vertical’ generational model of culture.”\(^{319}\)

Thus, while concurring with Minh-Ha Pham’s astute reminder to situate and interrogate paradigms of success and failure, I also follow Celine Parreñas Shimizu’s caution regarding how narratives of disciplinary failure can overshadow the “myriad fronts” and “multiple arenas” within which we struggle, especially when framed in terms of a generational divide.\(^{320}\) Before looking more closely at these putative fractures within the Asian American movement through analysis of Yamashita’s novel, I first reassess, through Suh’s play, the vexed history of Oriental caricatures and how the self-articulation (the birth) of “Asian America” and its movements, particularly within the realm of culture, aimed to formulate a clean break from these past degraded figures. In other words, before examining what we may consider as the pasts and

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presents configured *inside* “Asian America,” let us first examine how its origins is configured through marking a temporal break that repudiates its Orientalist pasts.

**Charlie Chan Must—Not—Die**

Ingrained in American popular culture Charlie Chan is as much a part of the legacy of cultural stereotypes that continues to haunt, frustrate, and—dare I say it?—inspire us.

— Jessica Hagedorn

In order for the Asian American to live, the Oriental must die. This commonly held conviction binds together many Asian American(ist) scholarly and cultural efforts. Elaine Kim describes this project as follows: “Like many other Asian American, I felt an urgent need to insist that these were not ‘our realities.’ Our strategy was to assert a self-determined Asian American identity in direct opposition to these dehumanizing characterizations, even if it was limited by being contained within the exclusive binary system that occasioned it.”

The Oriental is the fake, a mere imitative copy of ‘real’ Asian-raced bodies, histories, and experiences twisted and distorted for the viewing pleasures of mainstream audiences. Yet, in this retrospective, Kim contemplates the limits of this impulse in trends of cultural nationalism. Recall that this imperative to kill is most exemplified in the polemical writings of Frank Chin, who further underscores that presumptions of lack in terms of masculinity define these imitations of Asian Americans and facilitate their consumption. He describes the effects of racism in

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framing Chinese men as queer: “It is an article of white liberal American faith today that Chinese men, at their best, are effeminate closet queens like Charlie Chan and, at their worst, are homosexual menaces like Fu Manchu.” While many critiques have since been leveraged against Chin for the masculinist rhetoric which cast women and queers as traitors who are complicit in white racism (Kim muses that: “According to this definition, there were not many ways of being Asian American”), few disagree with the insidious nature of these characters.

Charlie Chan, whom Chin also describes as “an acceptable pervert,” has remained a central figure in symbolizing these histories of the Oriental that must be killed. Created by Earl Derr Biggers, Chan first emerged as a minor character in his magazine periodical in the 1920’s. Due to Chan’s popularity, Biggers soon made him the primary character, creating a number of detective fictions in his series. Following their success, a series of film adaptations around the novels began in the 1930’s, starring Swedish actor Warner Oland as Charlie Chan in yellowface. Yet, his sons were played by Chinese Americans. Throughout these cultural productions, Chan is known for spouting aphorisms and witticisms, marking him with a form of racial difference and wisdom stemming from his Oriental inscrutability as he solves the mysteries that no one else can.

This figure and his killing link together different collections of Asian American literature and literary studies. Positing what seems to be a fact, although perhaps it is better described as an ideal, Jessica Hagedorn’s edited literary anthologies Charlie Chan Is Dead (1993) and Charlie Chan Is Dead 2: At Home in the World (2003) foreground a number of contributions from emerging Asian American writers. In so doing, these anthologies hope to will the death of Charlie Chan by imposing the voices of these true writers over and against the haunting legacies

323 Ibid.
of Orientalist stereotypes. This can only be imagined and aspirational as the impetus for the original anthology and the need for its follow-up ten years later attest to the undead nature of Charlie Chan. Hagedorn’s hesitance undermines Kim’s definitive declaration in the first that “Charlie Chan is indeed dead, never to be revived. Gone for good his yellowface asexual bulk, his fortune-cookie English, his stereotypical Orientalist version of ‘the [Confucian] Chinese family.’” Instead, the second anthology identifies the addition of new prevalent stereotypes as well as the changing conditions of necessity, including the rampant forms of terrorist racialization following 9/11 and the shifting populations of Asian refugees arriving to the United States due to displacement from war.

In the face of these changing realities, we might further question the same insistence that “Charlie Chan Is Dead” as a means of examining, as the subtitle suggests, the possibilities for being “At Home in the World.” Pioneering scholar of Asian American literary studies Elaine Kim defines this project in her preface as follows: “These writers are ‘at home in the world’ in the sense that they are not involved in an ‘identity’ movement in search of cultural roots. At the same time, they are never quite ‘at home in the world’—thus their artistic attempts to disobediently claim and articulate the ‘trashy heart of history.’” Based on Kim’s assessment, this condition of being “at home in the world” is vexed with contradictions. On the one hand, it is defined through negation, seemingly against what has more commonly been associated with the domestic project of “claiming America” that manifested through the fortification of cultural nationalism via the construction of identity. Yet, the first sentence in this paragraph that concludes her preface, remains unclear about what this condition entails if it is not one “in search

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of cultural roots.” On the other hand, the second sentence offers clarification of this project by precisely underscoring the conditions inhibiting its possibility. In short, if we aim to discover what ties together the collectivity of “Asian America” that allows for a being “at home in the world,” we arrive at the condition of catechresis. That is, “Asian American” cannot be understood as describing a positivist essence encapsulating within a singular identity. Observing these discrepancies, Susan Koshy incisively critiqued the organizing logic reiterated in the introduction as one of celebratory difference. Instead, in place of common attributes, these artistic and cultural productions become forms of necessity, responding to and enacting the political imperative to “disobediently claim and articulate the ‘trashy heart of history.’”

What constitutes this trashy heart? Kim’s use of this phrase comes from an extended quote of Sara Chin’s contribution to the anthology, “Red Wall.” Kim and Chin each present a different version of what this might look like. Kim locates this heart and its contestations within questions of official histories and their mainstream representation, claiming that the Asian American writers: “give us another way of looking, a different take, as they remember and create history from occluded viewpoints that challenge both the textbook and the Hollywood versions.” Here, Kim figures the the trashy heart as that which is excluded from official (hi)stories. The task then becomes one of reclaiming the refuses of history. Yet, the protagonist of Chin’s story underscores trashy as a designation of that which is seen as of little or diminished value: “I loved the low ground, the things that people pushed offstage, the gossip, the dirt. I was looking for the heart, the trashy heart of history. After all, wasn’t that where the unknown leaped

The doubleness of the trashy in these two interpretations is especially fitting in elucidating the value placed on Charlie Chan and other Oriental racial representations in constituting what is seen or heard. To “disobediently claim and articulate” this trashy heart then suggests seriously grappling with these devalued images. That is, we might perhaps mine the multivalence of trash, the refuse of history and what it deems as trivial and insignificant to its narratives of linear progression.

In light of this evaluating of what constitutes the “trashy heart of history” and how we should relate to it, we might observe another possible role of Charlie Chan and the Oriental to the formation of “Asian America(n).” Hagedorn cautiously speaks to the multifaceted influence of Charlie Chan: “Ingrained in American popular culture Charlie Chan is as much a part of the legacy of cultural stereotypes that continues to haunt, frustrate, and—dare I say it?—inspire us.” Dare we say it? In this open secret of Charlie Chan as one of the sources from which Asian America continually draws inspiration, one cannot help but think of Chin’s exposure of Chan’s open secret as a “closet queen.” And, so, the constitutive role of this legacy intensifies and recasts Hagedorn’s observations about how and why it “continues to haunt [and] frustrate.” It is precisely due to this crucial role that, as David Eng observes: “Chin and his Aiieeeeee! colleagues constantly invoke the stereotype of the homosexual to describe how the yellow man is seen by white society. Although this image of gay Asian American male subjectivity is something that Chin categorically deplores, his work displays an intense anxiety over the possibility that this is something he has become.”

In other words, Chin et al. exemplify the more general and fundamental efforts of disavowing the Oriental that are constitutive for the thriving of the Asian

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American. Thus, they demonstrate the persistent need to abject the bad Oriental to construct the
good Asian American.

Considering the primacy of this dynamic, a fundamental abjection of the ‘trashy heart of
our history,’ what then is the exigency or benefit of disobediently claiming it as Kim implicitly
enjoins us to do through her observation of the collective work done by the Asian American
writers contributing to the anthology? How might we assume this enjoinder to reimagine the
relationship of the Oriental to the tradition of Asian American literary paternity that Frank Chin
constructs? What do we make of this dynamic to Asian American literary efforts in general in the
wake of Chin, as well as feminist critiques and reimaginings of his works? This exploration
seems especially necessary given the familial logic that sutures Asian America to these Oriental
pasts. Sheng-Mei Ma narrates the familial drama as follows: “And with respect to these eminent
representatives of Asian American, Orientalism, to some extent, sires ethnicity, the former being
the illegitimate patriarch disowned by the offspring. The vigor with which these Asian
Americans revolt against Orientalism tacitly acknowledges the family lineage of the two. That
Asian America is more than 150 years old but revels like a misguided fifteen-year-old attests to it
stunted growth, having been orphaned by the parent countries and then abused by the
(step)parent of the United States.”331 Configuring a parent-child relation in which Asian America
is the immature child who revels against Orientalism, Ma paternalistically calls on Asian
American(ist)s to become adults who seriously grapple with this past through a “deathly
embrace” of Orientalism.

Registering this ambivalent embrace, camp, I suggest, becomes an especially fruitful
means of wielding the double function of the trashy heart as both the devalued and the excluded.

331 Sheng-mei Ma, The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xiv–xv.
It allows for a reluctant embrace, through the disidentifactory processes of negotiating and reworking these past stereotypes, without prescribing to the linear temporality of reproductive futurity that Ma installs. As Andrew Ross observes on the “uses of camp,” camp relishes particularly in the that which is considered historically obsolete, waste, or trashy. “Camp, in this respect is more than just a remembrance of things past, it is the re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor.” I turn now to Lloyd Suh’s play, in which a campy staging of a familial drama illuminates unforeseen modes of labor that are obscured in the disavowal of the Oriental.

(Yellow)Facing the Oriental Ghosts of American Past-times

Lloyd Suh’s play *Charles Francis Chan Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery* (2015) redeployes camp aesthetics to make explicit these dynamics in our engagements with, while imagining an alternative relationship, to the histories of the Oriental. Before the play begins, the audience listens to jazz music reminiscent of the wartime era while viewing a slideshow of popular images of anti-Asian discrimination projected upon a semi-transparent screen that covers, while also leaving slightly visible, the stage. The play officially opens to a scene reminiscent of film noir with the discovery of a murder. Before the play reveals that the victim is Earl Derr Biggers, a blackout occurs on stage as the action shifts to Frank (Charles Francis Chan, Jr., played by Jeffrey Onuma) getting a physical examination by the draft board. Frank whimsically responds to the staff sergeant’s inquiries through extended detours and digressions.

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333 All citations for the play will appear in-text. The page numbers refer to an unpublished draft of the play manuscript that Lloyd Suh generously shared with me. Lloyd Suh, *Charlie Francis Chan Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Mystery*, 2015.
Evading and contemplating the demands for identification by the sergeant, Frank instead reflects upon the contradictory origins for an Asian-raced body in America.

He refracts and multiplies the question of birth and lineage. Officially born in Oakland on the same day that the atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima, Frank claims: “I have been severally reborn” (5). For these other births, he cites a visit to China, during which he realizes that “I am not simply Chinese but Chinaman! American born!” (5). Such proclamations resonate with the declaration made by Frank Chin’s protagonist Tam Lum from The Chickencoop Chinaman that “Chinamen are made, not born.”334 Second, he cites an occupation of Sproul Hall during the Berkeley protests of 1964, from which he was reborn after being released from the womb of the prison cell. These multiple births compel his eventual questioning of the term “Oriental” and its material effects as a mode of categorizing a whole set of racialized minorities.

From this scene, the play invites us to see the protagonist as a figuration of Frank Chin while thematizing the formation of Asian America. Beginning with this refusal to be drafted into the Viet Nam War, Frank, an aspiring writer and failing student at University of California, Berkeley, questions the contradiction by which Asian-raced Americans were called on to serve their country patriotically while the demonization of the enemy abroad relied upon racist discrimination against Asians. Seeing the category “Oriental” as indicative of the processes by which Asian-raced bodies of all ethnicities and nationalities become reductively homogenized, Frank, in his next scene, pleads with his girlfriend Suzy to not take a role in the fictional film Charlie Chan Versus the Inscrutable Vietcong for it replicates the same type of Orientalist logic in films. Tired of his political tirades, Suzy breaks up with him. It is at this moment that Frank throws a book in frustration and “Monkey” emerges, as a spiritual guide and muse from his

imagination. Monkey proves to be the best solution for Frank’s frustrations with the draft and U.S. racism. It is perhaps not surprising, for, as he proudly declares: “I have spent my entire existence fighting against ill-gotten authority and institutionalized power, on behalf of tricksters, warriors, malcontents, and all other types of underdog racounteurs” (22). Thus, the Monkey is not only an embodiment of but also an advocate for a “warrior tradition,” which conjures Chin’s formulation of a heroic tradition in emphasizing the labor of Chinese railroad workers in linking the nation together (24).

Under the Monkey’s inspiration, at a bar in Chinatown, Frank declares the moniker of “Asian American” as a coalitional political identity that thus critiques both U.S. racism and imperialism abroad. His response to this political quagmire is not to organize but to write a play. As Frank clarifies: “Oh, it’s not just a play. It’s a manifesto. Of a nascent revolutionary identity politic that establishes Asian America as a new but permanent social movement that will rise up in defiance of our gross misrepresentation in American culture, and our cruel subjugation in American society” (32). Like Chin’s and Kim’s discussions above, these efforts of literary creation and self-definition are posed as political projects of undermining racist representations. Frank convinces Kathy, whom he meets in the bar and marries shortly afterward, of the importance of creating this identity as they venture forth in writing and producing this play together. As the play progresses, the audience comes to find out that the scenes of the staged murder mystery investigation with Inspector Hastings and Charlie Chan, conveniently played by the same actors (those who play Frank and the sergeant, respectively), are actually part of this play that Frank attempts to write.

In brainstorming ideas for different titles for this play, Frank leaves traces of other threads that are staged: “The Children of Charlie Chan!” and “Death of the …no. Murder of
the...Oriental Murder Mystery! Charles Francis Chan Jr.’s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery. And Sing-Song Minstrel Show” (28). The title that names Frank’s play (and Suh’s as well) not only plays on a consumer’s desire for exotic Oriental otherness, with a “sing-song minstrel show” thrown in for good measure. Moreover, “The Children of Chan” signals a self-reflexive contemplation about the inspiration of Charlie Chan to this play specifically and Asian America(n culture) more broadly. Consistent with the general mission of The National Asian American Theatre Company (NAATCO) in New York City in staging and recasting plays originally not scripted for Asian American actors, the most explicitly stated intertext for this play is Agatha Christie’s murder mystery novel The Mysterious Affair at Styles. Yet, the intertextual histories upon which Charlie Francis Chan Jr. draws invokes and stretches what constitutes the literary tradition surrounding the “Asian American”—the legacy of Orientalist caricature for anti-Asian discrimination; yellow-face minstrelsy with Charlie Chan; the quest for constructing a ‘real’ literary tradition by Frank Chin; the feminist debates and rewriting of Chin’s project with Maxine Hong Kingston’s Tripmaster Monkey; and, the continued project of foregrounding new Asian American writers in Jessica Hagedorn’s edited anthologies Charlie Chan Is Dead.

Specifically, Suh re-engages with the histories of yellowface and, in so doing, elaborates upon their material practices and effects. The play within the play foregrounds the practices of yellowface indexed by Charlie Chan, by having the white draft official play this role. In the opening of scene 8, the screen once again covers the stage. Behind the screen, we can make out the draft sergeant, slowly applying makeup to his face. The screen projects a close-up of his face, following movement by movement his transformation. In detail, this scene rehearses the process of assuming the visual tropes of the Oriental—makeup to imbue a mustard yellow hue on the face; a black eyeliner to draw arched eyebrows and slanted eyes; and, a wig, moustache, and
goatee. After applying the makeup, he practices assuming the correct Orientalist stature. The stage direction reads: “He then begins to contort his face, squinting and pinching his nose and manipulating his cheeks in improvisatory ways, studying himself and the transformation in the mirror as he does” (41). This applies to his speech as well: “Herro! Herro. Ah! So. Herro” (41).

Indexing the by then popular practice of white actors portraying Asian characters by donning specific accessories and makeup, yellowface has a longer history in forms of popular entertainment, including “minstrel shows, dime museums, circuses, [and] the early vaudeville stage.” These cultural forms provided a means of relieving white anxiety about Asian immigrants, highlighting a set of characteristics to understand the inscrutable Oriental foreignness of these groups through humor and racial farce in the absence of physical interactions with these populations, who were often geographically segregated and contained. When Kathy criticizes Frank for including yellowface in the play, for precisely reproducing these historical dynamics, he counters with this explanation: “Charlie Chan is a white racist lie! So in order to represent that white racist lie he must be played by a real white racist in real white racist yellowface! To cast an Asian American as Charlie Chan would be to legitimize and endorse his white racist fakery!” (43). Frank thus asks us to restage and confront the uncomfortable staging of yellowface despite or because of the risk that such performances induce feelings of pleasure or humor in the audience. Refusing to endorse a belief that stereotypes are ‘fake,’ Frank insists: “stereotypes are so real, they are real white racist fictions that fuel a real white racist reality!” (44). In this way, the play recontextualizes what are by now well-rehearsed discussions about racial representation and the uses and limits of stereotype analysis.

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Suh reminds us to consider the insidious psychic and material effects of these representations. This plays out to a farcical effect as Frank, attempting to prove Kathy wrong, eggs the sergeant on to describe what is intrinsic to the character of the Oriental. Starting with stereotypical observations about bad driving and the length of male genitalia, Sergeant soon riffs on what he observes as a lack of value for human life due to the mechanical, nonhuman nature of a “big Oriental robot machine” that constantly reproduces identical, emotionless subhuman humans (48). These scenes play out Frank Chin’s arguments about the effectivity of stereotypes in reproducing conditions of racism. They recall the processes by which the anti-Asian imagery projected at the opening of the play were precisely used to buttress these ideas of Asian laborers as subhuman that further rationalized measures for legal exclusion. Furthermore, the play emphasizes that yellowface is directly tied to the fortification of whiteness through a parallel scene in which the Asian American Suzy—who returns after the director gives her role to a white actress instead—prepares for her part as the white Eleanor Biggers. Just like the Sergeant before, Suzy’s face is enlarged and projected onto the screen as she slowly applies powder and assumes the racial personification of Eleanor Biggers. As Suzy prepares for her character with Kathy, she comes to recognize and enjoy the forms of privilege that whiteness affords, casting light on the fact that the property of yellowness in contrast furthers alienage.

As the play unfolds, Frank’s dynamic family history also asks us to consider how practices of yellowface and the condition of alienage they produce are intimately staged within the realm of the personal and familial. It is revealed that Frank’s full name is Charlie “Frank” Chan Jr. and that his father’s name was Charlie Chan. In this way, what was stated all along in the title of the play with “Charles Francis Chan Jr.” becomes even more explicit as an incongruous amalgamation between the appellations of “Frank Chin” and “Charlie Chan.”
Indeed, we learn that not only was Frank’s father named Charlie Chan—a name imposed by the immigration official—but also that he performed an Orientalist act in the vaudeville, as Frank and his brother re-enact his most popular song and dance number, “The Heathen Chinee.”

Thus, in this ironic reversal, the character Frank Chan compels an inquiry into author-writer Frank Chin as the progeny of Charlie Chan. As Frank’s attempts to produce the quintessential “Asian American” play progresses in increasingly sprawling and seemingly aimless ways, Kathy suggests that his artistic production is actually an attempt to reconcile with his father and make peace with his legacy, especially after she learns about the father’s mysterious death (hit by a train on the railroad tracks). That is, the “minstrel show” that the marketing materials speak of come to signify multiply, with not only the actor hired to play, yet again, Charlie Chan, but also the acts that Frank’s father had to adopt for a living.

Ideas of authorship and paternity become increasingly intertwined and complicated as it is revealed that the murderer of Biggers is Charlie Chan. Chan exclaims: “Earl Der Biggers create Chan, but now creation overtake creator!” (98). When Hastings, bewildered, tries to reconfirm that Chan had mentioned Biggers is his father, Chan continues: “Yes. Created in one his image but I have been severally reborn! Born to submission. Born to assimilation. Born to appeasement but not this time…This time will I be born real. AAAAAIIIIIIIIIIIIIEEEEEE!!!!” (98).

While Chan’s monologue echoes Frank’s earlier claims about his multiple origins, this final yell

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This number is based on an actual poem written by F. Bret Harte, published in 1870 in *Overland Monthly*. As Yunte Huang notes, the poem was largely intended as a satire of the anti-Chinese sentiments at the time based on ideas of economic competition. The poem decries the strong presence of Chinese coolie labor stealing jobs away from white Americans. Unfortunately, the poem only worked to ignite animosity further. Furthermore, the poem has been adapted numerous times in different cultural productions, providing a lexicon for characterizing the Oriental. See Yunte Huang, *Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 127–131.
also ventriloquizes the famous scream that shapes the edited collections from Frank Chin et al., both the stereotyped scream of the Oriental and the protest of Asian Americans who break past these depictions. It also speaks to the power and material effect of Charlie Chan beyond the ‘original’ intentions of Biggers the author. As Yunte Huang recounts, during the Cold War and anxieties about a rising Communist China, the witty, aphorism-spewing Charlie Chan began to increasingly take on the menacing characteristics of Fu Manchu in the movies.\textsuperscript{337}

Just like Charlie Chan rebels against his creator Biggers by killing him, Frank’s play starts to unravel, suggesting that any attempt to represent a ‘real’ Asian America is always threatened by the irruptive scream of the ‘fake’ Oriental. Assuming the role of Monkey King in this internal play, Frank shows the character Alfred—an overtly weak and ‘emasculated’ man—the “troubled history in the Chinese in America” in order to explain how and why he feels powerless. Images similar to those projected before the start of the play appear once again on the screen. As images of anti-Asian sentiment and Chinese exclusion are shown, Frank as Monkey King sings the song “John Chinaman” (1855). Frank convinces Alfred that this is the legacy that shapes him, a legacy that he must actively rebel against by drawing upon a Chinese heroic tradition. In the end of his play and the larger play, Frank ultimately confronts both legacies, of Charlie Chan the racial icon and Charlie Chan his father, and faces in a sword fight showdown with Chan (still played by the Sergeant). Frank as Monkey proclaims: “I’m here to destroy the distorted image of the yellow man which you have perpetuated throughout this country, so that I can finally LIVE! As myself! As a new western Monkey King with the power and dignity of my ancient forebears! And that’s why you must die” (125). Frank suggests that Charlie Chan must die not only for the present generation to live, but also for the future generation, symbolized

\textsuperscript{337} Huang terms this new iteration of Charlie Chan in the movies during the cold war as “The Fu Manchurian Candidate” to capture the aura of xenophobia and McCarthyism. Ibid., 268–277.
through the announcement that Kathy is pregnant. Meanwhile, Charlie dismisses the idea that killing him would erase the legacy of Orientalist iconography: “You think you kill to me and then no one gonna laugh no more?” (126). In the final moments of this extended scene, Frank stabs Charlie Chan and cradles him while he is dying: “I got you, Pop, I got you. Because this time. This death. You will die in my arms. And I’ll never let go, Dad, I’ll carry you everywhere, your shame and your heartbreak, your hopes and your failures. And then, pop. And then. I will avenge you” (131; emphasis added). What might we make of this simultaneous embrace and disavowal? How and why must killing the father be a necessary precondition for accepting him?

This moment seemingly literalizes the common tenet that the Oriental must die for the flourishing of its child, the Asian American. Yet, we might read this concluding act another way as well. Consider that the “father” is assumed by the white actor. In this way, we might separate out that which is being eliminated and that which is embraced. I suggest that it is not the actual father who is being killed. Rather, it is the material practice of yellow-facing that is being murdered. In other words, it is only by eliminating the practice of staging yellowface before Frank Chan is able to properly apprehend and mourn the historical conditions that necessitated the Orientalist vaudeville performances that his father assumed in order to survive and accumulate the capital for his family’s needs. I would further argue that this difference is productively elucidated through the central ambivalence of camp aesthetics in relation to race that has been of interest throughout our chapters’ analyses thus far. In the first instance, I have been suggesting and arguing that histories of racial performance in the United States put pressure on celebratory accounts of camp aesthetics. The repertoire of Oriental tropes that Charlie Chan indexes, and that which Sergeant rehearses in preparing for this role, resonates with key elements of queer camp aesthetic: exaggerated facial features; cross-racial drag through yellowface
minstrelsy; the theatrical overemphasis on effeminacy and asexuality; and, racial farce in depictions of exotic foreignness.

In contrast, the story of Frank’s father generates an inquiry into the ways in which Asian American performers were forced to navigate within these dominant models of racial performance. Here, explicitly, his father is forced to adopt and work within the legacy of “Charlie Chan” in both his occupation and his name. Frank recounts this story of his father: “Our dad was a vaudevillian. He was trained in Peking Opera back in the mother country but they changed his name at Angel Island to Charlie Chan, and with that on a handbill he managed to pull some serious crowds who were ultimately disappointed as they expected a harmless and non-threatening yellowface murder mystery, and instead got a confusing and grotesque metatheatrical Chinese-infused operatic American freak show” (63). Camp registers in terms of his father’s necessary strategies for survival and circulation within a hostile, racist labor market. We witness these complexities through a shift in the showdown before this ultimate killing, in which the Sergeant playing Charlie Chan (the racial icon) increasingly takes on an earnest, paternal demeanor. Breaking past Charlie Chan the icon, he assumes the role of Frank’s father, a ghost that returns to explain to Frank his shame and decisions in adopting Orientalist caricatures in his vaudevillian performances. Charlie the father explains: “Long ago time, when still very young persons you were, I stop to do police work in favor of traveling Chinese minstrel show puppet carnival, yes? Safer this way. Peddling harmless and humorous stories of the Chinese for American palate. This give me great shame, my son” (129). Charlie conveys the moments leading to his death on the railroads tracks, in which this contemplation of his shame is intertwined with a reflection about his grandfather’s work as an immigrant laborer on the
Transcontinental Railroad. His death comes with the acknowledgment of his inability to change these circumstances of racial shame for his son.

Complicating reductive binaries between accommodation and resistance, these decisions point to conditions of necessity while also suggesting the possibility of negotiating and working within these performances on stage to trouble stereotypes. These processes also resonate with what Frank Chin describes as a necessary survival strategy. He notes: “embracing the acceptable stereotype is an expedient tactic of survival, as selling out and accepting humiliation almost always are. The humiliation, this gesture of self-contempt and self-destruction, in terms of the stereotype is euphemized as being successful assimilation, adaption, and acculturation.”

Pointing to the larger general circumstances that Chinese/American vaudevillians negotiated, Krystyn Moon notes: “Chinese and Chinese Americans had to navigate carefully between well-developed preconceptions and their own artistic desires in order to succeed in vaudeville. To do this, they blended aspects of Chinese culture with American stereotypes to give white audiences what they expected, while simultaneously challenging those stereotypes.”

Frank’s depiction of his father’s performance allude to these contestations, albeit in a less than flattering light as “a confusing and grotesque metatheatrical Chinese-infused operatic American freak show.” This scholarly observation by Moon, however, is not one that is shared by Frank, who instead views his father’s minstrel performances as a mark of shame. In addition to “The Heathen Chinee,” the audience may safely assume that Frank’s father also drew from this general repertoire to work within and potentially against the expectations of the white viewers: “The most common devices they used were pidgin English, songs about Chinatowns, and Chinese-inspired costumes, prop,

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and backdrops, which audiences had already seen and enjoyed.” To draw in audience members then, Chinese/American vaudevillians restaged and reworked acts and elements common to yellowface minstrelsy and popular racial caricatures of the Oriental.

Camp also figures in the play’s contemplation about the consumption of Asian American culture today. The play itself masquerades under the terms of this comedic murder mystery while attempting to offer modes of critique via a “confusing and grotesque metatheatrical Chinese-infused operatic American freak show.” This play about the declaration of Asian American as a new formation instead concludes with an extended consideration about histories of racial shame. Following the staged death of Charlie Chan, Frank accepts and owns such histories, declaring: “My name is Charles Francis Chan, Jr. Son of Charlie Chan and the inheritor of a great shame” (132). Frank further observes: “We’ve been ignored and humiliated, in every chapter of our history in America, and we can’t change that unless we own our suffering. Live inside it, accept it and understand that’s who we are. The children of Chan are children of suffering” (132).

While Frank earlier suggests that Chan must be killed in order for his and his future baby’s survival, his reckoning with these inherited histories of shame forces him to refuse not only distinctions between the real and the fake but also generational logics of reproductive futurity. The play ends as Monkey engages in an extended monologue in response to Frank’s request to tell him about the future. His pronouncement might seem pessimistic: “You will continue to divide the world into the real and the fake. The authentic and the invented. And you will spend your life searching for the real. But at the end, Frank, you will understand that none of this was ever real. That none of this was ever fake either, for the things we invent might just be the realest

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340 Ibid.
341 Moon traces these strategies through “five distinct theatrical practices--costuming, music, language dancing, and impersonation” (151). For more, see chapter 6 of her important monograph. Moon, Yellowface.
thing we have” (135). This monologue might be registered as not a judgment on character
Frank’s conclusions but rather a commentary on the polemical writings of Frank Chin and their
divisiveness. Dispensing with claims of authenticity, Monkey instead underscores the material
effects of the fictions we invent and the futility in dispelling stereotypes and ‘fake’
representations.

Refusing to dictate how what is staged on the play, and the historical contexts it indexes,
should be understood, Monkey instead defers to the future. “The only thing that really matters, is
the child…How will it understand its history, it’s identity, it’s almond eyes and black hair [sic],
and what will that mean? In the year 2000. 2015. Or beyond. What kind of world will the world
be then? And what is that child gonna do about it?” (135). Initially, it might seem that the
Monkey is concluding the play by re-incorporating it into a temporality of reproductive futurity,
one in which political change is always deferred into the future, evacuating the importance of the
past and the present. Yet, given that the play is set in 1967, we might instead understand the
future he invokes as our “now,” especially as he imagines what this future might be like in
“2015.” In so doing, the “child” who often enfigures a deferred futurity actually comes to stand
in for the audience members viewing in the present. He thus calls upon us in the present to
contemplate the circumstances that we inhabit and to reflect on these pasts in order to envision a
path toward the future. No longer does he call for an Oedipal relation to the past. Instead, he
emphasizes the need to apprehend and recognize these pasts while forging open futures wherein
future generations come to their own understandings and decisions about what constitutes the
functions and goals of Asian America.

This inquiry as well as the legacies of yellowface explored in the play become especially
poignant as another one of Lloyd Suh’s works became embroiled within the prevalent legacies of
yellowface at the same time that this play was being staged. In November 2015, Suh wrote to and asked the Clarion University to cancel their production of his play, *Jesus in India*, which cast a number of roles meant for actors of color with white students. At the same time, Clarion never officially sought permission from Suh for staging his play.\textsuperscript{342} Suh’s decision received much criticism as groups once again resorted to claims of post-racialism and color-blindness as universality to dismiss these critiques.\textsuperscript{343} What Suh elucidates, however, is that the focus on just the “face” in yellowface and questions of color-blind casting persistently ignore the material realities of these practices, only one of which is the systemic unevenness whereby Asian American and other actors of color occupy a disproportionately low number of roles on the stage and screen. Engaging the historical and ongoing processes of yellowface, Suh’s play invites us to reconsider this shift between redistribution and representation by emphasizing the materialist grounds of Asian American representation through which racism and anti-racist critique are played out and contested. Specifically, by revisiting and reassessing the histories of Orientalist performance through Charlie Chan, Suh rewrites common notions of the generationality of past and present. Returning to the moment of the Asian American movement and the birth of its coalitional category, Suh reanimates the debate over representation as one that is always already rooted in questions of the material and the imperatives for redistribution. In short, he troubles the narrative of a social movement defeated by the projects of cultural nationalism, which turned away from redistribution toward representation.


\textsuperscript{343} For a more in-depth analysis about the contexts and arguments around color-blind and non-traditional casting, see Angela Chia-yi Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-Casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).
Rewriting Origin Stories of Asian American Literary Paternity in *I-Hotel*

I have been observing the ways that the rhetoric and concept of generation installs a familial logic of organicity that delimits our understanding about the development of Asian American Studies and the relations between the multiple practitioners, formations, and fronts within the field. Generational paradigms further condition the ways we conceive of the participants and agents of political activism who partake in these multiple and sometimes overlapping fronts. In an interview, Yamashita discussed her perception about the generational composition of the movement’s members and how it shifted during her research:

I originally thought that the movement was a bunch of young cocky kids. But, none of this could’ve happened without people who were older—graduate students, professors, internees, war veterans. They all brought expertise and knowledge and experience. Scholars conducted study groups and classes in the community. They opened spaces to students. The manongs, nisei artists, freedom riders, closet communists and socialists—in gathering oral histories, I began to understand how central their mentorship was.³⁴⁴

Yamashita’s comments reveal the fraught tensions and meanings of generation in discussion of Asian America, for generation hardly ever merely functions only to mark differences in age, but also to signal one’s proximity to a particular country. In this context, there risks the perpetuation of a belief that radical action is reserved for the second generation onwards and that the immigrant parents are necessarily reserved and passive due to their proximity with “Asia.”

³⁴⁴ She continues: “There were elder Chinese communists who were hidden and afraid of discovery but who quietly supported the activists. And overseas students from Japan, Philippines, Taiwan, and Hong Kong who put themselves on the line, or behind the scenes, to help.” “Karen Tei Yamashita: Interviewed by Kandice Chuh,” *The Asian American Literary Review* 1, no. 1 (2010): 106–107.
Yet, this multivalence of generationality upon which Yamashita comments and prevalent throughout the novel, speaks to the ways in which the intimacies between these fronts can be illuminated rather than foreclosed. Rereading intergenerational conflict, Colleen Lye takes as her analysis Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* to argue that we can observe the fundamental shift of the trope from the Asian American historical novel of the 1960’s onward, whereby the older generation enfigures not that which must be continually disavowed, but rather a needed resource of tradition that sustains the younger generation. Lye further situates this frame within understandings about what she traces as an emergent “global Maoism” during the Asian American movement as a “permanent, unresolved unity of opposites.”  

There is something incredibly appealing and fruitful in this formulation that reminds me of Muñoz’s sense of “belonging in difference.” Thinking alongside both scholars’ insights, I wonder about the limits of presuming in advance what constitutes the two opposites. Even more urgently, what happens when these opposites are positioned within a frame of familial intergenerationality? The articulation of opposites calcified into generational difference risks concretizing their relations within a parent-child dynamic that prioritizes antagonism over and against the possibility of acknowledging other forms of intimacy. In other words, I invite us to question the ways in which the terms of the relationship between these two spheres are configured as in opposition, thus presuming the unthinkability of erotic intimacies between them. Karen Tei Yamashita’s *I Hotel* affords the possibility of bringing to bear a much greater variety of movements, contacts, and relations across and alongside historical (i.e., “generational” or cohort) specificity as a contact zone of radical desires for otherwise. As I show below, by so doing, *I Hotel* transfigures the

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meaning of generation as a noun referring to a discrete unit partitioned by temporal boundaries to a constellation of longings and actions by which we cohere to generate movements.

Rather than attempt to write a definitive origin story that imposes values on the objects and objectives of “Asian America,” I Hotel allows us to “revisit the questions originally posed by the Asian American movement in order to see what kinds of answers we might arrive at in the present moment.” It explores the complexities of the organizing, activism, and work indexed by the emergence of “Asian American” as a category, and illustrates the difficulty of narrativizing the movement as attached to a singular, coherent generation. The novel consists of ten novellas, each of which tracks a year within a decade long depiction of the movements of radical activism, starting with the Tet Offensive in 1968 and ending with the aftermath of the fall of the International Hotel in 1977. What the novel illuminates in depicting this decade is that, in thinking about the term “Asian American,” the oft-cited distinctions between academia and the community, political and cultural capital, aesthetics and the social, are hardly ever so clear. Instead, this novel frustrates any attempt to memorialize the events of this decade.

The structure of the novel enacts the various strategies by which we have interpreted and narrated these moments. The book opens with drawings of ten diagrams, unfolded boxes that outline the architecture for each year—its main protagonists as well as the sites and events of concern. Like the eponymous hotel structuring the novel, each box represents a different room. By focusing on “narrative voices,” the first novella Eye Hotel invites us to contemplate what (hi)stories are told and how we tell them. As Yamashita stated in an interview: “I used the first novella to develop each of the voices that would then be attached to each novella.” Rather than

asserting the primacy of the first novella over the other nine, this observation emphasizes the important work that *Eye Hotel* does as a point of departure for the rest of the novel. Like the International Hotel itself, both for the movement and the novel, the first novella (and 1968) may be said to enable, without dictating, an architecture for the politics and organizing that unfolded. Suggestive of the movement itself, this first novella includes a number of different narrative voices—Walter Cronkite, a dowager empress, and a first person plural “we” symbolizing Japanese/Americans—and styles—a textbook description of the student strikes, a hybridized rendition of Confucius’s *The Analects*, and a cinéma vérité screenplay. Moreover, featuring characters that are translators, educators, poets, and writers, this novella invites us to consider the means and modes by which we produce and transmit knowledge.

By rehearsing, extending, and subverting tropes of Oedipal relations, *Eye Hotel* plays with assumptions regarding generationality, politics, and the role of the international through tropes of paternity: father figures and the (re)production of sustainable legacies. A perverse mixture of life and death begins this literary work and the decade of Asian American activism it traces. Clutching his heart, Paul Wallace Lin’s father, “Ba,” falls to the ground as his last words remain unheard against the backdrop of New Year festivities; Paul can only imagine what they are. The narrative voice draws a connection between Paul’s loss of his father to the massacre of civilians in Viet Nam. Juxtaposed with U.S. military violence during the lunar new year in the Tet Offensive, “the death of the father” serves as a trope to consider not only the violent consequences of racism at home and imperialism abroad, but also the anxieties and hopes for galvanizing movements to challenge these systems by identifying affinities across racial and geographic borders. Furthermore, the metaphor of orphanage becomes a means of claiming kinship with the Vietnamese in the formation of a Third World Liberation Front.
The novella also highlights the risks of thinking through the familial as a means of staging solidarities and critiques. It juxtaposes two disparate types of father figures to depict how metaphors of paternity can dangerously stifle social movements. First, the text conveys a loss of direction given the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, father figures of sorts to social justice movements. Then, the chapter ends with the paternal state: “Paul looks back in shock at a charging cavalry of mounted police. Suddenly he sees himself multiplied, monkey orphans let loose, raising havoc. One by one, an invisible daddy cracks his multiplying monkey skulls. Who is free to be free at last?” Understood as “an invisible daddy,” the state may be seen as operating to manage and quell dissent both through physical violence and discourses of benevolent paternalism. Conversely, viewing this moment of rebellion in Oedipal terms can frame dissenters as irrational children as a means of discounting the conditions that motivate their dissent. Meanwhile, the first set of father figures speaks to our privileging of charismatic figures as singular leaders for social movements. By pairing them in relation to the violence of the ‘daddy state,’ Yamashita alludes to how such reliance can discipline our understandings of what counts as the political, thereby foreclosing explorations of already existent and future alternative possibilities for social justice.

Amid these contradictory metaphors for paternity, Paul encounters two contrasting ways for making sense of his father’s legacy. Following Ba’s death, Paul’s Aunt takes over to ensure that Ba’s life and death are commemorated within the dictates of Chinese tradition. In a telling move, she demands that Paul not include his father’s “favorite book,” Karl Marx’s *Capital*, within the casket, effectively distancing the life and legacy of Ba away from Communist ideology (6). Chen Wen-guang’s entrance as a potential paternal substitute for Paul, however,

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provides an alternative way of remembering Ba that challenges these disciplinary traditional rites. Jumping into Paul’s car as his father’s funeral procession circles Chinatown, Chen introduces himself as Ba’s friend and the matchmaker between Paul’s parents. His entrance becomes a way of breaking out of the tradition imposed by Paul’s Aunt, of questioning the blind acceptance of Chinese funereal rituals that Ba would have hated, and of transporting Paul out of the confines of Chinatown. Chen resituates the “monkey orphans” of Asian/America by uncovering Ba’s past among the radical artistic community on Monkey Block, a legacy that remains illegible under the traditions of mourning at the funeral. In shedding new light upon Ba’s past, Chen also maps an alternative relationality toward “China,” providing Paul an entry to both Ba’s past and to China that foregrounds the practice of revolutionary art and thought.

Metonymically referred to as “Professor,” Chen is not only a family friend, but also a mentor for Paul in diasporic writings, catalyzing his politicization. Chen assumes a privileged position within the novella in that he has a large following among the students on strike. As a professor fired from San Francisco State College (SFSC), Chen demonstrates to the student activists the various uses that China provides—artistically, politically, and pedagogically—from the literature of Lu Xun to the writings of Mao. In other words, “Asia” and “China” are not vessels for flattened notions of cultural tradition, but rather dense resources for thinking through political strategizing that emphasizes the importance of culture and writing for revolution. Consequently, he advocates a mode of Third World Internationalism inspired not only by Maoist thinking, but also modern Chinese literature and culture. Asia, and more directly China, serves as a shadow throughout this first novella, gesturing toward the various ways in which “Asia” becomes formative to the political formation of “Asian America.” The Viet Nam War, the Third

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349 For more on the role of Maoist thinking, see Lye, “Asian American 1960s.”
World Liberation Front, and key events and knowledges from Asia mobilized activists organized in the SFSC struggle. What the novella asks us to consider is the myriad ways in which China and Asia prompted the formulation of radical U.S. social movements with Chen—as Professor, educator of Chinese literature, and father figure—enfiguring various ways that “Asia(n)” can and does manifest in invocations of “Asian America(n).”

Through the triangulated relationship between Chen and his students Paul and Edmund Yat Min Lee, this novella, I argue, explores and negotiates various strategies and narratives about Asian American literary paternity. On literary paternity among Asian American male authors, Patricia P. Chu argues that these authors presented “author-heroes” where the narrative “defines their American character in terms of authorial integrity, Oedipal rebellion, and the founding (or ‘fathering’) of a literary tradition.”

Literary paternity, as I understand it to be theorized through Yamashita’s novella, both resonates with and extends these characteristics of authorship. Through these three characters we see literary paternity as describing: the desire and practice of articulating and creating what “Asian America” is and means through writing; the (re)production of Asian America and its (literary) tradition through the selection of father figures; and, our contemporary means of remembering the development of Asian America via these past writings. Through their various writerly roles—Chen as Professor, Edmund as translator, and Paul as the poet—these characters emphasize the importance of writing for the social movement in defining, recording, and making sense of the struggles around them. Each character allegorizes a particular orientation toward Asian/America, with Professor Chen orientating toward China with Maoist teachings, Paul representing the vanguard in writing a distinctly “Asian American” experience, and Edmund translating Chinese poetry. The complex

intimacies between the international and the national in Chen’s and Paul’s relationship are mediated through Edmund, the son of a Chinese immigrant working-class family, fellow student and protégé of Chen. Unlike Paul and others, Edmund is known for his linguistic fluency, his love for Chinese literature, and comes to embody questions of translation between “Asian” and “Asian American” that is represented by Chen and Paul respectively. The “desire to write” animates and drives these three individuals in their related yet distinct visions of what constitutes a literary paternity for Asian America (95).

I submit that Chen and Paul respectively allegorizes Third World Internationalism and Asian American cultural nationalism and that Yamashita uses their relationship to dramatize the ways in which these two ideologies are often narrated in terms of intergenerational conflicts within Asian American Studies. On the divergent narrative accounts of the Asian American movement and its origins, Daryl J. Maeda observes: “Discrepant genealogies of the origin of Asian American identity reproduce [a] tension: social histories and documentary collections of Asian American activism in the 1960s and 1970s tend to locate Third World internationalism as its central ideology, while literary and cultural histories generally privilege domestic U.S. nationalism.”351 These two genealogies also roughly align with William Wei’s narration of the movement’s development in terms of revolutionaries and reformers, whereby the latter successfully trumps the former.352 Glenn Omatsu similarly notes: “Their accounts tend to divide the period into two phases: the ‘good’ phase of the early 1960s characterized by the participatory

352 Wei bookends his important monograph with this claim. I thus concur with Maeda’s critiques that Wei’s verdict reduces the complexities of the players and processes of the movement so comprehensively detailed in his study. See William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); For Maeda’s critique, see Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*, 16.
democracy; followed by the post-1968 phase, when movement politics ‘degenerated’ into violence and sectarianism.” These accounts often explain the subsequent sectarianism in terms of not only splintering factions, but also the emergence of identity politics. Moreover, cultural productions and the fields studying them are often cited as formations that contained and diminished the revolutionary fervor of the movement. However, given the strong tradition of Asian American literatures that have been intent on exploring and reconstructing the histories and experiences of U.S. Asian racialization, Asian American literary and cultural studies have played a significant role in shaping the ways we understand and narrate not only “Asian America,” but also Asian American studies.

Accordingly, Yamashita problematizes these timelines throughout the novel by emphasizing the importance of narrative strategies in all scholarly and cultural efforts to document and remember the Asian American movement. She underscores these various modes of narration by playing with ideas of literary paternity that are most frequently attributed to Frank Chin, who is often referred to as the patriarch of Asian American letters, and the 1974 *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* that he co-edited with Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong as part of the Combined Asian Resources Project (CARP). While *I Hotel* includes a novella that more explicitly engages with *Aiiieeeee!*, Yamashita’s rehearsal of the rediscovery of John Okada’s *No-No Boy* at the end of the first novella beckons us to consider how the practices, dynamics, and debates around this literary

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collection shape the narration about the origin of the Asian American movement. In other words, it contemplates how Asian American Literature and our studies of it have come to influence our understanding of the Asian American movement and dominant accounts of this period in terms of cultural nationalism. More specifically, she works through the anxieties about paternity, tradition, and influence in his writing as a synecdoche for some of the anxieties around the Asian American movement and studies in general. If Chin’s writings and criticisms of them have obscured what David Eng astutely observed as “the interpenetrations between the diasporic and the domestic in the historical and contemporary genesis of Asian(-)American as a political identity and an oppositional social movement,” then I argue that Yamashita, through Chen and Paul, raises the question of what becomes excluded and cast aside in the ‘founding’ of a literary tradition as well as how our attachment toward narrating this literary paternity as the story of the Asian American movement (and its demise) reproduces such exclusions.

Dramatizing the tensions between Third World Internationalism and cultural nationalism that Maeda points out, Edmund’s death later in the novella marks a breach between the relationship of Chen and Paul. Following his death, Chen and Paul’s relationship is symbolized through the projects of literary production. While Chen, in mourning, attempts to compile a manuscript based on Edmund’s translations of the poems from Angel Island, Paul is immersed in editing a literary collection, allusive of Aiiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeee! The latter literary project signals the emergence of what may be understood as an ‘Asian American consciousness’ and cultural nationalism, a seeming departure from the former. While such depictions signal an important turning point in the emergence of the sign “Asian American” and its legitimization through

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356 Eng, Racial Castration, 213.
literature, Yamashita does not suggest a distinct mutual disavowal between “Asia” and “Asian America.” Instead, these two projects show the strain between Chen and Paul and the potentially destructive consequences when relations of pedagogy and mentorship become understood within frames of paternity and generational change.

The final schism between Chen and Paul occurs with the discovery of possible paternity. Paul’s desire for pride and approval for Chen overshadows their relation as teacher and student: “The problem was that Chen had become more than a teacher. Sometimes you think the student wants to surpass or show up the teacher, but that wasn’t the case for Paul. He wanted to make Chen proud. He wanted to give back something significant in return” (98). Awaiting Chen’s approval of his work, Paul discovers a suspicious photograph, a wedding picture of a younger Chen and Paul’s mother. Significantly, this discovery of possible biological paternity coincides with Chen’s feelings of obsolescence and resentment toward Paul. The text provides a view of Chen’s skepticism toward Asian American literature: “He knew that it was a breaking away and a breaking out, that someone had to stand up to American racism and to claim American English. He knew the political meaning of literary acts. He knew that if Paul and his generation of writers wanted a history, they would have to dig it up and invent it for themselves” (101). In response to new circumstances and political objectives, Chen recognizes the need for other forms of knowledge to emerge. However, rather than further facilitate conversations and lessons from Chinese literature, he articulates a notion of Oedipal rivalry that views Paul’s focus on Asian American literature as a new alluring trend that casts his interest as irrelevant and obsolete. Robert McLaughlin interprets this passage as follows: “At one point, a well known poet, translator, and teacher reflects disapprovingly on one of his activist students and senses
himself becoming irrelevant in the eyes of the new generation." Yamashita draws attention to the ways in which approaches of knowledge transmission and mentorship can unwittingly reproduce Oedipal logics of rivalry, shame, and indebtedness.

The insertion of the potential paternal drama throws into relief the problem of viewing these shifts in thinking as being in opposition to prior modes of thought. Notions of generational conflict and opposition fortify ideas about these two strands of thinking and writing as mutually discrete in counterproductive ways. Internalized as a narrative of competition or abandonment, these changes become personalized and privatized. Yamashita locates this tendency toward privatization within the risks in desires to write: “It’s a complicated desire that becomes mixed up with the self, and Chen and Paul, if forced, would admit that it was a desire stronger than any human relationship, including the one between them” (95). With the overemphasis on the self in ideas of authorship, the emergence of new knowledges and ideas, rather than welcomed, become reinterpreted as competition. This tension between Chen and Paul is similarly depicted in an earlier scene between Chen and his mentor. When Chen visits his former teacher in China, the latter conveys his disdain toward Chen and the younger generations because the newly popularized knowledges that they championed have rendered him obsolete. This sense of (dis)approval and (ir)relevancy comes to reproduce a calcified sense of tradition that fixes and dictates what can or cannot be said. Both between Chen and his mentor and Chen and Paul, differences in politics and ideology become reframed as generational distinctions, in which each stakes his own stance in opposition to the other.

Through these staged conflicts, this novella allows us to reassess the homosocial circuits of competition and desire that arise in the masculinist tradition of Asian American literary

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paternity, within which strands of cultural nationalism advocate for ideals of political self-determination and identity-formation that often privilege heteronormative masculinity at the expense of women and queers. In a chapter entitled “Analects,” Yamashita plays with this notion with 13.1 anxiously asking “What should be done about those colored homosexuals and raging feminists whose presence undermines the full and masculine citizenship of every man of color? I ask, if your masculinity is not your own, to whom does it belong?” (46). Parodically playing with the axiomatic lessons of Confucius, this analect queries how the prioritization of masculinity forecloses other kinds of desires. Yet, it also gestures toward another mode of queerness arising from this literary tradition. While Frank Chin has commonly been identified as an exemplar of Asian American cultural nationalism that is constitutively heterosexist and homophobic, Daniel Y. Kim has argued that his drawing upon African American male writers evinces a literary interracial homosociality that works to interrogate the feminizing and emasculating effects of white racism. Meanwhile, Cynthia Wu further observes the ways in which homoerotic desire may work “intra-ethnically” as a mode of coalitional building. Both scholars reframe understandings about the heteronormative masculinity of Asian American literary paternity by pointing attention to how queerness subtends and indexes the conditions of (im)possibility for alternative coalitions within the political objectives of Asian America.

The relation between Chen and Paul speaks to the possibility for such queerness. Analyzing this novel, Jinqi Ling observes the role of the sexual in unsettling the divide between

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the private and the public in politics: “This narrative rendering of the sexual through the political has the performative effect of redirecting private desires to concerns that take shape in public spaces—spaces that in turn provide a structure and orientation for the external layering and internal complexity of the human activities and intersubjective negotiations centering on the I-Hotel.” Yet, Ling’s reading of Paul as “gay,” I would argue, delimits queerness as merely an individualist problem of identity and psychological struggle. In reading the moments of homoerotic desire in the first novella, Ling unwittingly circumscribes questions of queerness to the demographic inclusion or exclusion of queer individuals, inhibiting examination into other potential ways in which queerness informed the Asian American movement. Instead, I argue that the dynamic relations that Yamashita stages between Chen and Paul explore the conditions of (im)possibility for queerness within narratives of the Asian American movement.

“We” Are Not Family: The (Im)possible Queerness of Inter-generational Intimacies

Against the possibility of biological paternity, revealed through Paul’s discovery that Chen might be his father, Yamashita depicts a strong homoeroticism between the two characters to interrogate how alternative forms of desire and intimacies become suppressed within models of literary paternity. The novella stages a homoerotic relationship between Chen and Paul as a means of illuminating the inadequacies of familial paradigms undergirding forms of radical political thinking and the possibility for otherwise. The erotics underlying their exchanges compel a disidentification from filial models of knowledge transmission and legacy, instead underscoring other potential modes of knowing, being, and wanting. In a chapter entitled “we,”

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the midpoint of the novella, the reader participates directly in the text, overseeing and overhearing the encounter between Chen and Paul. We as narrators, assert the same sensual gaze that the two wrap around one another. They meet in the aftermath of their terminated relationships with a female partner. In both cases, these female characters are minor and tangential, serving merely as foils to the separation and reunion of Chen and Paul. After a long absence, Chen meets with Paul on a ferry. Their longing for one another is clear as Chen hands Paul a present for his twenty-first birthday. Chen imparts wisdom onto Paul about the struggle for revolution, stating, “A man’s private life, one’s deep interior, must at times be forgotten or sacrificed” (61). Here, Yamashita alludes to the ways in which (queer) sexual desire is commonly framed as that which must be secondary to or abjected for the revolutionary cause. This advice may initially seem to ring true as they both arrive to Angel’s Island and discover the Chinese poems written on the walls of the cells of the detained immigrants. What we get instead is the possibility of erotics and desire as creative forces fomenting the work of revolution. The physical connection of “[t]heir shoulders touching” symbolizes the intimately personal bond that they forge through the desire to learn and to write (64). Moreover, the start of this project leads to a moment of queer production, in which Chen and Paul collaborate in writing a poem, which ends with the repetition of the line “I’ve been too busy missing you to be angry” (64).

That the queer erotic intimacies between Chen and Paul are alternately illuminated and encoded within the narrative speaks to structures of impossibility for queerness within Asian American literary paternity. In the last chapter of the novella, entitled “All the Things You Are,” Chen and Paul reunite once again after a separation and their depicted interactions are sensual,
paralleling that of the ferry scene. With his house condemned and its foundation slipping, Chen calls Paul for help removing his belongings. Sensing an emotional ambivalence from Paul, Chen decides to reveal his personal history with Paul’s mother: “[Your mother and I] were married only a year, and she left. But we were always friends. It’s really true I introduced her to your father. They were very happy together” and Paul also tells Chen: “I thought you were my father” (111). Chen’s facilitation of the union between Paul’s father and mother suggest a queer genealogy that shifts us away from the biological. Confronting this misrecognition of paternity at the end of the novella leads to the strongest homoeroticism between the two men. Escaping the pouring rain, the two male characters take cover in Chen’s condemned house with a precarious foundation. The text reads: “The relentless rain washes across their face, dribbles from nose to chin to chest to stomach to crotch. The clothing has to be peeled off, layer by layer, abandoned with boots in sloppy piles in the dark entryway. Naked, shivering” (112). Notably, the subject becomes unintelligible within this intersubjective erotic space. Later, Chen ambiguously tells Paul to “Get under. Hurry” (112). This unclear gesture suggests a bond that extends into the day, as both characters cook and eat before leaving the crumbling house.

This mutual care-taking between the two characters in the face of a collapsing house offers a powerful metaphor for domesticity. The literal collapse of this house, which ends the novel with the repetition of the word “falling,” invokes the queer residents of the International Hotel, elucidating the false promise of the good life that stems from ideals of nationhood, domesticity, and heteronormativity for the racialized subject. This collapsing of the house thus portends and reframes the fall of the International Hotel at the close of the novel and the decade, casting it in another light than failure. Facing the hotel’s demolition, a resident in the hotel states in the last novella of this book: “we were not considered permanent or stable members of
society. We did not own our homes. We may have had families, but hotels were suspect places to raise children, so we were suspect families…A famous scholar warned us that when there are no homes, there will be no nation” (590). While this quote comes from the last novel of this book, which documents the ultimate loss of the International Hotel, I would assert that the book invites us to engage in a queer reading practice. By rearranging the order in which each book is read, which Yamashita encourages, we may find alternative possibilities, missed opportunities, and ways of relating to the contemporary context of Asian America. If we understand that the nation-state heralds a vision of citizenship entrenched in heteronormativity, a social formation historically and legally denied these residents and Asian immigrants, how may we productively inhabit this queer space and interrogate nationalist presumptions of “Asian America”? The queer intimacies between Paul and Chen compel an exploration of alternative forms of queer (be)longing within Asian America that fall outside and question the prioritization of the family unit. These affective ties, desires, and collective formations are located within and against the perpetual state of “falling,” of a domesticity slipping away.

Attending to the complex and porous ways in which queerness and the transnational are configured in Yamashita’s novella opens up multiple temporalities within the ‘origins’ of the Asian American movements. We may perhaps embrace what is not yet known or what cannot be known ‘about’ this period in order to remain open to the work that “Asian American” can do. Entrapping Asian American Studies within familial logics of inter-generational conflict forecloses the possible work that it can do by presupposing and struggling over the content of what the field is about.363 In part, I am following Chandan Reddy’s important observation that we have not yet been able to account for the high participation of women of color and queers of

color in these radical social movements. He urges: “we may commit ourselves to a
historiographical practice that places these non-national gendered and sexual solidarities,
socialities, and forces within the same representational schemas used by cultural nationalist
thinkers to attest to the equally full presence of those excluded from our knowledge.”

In a way, we might say that this observation also holds true of Yamashita’s impressive *I Hotel*,
populated by inter-group modes of solidarities, but filled with mainly heterosexual couplings
rather than queer ones. Nevertheless, I suggest that the queerness that arises from the first
novella haunts and animates the forms of work depicted in the latter ones, beckoning us to
reassess the inter-racial, inter-cultural, and inter-generational queer exchanges of erotic desire
and solidarity.

What *I Hotel* traces in its queer genealogies then are not only the intimacies between
internationalism and nationalism in the formation of the Asian American political movement, as
the above analysis has argued, but also the forms of solidarities between peoples across
generations and multiple axes of difference. This collectivity of queer (be)longing coalesces in
the last novella, *I-Hotel*, which documents the final moments of the anti-eviction movement in
1977 through a narrative “we.” This “we” coheres around a utopian longing, compelled through
identifications and collaborations, generating movements that demanded a more just future, that
refused to be confined within its present moment. Similarly, the ten novellas of *I Hotel* also
generate movements and not moments. In spite of the year that entitles each one, multiple
temporalities are embedded into the novellas in ways that exceed and expand the chronological
marker. Barely remarked upon in the text itself, the “1968” of *Eye Hotel* actually spans the

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365 See Estella Habal, *San Francisco’s International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American
entirety of the decade under examination. Thus, “1968” and the larger novel as a whole stages a utopian imagining of the thens and theres of Asian America akin to Lauren Berlant’s ideal: “I mean to place ’68 in a scene of collaborations and aspirations for thinking, describing, and theorizing social change in a present tense, but a present tense different from what we can now imagine for pragmatic, possible or useful politics.”

What then are the possibilities of feeling this utopian impulse when locating the house and the International Hotel as the then and there of Asian America? The falling house from which Chen and Paul escape at the conclusion of the first novella is meant to temporally and symbolically parallel the fall of the International Hotel. Through such a parallel, Yamashita’s Eye Hotel invites us to reassess the term “Asian American” through the queerness that conditions its emergence. We may reframe the formative articulation of “Asian/American,” in which the solidus seemingly signifies the unbreachable gap, which translates into a number of debates due to the catachrestic nature of “Asian American” that, as I have been arguing, so often manifests and/or is understood as intergenerational conflict. The solidus is not only a slash, but also, as Jafari Allen reminds us, a stroke, which conveys contact and intimacy within which desire and erotics circulate between the two terms that rub up against one another. The horizon of these desires are not yet known as Chen and Paul leave the house before it collapses in a car that “holds a small treasure and the unrequited future: a pink slip, two unfinished manuscripts, one of translated poems, songs of Gold Mountain, and another, an illustrated cookbook; a tin can of old photographs” (113). This journey reimagines a queer point of departure heading toward an

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“unrequited future,” one that can only be hoped as an Asian/American horizon of interdependent and coalitional intimacies. Indeed, the depicted intergenerational intimacies and coalitions in *I Hotel* give a glimpse into this ‘unrequited future.’

**CODA: Intimating Movements in Moments**

2015 witnessed a number of student organized efforts throughout the United States protesting rampant institutional racism on university campuses and demanding systemic change. From University of Missouri to Ithaca College, from UCLA to Brown University, this critical mass of energy exuded across more than sixty academic institutions in North America, to many, signals a continuation of the unfinished project by the Third World Liberation Front and resonates with calls for transforming the university during the 60’s and 70’s.\(^{369}\) These students join in solidarity with other movements, most notably Black Lives Matter, to emphasize the intimacies in efforts galvanized against institutional racism, police brutality, sexual assault, student debt, and contingent labor. From these collectivities emerges an increasingly common declaration that challenges attempts to dismiss and undermine the structural conditions compelling their collective radical action: “This is a movement, not a moment.” While narratives around radical social movements are replete with laments about failure and defeat, this statement challenges what is often a temporal condoning of the event as a “moment,” spontaneous, fleeting, and ultimately past. Such claims oftentimes occlude examinations into the material conditions that underwrite the collective action, longer genealogies of struggle and organizing

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\(^{369}\) Organizers stress: “These are living demands and will grow and change as the work grows and changes.” See “Campus Demands,” *The Demands*, accessed April 5, 2016, [http://www.thedemands.org/](http://www.thedemands.org/).
upon which the movement builds, and too quickly evaluate the success and failure of a
movement based on objective outcomes.

The more insidious operations of generationality are made clear in the dismissive
critiques against the student movements now. Pundits infantilize the student activists as well as
the racial violence against which they are organizing by likening such critiques to the need for
coddling. The logics of generationality ensnare the possibilities for radical change in the here and
now. Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University, situates such critiques within a broader
context: “Generations of parents and grandparents have long loved to shake their heads at the
apparent absurdities of the young…Now my graying generation (with plenty of coloring)
infantilizing then precisely limits the protests into a moment by framing them as temper
tantrums. Such assumptions about a generational split, however, further risks occluding the
palpable presence of those students who are not only critics of their protesting peers, but also the
very instigators of the racist discrimination on campuses nationwide. Undermining such logics of
generationality and temporal demarcations, the student activist efforts cohere as a spatial and
temporal movement, connecting with intimacies across campuses and across times to
interconnected struggles from the past. They allow us to reanimate the liberation struggles of the
60’s and 70’s as symbolizing both “the movement and the moment…a history in progress and ‘in
EPilogue

Camp Onward: On Trajectories (Still to Be) Followed

“Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to welcome back to the stage at this time—Miss Visa Denied!” Re-enter Visa Denied onto the stage following “150 years of Asian American history.” This time, she is left alone to vogue alongside Madonna’s voice. In addition, the two screens on either side of the center stage project text onto slides representing his internal monologue—written in English on one screen and in traditional Chinese on the other. Visa relates an experience of wandering the streets after work, upon which he comes to the realization that “As if by command, I / ventured down the / same streets where / the Chinese lived / more than a hundred / years ago.” This historical awareness leads to an affective experience of fear and displacement: “I felt a stirring / of collective fear / the Chinese had” (272). This moment of identification with the Chinese of “more than a hundred years ago” and the anti-Asian discrimination they experienced leads Visa to repeatedly pose what he asserts is the “same” question of place and home: “Stay or go?” Without raising the question explicitly in the text, Visa’s drag performance compels us to broaden this threat of violence and the (im)possibility of belonging toward intersectional considerations of sexuality, homophobia, and transphobia. Still, as the song enters its chorus, Visa comes to the conclusion that “I’m staying” because “I’m home” (273).

Shortly after this decision, the playback stutters toward the end of the chorus, tripping up as the invitation to “come on, vogue!” takes on a frantic quality like a compulsive demand. Visa Denied stares in bewilderment. The other two actor-characters playing Visa Denied—his ‘voice’ and dancing spirit of sorts—come onto the stage. With gentle care, they lovingly remove Visa’s
make-up, wig, and his top, leaving a chiseled male torso exposed. Staring out into the audience, the actor begins to speak in his own voice for the first time in the play. The metaphorical and literal stripping down of the protagonist, along with the direct address to the audience recall the closing act on sorcerer Prospero of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Yet, despite the fabulosity, it would be inaccurate to suggest that Miss Visa Denied ever closely approximated either the power that Prospero wields or the cultural capital that Madonna possesses. Like the track that is experiencing “technical difficulties,” Visa too stutters as he delivers his lines in “*broken and halting English*” (as indicated by the stage directions, 273). He introduces himself as Wong Kong Shin before asserting his belonging in America.\(^{372}\)

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I
come
from
Penang
West Malaysia

No

I
come
from
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\(^{372}\) In an extended endnote, David Román argues against what might be read in this moment as not only “Visa's seeming denial of her drag persona” but also "a phobic response to drag." While understanding this as a possible reading, I am more concerned with problematizing a potential interpretation of authenticity in this act of removing the elements of drag on stage. David Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 319, n.29.
While this declaration aligns with projects of ‘claiming America,’ it is nonetheless made through the recognition of racial discrimination and the violences that underlie national belonging. Unlike Prospero’s ultimate deliverance from the shackles, abetted by the applause of the audience, Wong’s monologue is followed by a return to the scene of interrogation in the opening of the play. Thus, Wong’s decision to stay concludes with the officer’s clarification that “You cannot stay / for more than three months,” followed by an ironic “Welcome to America” (275). Tellingly, the present moment and immigration regulation bookend the “150 years of Asian American history” just staged in the play. Witnessing the contrast between the opening and closing scenes—with the back of Miss Visa Denied versus the front of Wong Kong Shin facing the audience—one might be tempted to read this difference as one of un-covering and of defeat. Indeed, this collapse between the two scenes raises the specter of the stage as both checkpoint and immigration detention center, a provisional nodal point shifting between transit and confinement. The repetition of the first scene with a difference, however, suggests other possibilities. Wong extends his right arm outward toward the audience. This movement suggests a response to the officer’s command that he present his plane ticket. Yet, we might also understand the gesture of Visa’s extension as a plea or provocation to remember the larger histories, practices, contexts, and spaces that both undergird and exceed this exchange. His arm extends beyond the diegetic world of the play, conjuring other times and spaces. It asks us to remember and recall the scenes previously staged, those which underwrite this present.
Particularly, as I have been tracing throughout these chapters, this closing, I suggest, forces us to consider once again how camp recovers historical and ongoing structures of racial inequity and colonial violence. By “recover,” I mean multiple senses of this word, emblematic of the multivalent and complex ways in which race and sexuality rub up against one another within the juxtaposition of camps. On the one hand, I mean quite literally the reparative practices by which racialized subjects inhabited, negotiated, and survived within compromised conditions of state violence, legal disenfranchisement, confinement, and extreme duress. It points toward the means by which bodies creatively (re)worked the structures—physical, legal, and cultural—that aimed to fix them into place. Within and against these structures, bodies moved individually and in concert with one another to improvise and proliferate collective modes of social living within spaces often written off as materializing social death. On the other hand, by “re-cover” I also aim to inquire into how the realm of aesthetics, as well as the spectacularity and humor indexed by camp, has served to cover over its imbrication with structures of racial violence.\(^\text{373}\)

As intimated through my engagements with camps in these chapters, recovery signals not only the important process of discovering new archives and artifacts, exposing voids in extant scholarship, and pointing attention to that which has been willfully or unwittingly neglected. Rather, the task of recovery also demands a vigilant interrogation of our disciplinary protocols in order to attend to the processes by which they render certain objects, practices, and forms of living unthinkable or undesirable. It compels us to grapple with the previous two meanings of recovery in tension with one another, to ensure that we as scholars do not continually cover over both the seemingly counterintuitive ways in which state power becomes consolidated and

\(^\text{373}\) As Ahmed explains: “To recover can be to re-cover, to cover over the causes of pain and suffering.” Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 216.
creatively undermined. The itinerary of this extended analysis into the historical entanglement between camps has followed the routes of Asian racialization, suggesting that the historical processes, archives, as well as scholarly and cultural productions they coalesce afford us a particularly astute understanding into these relations. These archives invite further examination into the cross-racial tensions and coalitions raised within and between camps.

*Look around: everywhere you turn is heartache...*

*Let your body move to the music.*

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