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Cultural Critique
M. Butterfly: Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity

Dorinne K. Kondo

I

In David Henry Hwang's Tony award-winning play M. Butterfly, Broadway audiences encounter a dazzling spectacle, in which a tale of seemingly mistaken gender identities and delusions perpetuated over decades occasions a richly textured production moving in and around the spaces of global politics, gender and racial identities, and the power relations inevitably present in what we call "love." A close examination of M. Butterfly has profound implications for our assumptions about identity, including anthro-
pological theories of the self or the person, the ways gender and race are mutually implicated in the construction of identity, and the pervasive insidiousness of gender and racial stereotypes.

The story intrigues through its sheer improbability. The playwright’s notes cite the *New York Times*, which in May of 1986 reported the trial of a “former French diplomat and a Chinese opera star” who were “sentenced to six years in jail for spying for China after a two-day trial that traced a story of clandestine love and mistaken sexual identity. . . . Mr. Bouriscot was accused of passing information to China after he fell in love with Mr. Shi, whom he believed for twenty years to be a woman.”¹ In asking himself how such a delusion could be sustained for so long, Hwang takes us through the relations between France and Indochina, and most especially, through the terrain of written images of “the Orient” occupied most centrally by that cultural treasure, *Madama Butterfly*. These already-written images—the narrative convention of “submissive Oriental woman and cruel white man”—are played out in many different arenas, including, perhaps most tellingly, the space of fantasy created and reproduced by the Frenchman himself.

An analysis of *M. Butterfly* suggests the ways Hwang challenges our very notions of words such as “truth,” our assumptions about gender, and, most of all, how *M. Butterfly* subverts and undermines a notion of unitary identity based on a space of inner truth and the plenitude of referential meaning. Through its use of gender ambiguity present in its very title—is it Monsieur, Madame, Mr., Ms. Butterfly?²—through power reversals, through constituting these identities within the vicissitudes of global politics, Hwang conceals, reveals, and then calls into question so-called “true” identity, point-

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1. *M. Butterfly* appeared in *American Theater* 5 (July/August 1988) in a special pull-out section. It was later published in 1988 by the Dramatists’ Play Service, New York. All quotations cited are from this latter source. My thanks to William Craver Associates, literary agents for David Henry Hwang, for permission to quote from the play.

2. If the play were in French, the answer would be clear—Monsieur Butterfly. But since it is a play written in English by an Asian American, about a Frenchman, that utilizes an Italian opera as a narrative foil, the matter is rather more vexed and ambiguous.
ing us toward a reconceptualization of the topography of “the self.” Rather than a bounded essence, filled with “inner truth,” separated from “the world” or “society” by an envelope of skin, *M. Butterfly* opens out “the self” to “the world,” softening or even dissolving those boundaries, where “identity” becomes spatialized as a series of shifting nodal points constructed in and through fields of power and meaning. Finally, *M. Butterfly* intertwines geography and gender, where East/West and male/female become mobile positions in a field of power relations. It suggests that analyses of shifting gender identity must also take into account the ways gender is projected onto geography, and that international power relations and race are also, inevitably, inscribed in our figurations of gender.

II

Perhaps the creative subversiveness of Hwang’s play best emerges most clearly in contrast with the conventions of the opera *Madama Butterfly*, to which it provides ironic counterpoint. This cultural “classic”—music by Giacomo Puccini, libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, based on a story by John Luther Long—debuted at La Scala in 1904. It remains a staple of contemporary opera company repertoire, one of the ten most performed operas around the world. As we will see, Hwang reappropriates the conventional narrative of the pitiful Butterfly and the trope of the exotic, submissive “Oriental” woman, rupturing the seamless closure and the dramatic inevitability of the story line.

The conventional narrative, baldly stated, goes something like this. Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton is an American naval officer, stationed on the ship *Abraham Lincoln* in Nagasaki during the Meiji period, at the turn of the century, not long after Japan was “opened” to the West. The opera begins with Pinkerton and Goro, a marriage broker, as they look over a house Pinkerton will rent for himself and his bride-to-be, a fifteen-year-old geisha named Cho-Cho-San (“Butterfly” in Japanese). American consul Sharpless arrives, and Pinkerton sings of his hedonistic philosophy of life, characterizing himself as a “vagabond Yankee” who casts his anchor where he pleases. “He doesn’t satisfy his life/if he
doesn't make his treasure/the flowers of every region . . . the love of every beauty."³ Pinkerton toasts his upcoming marriage by extolling the virtues of his open-ended marriage contract: "So I'm marrying in the Japanese way/for nine hundred ninety-nine years/Free to release myself every month" (189). Later, he toasts "the day when I'll marry/In a real wedding, a real American wife" (191). When Butterfly arrives with an entourage of friends and relatives, Pinkerton and Sharpless discover that among the treasures Butterfly carries with her into her new home is the knife her father used for his seppuku, or ritual suicide by disembowelment—and music foreshadows the repetition that will inevitably occur. Friends and relatives sing their doubts about the marriage, and in a dramatic moment, Butterfly's uncle, a Buddhist priest, enters to denounce Butterfly's decision to abandon her ancestors and adopt the Christian religion. Rejected by her relatives, Butterfly turns to Pinkerton. The couple sing of their love, but Butterfly expresses her fear of foreign customs, where butterflies are "pierced with a pin" (215). Pinkerton assures her that though there is some truth to the saying, it is to prevent the butterfly from flying away. They celebrate the beauty of the night. "All ecstatic with love, the sky is laughing" (215), says Butterfly as they enter the house and act 1 closes.

By the beginning of act 2, Pinkerton has been gone for three years. Though on the verge of destitution, Butterfly steadfastly awaits the return of her husband, who has promised to come back to her "when the robin makes his nest" (219). And, known only to her servant, Suzuki, Butterfly has had a baby, a son with occhi azzurini (azure eyes) and i ricciolini d'oro schietto (little curls of pure gold)—truly a stunning genetic feat. Sharpless comes to call, bearing a letter from Pinkerton, and he informs Butterfly that her waiting is in vain, that Pinkerton will not return and that she should accept the marriage proposal of the Prince Yamadori, who has come to court her. She will have none of it, still sure of her husband. In Butterfly's eyes, she is no longer Madame Butterfly, but Mrs. Pinkerton, bound by American custom. In desperation,  

hoping the consul will persuade Pinkerton to return, Butterfly brings out her son. At that point Pinkerton is in fact already in Nagasaki with his American wife. Knowing that he is in port, Butterfly and Suzuki decorate the house with flowers. Butterfly stays awake all night, awaiting Pinkerton's arrival. In the morning, when Suzuki finally persuades her mistress to rest, Sharpless and Pinkerton arrive. Pinkerton has decided to claim his son and raise the boy in America, and he persuades Suzuki to help him convince Butterfly that this is for the best. Later, Butterfly sees Sharpless and an American woman in the garden. Now, realizing that Pinkerton has in fact remarried, Butterfly cries out with pain, "All is dead for me!/All is finished, ah!" (253), and she prepares for the inevitable. She tells Sharpless to come with Pinkerton for the child in half an hour. Butterfly unsheathes her father's dagger, but then spies her son, whom Suzuki has pushed into the room. In her agony, the music forces her higher and higher, as her voice threatens to soar out of control and then sinks to an ominous low note. Butterfly blindfolds her child, as if to play hide-and-seek, goes behind a screen to stab herself, and emerges, staggering toward the child. The brass section accompanies her death agony, trumpeting vaguely Asian-sounding music until finally, climatically, a gong signals her collapse. We hear Pinkerton's cries of "Butterfly" as Pinkerton and Sharpless run into the room. Butterfly points to the child as she dies, and the opera resolves in a swelling, tragic orchestral crescendo.

In Madama Butterfly Puccini draws on and recirculates familiar tropes: the narrative inevitability of a woman's death in opera, and most especially, the various markers of Japanese identity: Butterfly as geisha, that quintessential Western trope of Japanese woman; the manner of Butterfly's death, by the knife—the form of suicide conventionally associated in the West with Japan; the construction of the Japanese as a "people accustomed/to little things/humble and silent" (213). And little is exactly what Butterfly gets. In Western eyes, Japanese women are meant to be sacrificed, and Butterfly sacrifices her "husband," her religion.

4. Treated so eloquently in Catherine Clement's Opera, or the Undoing of Women, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
her people, her son, and, ultimately, her very life. The beautiful, moving tragedy propels us toward narrative closure, as Butterfly discovers the truth—that she is, indeed, condemned to die as her identity as a Japanese geisha demands—an exotic object, a "poor little thing," as Kate Pinkerton calls her. In Puccini's opera, men are men, women women, Japanese Japanese, Americans Americans, as defined by familiar narrative conventions.\(^5\) And the predictable happens: West wins over East, Man over Woman, White Man over Asian Woman. The music, with its soaring arias and bombastic orchestral interludes, amplifies the points and draws us into further complicity with convention. Butterfly is forced into tonal registers that edge into a realm beyond rational control, demanding a resolution that arrives, (porno)graphically, with the crash of the gong.\(^6\) Music and text collaborate, to render inevitable the tragic—but oh, so satisfying—denouement: Butterfly, the little Asian woman, crumpled on the floor. The perfect closure.

Identities, too, are unproblematic entities in Puccini's opera; indeed, Puccini reinforces our own conventional assumptions about personhood. Butterfly's attempts to blur the boundaries and to claim for herself a different identity—that of an American—are doomed to failure. She is disowned by her people, and she cleaves to Pinkerton, reconstituting herself as American, at least in her own eyes. But the opera refuses to allow her to "overcome" her essential Japanese womanhood. The librettists have Butterfly say things and do things that reinforce our stereotyped notions of the category "Japanese woman": she is humble, exotic, a plaything. Pinkerton calls her a diminutive, delicate "flower" whose "exotic perfume" (199) intoxicates him. His bride, this child-woman with "long oval eyes" (213), makes her man her universe. And like most Japanese created by Westerners, Butterfly is concerned with "honor" and must kill herself when that honor has been sullied. Death, too, comes in stereotyped form. Her destiny is to die by the knife—metaphorically, via sexual penetration,

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\(^{5}\) Indeed, both Butterfly and Pinkerton are exotic caricatures for Puccini and his librettists. See Arthur Groos, "Lieutenant B. F. Pinkerton: Problems in the Genesis of an Operatic Hero," \textit{Italica} 64 (1987): 654–75.

\(^{6}\) Many thanks to Susan McClary for pointing out the ways in which the music collaborates with the textual narrative.
and finally, in her ritual suicide. Butterfly is defined by these narrative conventions; she cannot escape them.

I would like to suggest that this view of identity—a conventional view familiar to us in our everyday discourses and pervasive in the realm of aesthetic production—is based on a particular presupposition about the nature of identity, what philosophers might call "substance metaphysics." Identities are viewed as fixed, bounded entities containing some essence or substance, expressed in distinctive attributes. Thus Butterfly is defined by attributes conventionally associated in Western culture with Asian—or even worse, "Oriental"—women. Furthermore, I would go on to argue that a similar view of identities underlies the burgeoning anthropological literature on what we call "the self" or "the person." "The self" carries a highly culturally specific semantic load and presents a picture of unitary totality. According to our linguistic and cultural conventions, "self" calls up its opposing term, "society," and presupposes a particular topography: a self, enclosed in a bodily shell, composed of an inner essence associated with truth and "real" feelings and identity, standing in opposition to a world that is spatially and ontologically distinct from the self. A "self" is closed, fixed, an essence defined by attributes. Typically, the many anthropological analyses of "la notion de per-

9. Butler's work (e.g., *Gender Trouble*) on the "whole subject" in philosophy, and the insidious persistence of the subject-world trope in object relations theory and in hermeneutics, has been especially illuminating and instructive. In slightly different disciplinary languages, anthropologists have articulated similar critiques. James Clifford, for example, in *Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), argues: "Orienting, indeed constituting, the person, this complex spatial locus is not grasped in the mode of narrative closure by a centered, perceiving subject" (7). Leenhardt uses the notion of "plenitude" to describe a person constituted through relationships to the cosmos, to nature, to other persons. The notions of "presence" and the plenitude of referential meaning I deploy in this paper owe more to the deconstructionist tradition, where "plenitude" is associated with the centered, whole subject. One could argue that Leenhardt's work, though rooted in evolutionary perspectives and silent on the question of power, presages the emphasis on decentered subjects in this historical moment.
sonne,”¹⁰ “the concept of self” in this or that culture, abstract from specific contexts certain distinctive “traits” of “the self” among the Ilongot, the Ifaluk, the Tamils, the Samoans, the Americans. And even those analyses that claim to transcend an essentialist notion of identity and a self/society distinction by arguing for the cultural constitution of that “self” tend to preserve the distinction in their rhetoric. That one can even talk of a “concept of self” divorced from specific historical, cultural, and political contexts privileges the notion of some abstract essence of selfhood we can describe by enumerating its distinctive features. This self/society, substance/attribute view of identity underlies anthropological narratives as it informs aesthetic productions such as Madama Butterfly.¹¹

III

The self/society, subject/world tropes insidiously persist in a multiplicity of guises in the realms of theory and literature, but in anthropology, the literature on “the self” has transposed this opposition into another key: the distinction between a “person”—a human being as bearer of social roles—and “self”—the inner, reflective essence of psychological consciousness, recapitulating the binary between social and psychological, world and subject.¹² Yet anthropology deconstructs this binary even as it maintains its terms, for in demonstrating the historical and cultural specificity of definitions of “the person” or “the self,” we are led to a series of questions: Are the terms “self” and “person” the creations of our own linguistic and cultural conventions? If “inner” processes are culturally conceived, their very existence mediated by cultural

¹⁰ The foundational essay here is by Marcel Mauss, “La notion de personne, celle de ‘moi,’” Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 68 (1938), 263–82.
¹¹ The arguments I outline in this and the following section are more fully elaborated in my Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). My thanks to the Press for permission to recapitulate those arguments in this article.
discourses, to what extent can we talk of "inner, reflective essence" or "outer, objective world" except as culturally meaningful, culturally specific constructs? And how is the inner/outer distinction itself established as the terms within which we must inevitably speak and act?

Early studies of "the person," such as the classic Marcel Mauss essay, take as a point of departure la notion de personne as an Aristotelian category, an example of one of the fundamental categories of the human mind. Traversing space and time, Mauss draws our attention to different ways of defining "persons" and "selves" in different cultures in different historical moments, but posits the evolutionary superiority of Western notions of person. In a key passage, Mauss discusses the notion of the self: "Far from existing as the primordial innate idea, clearly engraved since Adam in the innermost depths of our being, it continues here slowly, and almost right up to our own time, to be built upon, to be made clearer and more specific, becoming identified with self-knowledge and the psychological consciousness."13 Western conceptions of self as psychological consciousness and a reflexive self-awareness, based on a division between the inner space of selfhood and the outer world, are held up as the highest, most differentiated development of the self in human history. Though Mauss's insights have been elaborated in richly varied ways, most anthropological analyses leave in place the rhetoric of "the self" as "psychological consciousness" and "self-knowledge," continuing to impart the impression of implicit ethnocentric superiority, essential unity, and referential solidity.

I have used the term "referential solidity," for it is clear that this rhetoric/theory of "the self" pivots on a spatialized ideology of meaning as reference. Saussure's influential formulation of the sign as the relation between signifier (the sound-image, "the impression it makes on our senses")4 and the concept inside the
head ("the psychological imprint of the sound") links the speaking subject to assumptions about meaning as plenitude, a fullness occupied by certain contents, located inside one's "self." Here we find another permutation of the Cartesian dichotomy between reason and sense perception. "Self" is constituted culturally, but in its presence, supported by the solidity of referential meaning, "the self" takes on the character of an irreducible essence, the Transcendental Signified, a substance that can be distilled out from the specificities of the situations in which people enact themselves. Such an essence of inner selfhood preserves the boundaries between the inner space of true selfhood and the outer space of the world.

The many anthropological accounts reliant on characterizations of "the concept of self," la notion de personne, with no reference to the contradictions and multiplicities within "a" self, the practices creating selves in concrete situations, or the larger historical, political, and institutional processes shaping those selves, decontextualize and reify an abstract notion of essential selfhood, based on a metaphysics of substance. Echoing Madama Butterfly's familiar narrative conventions and satisfying sense of closure, anthropological narratives recirculate tropes of a self/world boundary and a substance/attribute configuration of identity.

However, when we move from the conventions of fixed, essentialist identities in Madama Butterfly to the subversion of those conventions in M. Butterfly, we might go on to ask how selves in the plural are constructed variously in various situations, how these constructions can be complicated and enlivened by multiplicity and ambiguity, and how they shape and are shaped by relations of power. Such an approach would open out the space of selfhood to "the world," dissolving the boundaries and emptying the inner self of its plenitude, spatializing selves as conjunctions of forces produced by history, politics, culture, and narrative conventions, within a changing, complicated, and open discursive field. From clear boundaries between inner and outer, fixed identities characterized by distinctive attributes, and narrative closure to an open, shifting multiplicity of meanings, constituted in and by a changing field of

15. Ibid.
discourses and forces of power, where selves in the plural are empty of reference in an essentialist sense—these are the moves suggested by an analysis of Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*.

**IV**

The play opens with ex-diplomat René Gallimard in prison. (His last name, the name of a famous French publishing house, resonates with notions of narrative and of textual truth, and his first name, which sounds the same in its masculine and feminine forms, underlines the theme of gender ambiguity.) “It is an enchanted space I occupy” (8), he announces, and, indeed, it is enchanted—a space of fantasy, a prison of cultural conventions and stereotypes where Gallimard’s insistence on reading a complex, shifting reality through the Orientalist texts of the past makes him the prisoner and, eventually, the willing sacrificial victim of his own culturally and historically produced conventions.

Gallimard will be “seduced,” “deluded,” and “imprisoned” by clinging to an ideology of meaning as reference and to an essentialist notion of identity. For him, clichéd images of gender, race, and geography unproblematically occupy the inner space of identity, enabling opera star Song Liling to seduce through the play of inner truth and outer appearance. The first encounter between Song and Gallimard occurs in a performance at the home of an ambassador, where Song plays the death scene from *Madama Butterfly*. Clothed as a Japanese woman, wearing a woman’s makeup, Song is “believable” as Butterfly. This “believability” occurs on the planes of gender, size, and geography, when Gallimard gushes to Song about her/his wonderful performance, so convincing in contrast to the “huge women in so much bad makeup” who play Butterfly in the West (18).

Gallimard adheres to stereotyped images of women and of the Orient, where he assumes a transparent relationship between outer appearance and the inner truth of self. The signs of this identity are clothing and makeup, and since Song is dressed as a woman, Gallimard never doubts Song’s essential “femininity.” Gallimard’s equally essentialized readings of “the Orient” enable Song to throw Gallimard off balance with her initial boldness,
when she describes the absurdity of Madama Butterfly’s plot, but for the geographic and racial identities of its protagonists: “Con-
sider it this way: what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it’s an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner—ah!—you find it beautiful” (18).

Later, Song becomes flirtatious, and strategically exhibits the “appropriate” signs of her inner, essential “Oriental” female self: modesty, embarrassment, timidity. Gallimard responds by thinking, “I know she has an interest in me. I suspect this is her way. She is outwardly bold and outspoken, yet her heart is shy and afraid. It is the Oriental in her at war with her Western education” (25). Thus, Gallimard reads Song’s “Westernized, masculine” exterior as mere veneer, masking the fullness of the inner truth of “Oriental” womanhood. However she may try to alter this substance of identity, in Gallimard’s eyes, she—like Madame Butterfly—will never be able to overcome her essential “Oriental” nature.

This conventional reading of identity enables Song to manipulate the conventions to further her ends, to become more intimate with Gallimard, and, eventually, to pass on to the government of the People’s Republic of China the diplomatic secrets she learns in the context of their relationship. When Song first entertains Gallimard in her apartment, she appeals to Orientalist stereotypes of tradition, modesty, unchanging essence, invoking China’s two-thousand-year history and the significance her actions therefore take on in a “traditional” culture: “Even my own heart strapped inside this Western dress . . . even it says things . . . things I don’t care to hear” (27).

Her appeal finds a willing audience in Gallimard, who finds this Song far more to his liking and shares with the audience his delighted discovery that “Butterfly,” as he now calls her, feels inferior to Westerners. Seeing Song supposedly revealed—paradoxically, in the moment of her greatest concealment—in her feminine/“Oriental” inferiority, behaving with “appropriate” sub-
missiveness and docility, Gallimard for the first time finds his "true self" as a "real man" defined in opposition to Song. Wondering whether his Butterfly, like Pinkerton's, would "writhe on a needle" (28), he refuses to respond to her increasingly plaintive missives, and for the first time feels "that rush of power—the absolute power of a man" (28), as he cleans out his files, writes a report on trade, and otherwise enacts confident masculine mastery in the world of work. In the phrase "the absolute power of a man," Hwang highlights the connection between this power and the existence of a symmetrical but inverted opposite, for though presumably Gallimard was by most people's definitions a "man" before he met his Butterfly, he can only acquire the "absolute power of a man" in contrast to her. In love with his own image of the Perfect Woman and therefore with himself as the Perfect Man, Gallimard reads signs of dissimulation—that Song keeps her clothes on even in intimate moments, with appeals to her "shame" and "modesty"—as proofs of her essential "Oriental" womanhood. In so doing, he guards his inner space of "real, masculine" identity.

Gallimard begins with a conception of gender and racial identity based on an ideology of the inner space of selfhood. The audience, however, is allowed a rather different relationship between inner truth and outward appearance, one that initially preserves the distinction between "real," inner self and outer role. That Song is a Chinese man playing a Japanese woman is a "truth" we know from an early stage. Song plays ironically with this "truth" throughout. Its subtleties are powerfully articulated in a scene where Song is almost unmasked as a man. Gallimard, humiliated by the failure of his predictions in the diplomatic arena, demands to see his Butterfly naked. Song, in a brilliant stroke, realizes that Gallimard simply desires her to submit. She lies down, saying, "Whatever happens, know that you have willed it. . . . I'm helpless before my man" (47). Gallimard relents, and Song "wins." Later, Song triumphantly recounts the crisis to Comrade Chin, the PRC emissary, and then rhetorically asks her: "Why, in the Peking opera, are women's roles played by men?" Chin replies, "I don't know. Maybe, a reactionary remnant of male . . . " Song cuts her off. "No. Because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" (49).

Irony animates these passages. On the one hand, Song is
surely a man playing a woman—and his statement is a clear gesture of appropriation. However, Hwang suggests that matters are more complicated, that "woman" is a collection of cultural stereotypes connected tenuously at best to a complex, shifting "reality." Rather than expressing some essential gender identity, full and present, "woman" is a named location in a changing matrix of power relations, defined oppositionally to the name "man." So constructed by convention and so oppositionally defined is "woman" that, according to Song, only a "man" really knows how to enact "woman" properly. And because "man" and "woman" are oppositionally defined terms, reversals of "male" and "female" positions are possible. Indeed, it is at the moment of his greatest submission/humiliation as a woman that Song consolidates his power as a "man." She/he puts herself/himself "in the hands of her man," and it is at that moment that Gallimard relents and feels for the first time the twinges of love, even adoration. The vicissitudes of the Cultural Revolution and the signal failure of Gallimard's foreign policy predictions send Gallimard home to France, but he keeps a shrinelike room waiting for his Perfect Woman. And in his devoted love, his worship of this image of Perfect Woman, Gallimard himself becomes like a "woman."

A dramatic reversal is effected in the play in act 3 through a stunning confrontation, where Song reveals his "manhood" to Gallimard. By this time Song is dressed as a man, but he strips in order to show Gallimard his "true" self. Gallimard, facing Song, is convulsed in laughter, finding it bitterly amusing that the object of his love is "just a man" (65). Song protests in an important passage that he is not "just a man," and tries to persuade Gallimard that, underneath it all, it was always him, Song, in his full complexity. Gallimard will not be persuaded, however. Clinging to his beloved stereotypes of "Oriental" womanhood, now supposedly "knowing" the difference between fantasy and reality, he declares his intention to "choose fantasy" (67). Song announces his disappointment, for his hope was for Gallimard to "become . . . something more. More like . . . a woman" (67). Song's efforts are to no avail, and Gallimard chases Song from the stage.

Gallimard returns to his prison cell in a searing finale and launches into a chilling speech as he paints his face with geisha-like makeup and dons wig and kimono. He speaks of his "vision of the
Orient” (68), a land of exotic, submissive women who were born to be abused. He continues:

[T]he man I loved was a cad, a bounder. He deserved nothing but a kick in the behind, and instead I gave him . . . all my love.

Yes—love. Why not admit it all. That was my undoing, wasn’t it? Love warped my judgment, blinded my eyes, rearranged the very lines on my face . . . until I could look in the mirror and see nothing but . . . a woman. (68)

Gallimard grasps a knife and assumes the seppuku position, as he reprises lines from the Puccini opera: “Death with honor is better than life . . . life with dishonor” (68). He continues:

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

Gallimard plunges the knife into his body and collapses to the floor. Then, the coup de grâce. A spotlight focuses dimly on Song, “who stands as a man” (69), on top of a sweeping ramp. Tendrils of smoke from his cigarette ascend toward the lights, and we hear him utter quizzically, “Butterfly?” as the stage darkens.

This stunning gender/racial power reversal forces the audience toward a fundamental reconceptualization of the topography of identity. “True” inner identity is played with throughout, then seemingly preserved in the revelation of Song’s “real” masculinity, then again called into question with Gallimard’s assumption of the guise of Japanese woman.16

16. The television promo for the play recapitulates these power reversals, beginning with a shot of B. D. Wong dressed as the demure Butterfly, fan in hand. She turns around, to reveal a laughing, confident B. D. Wong, now in
Whereas the death of Madame Butterfly in Puccini’s opera offers us the satisfaction of narrative closure, Gallimard’s assumption of the identity of a Japanese woman is radically disturbing, for in this move Hwang suggests that gender identity is far more complicated than reference to an essential “inner truth” or external biological equipment might lead us to believe. As Foucault has noted, “sex” as a category gathers together a collection of unrelated phenomena in which male and female are defined oppositionally in stereotyped terms and posits this discursively produced difference as natural sexual difference. M. Butterfly deconstructs that “naturalness,” opening out the inner spaces of “true gender identity” to cultural and historical forces, where identity is not an inner space of truth but a location in a field of shifting power relations.

Perhaps what Hwang might further emphasize is the inadequacy of either gender category to encompass a paradoxical and multiplicitous reality. The key statement here is Song’s, that he is more than “just a man.” In the stage directions, Song at the end “stands as a man” (69, my emphasis) in the clothing and the confident, powerful guise of a man. But we cannot say with certainty that he is a man, for “man” is a historically, discursively produced category that fails to accommodate Song’s more complex experience of gender. Song attempts to persuade Gallimard to join him in a new sort of relationship, where Song is more like a man, Gallimard more like a woman. At precisely this point Hwang suggests the inability of the categories of “man” and “woman” to account for the multiple, changing, power-laden identities of his protagonists. Gallimard refuses, saying that he loved a woman created by a man and that nothing else will do. Song thereupon accuses him of having too little imagination. Gallimard immediately retorts that he is pure imagination, and, on one level, he is right. In his obsession with the Perfect Oriental Woman, he truly remains the prisoner and then the willing sacrificial victim of his masculine guise in suit and tie. He laughs, puts his face in his hands, and turns again. As the hands open, we see the sorrowful face of John Lithgow, painted in lurid Japanese whiteface and Kabuki-like makeup, dressed as Butterfly.

Orientalist cultural clichés—a realm of "pure imagination" indeed. But this distinction between imagination and reality itself erects the bar between categories and fails to open those mutually exclusive spaces to irony, creativity, and subversion. The last word rests with Song, and in the end his interpretation prevails: that Gallimard has too little imagination to accept the complexity and ambiguity of everyday life, too little imagination to open himself to different cultural possibilities, blurred boundaries, and rearrangements of power.

One might also argue that Gallimard's refusal arises from his attempt to keep erect his boundaries as a heterosexual man. Gallimard's lack of imagination appears in part to be a homophobic retreat, and there is a level at which Hwang seems to suggest that gay relationships offer the greatest potential for gender subversion. Yet, upon inquiry, Hwang further complicates matters by refusing us the comfort of conventional binaristic categories:

To me, this is not a "gay" subject because the very labels heterosexual or homosexual become meaningless in the context of this story. Yes, of course this was literally a homosexual affair. Yet because Gallimard perceived it or chose to perceive it as a heterosexual liaison, in his mind it was essentially so. Since I am telling the story from the Frenchman's point of view, it is more specifically about "a man who loved a woman created by a man." To me, this characterization is infinitely more useful than the clumsy labels "gay" or "straight."18

Hwang once again forces us to confront the pervasive, essentialist dualisms in our thinking and argues instead for historical and cultural specificity that would subvert the binary.

V

Literary critics and readers of French literature will note the striking parallels between the tale of M. Butterfly and the Balzac short story "Sarrasine," the object of Roland Barthes's S/Z19 and of

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Barbara Johnson's essay "Barthes/BalZac." Both Sarrasine and Gallimard commit the same errors of interpretation in pursuing their objects of desire. Sarrasine, a sculptor, falls in love with an Italian opera singer, the image of Sarrasine's Perfect Woman. But like all Italian opera singers of the day, La Zambinella is a castrato. Sarrasine, a newcomer to Italy, is ignorant of the custom, and he pays for his ignorance, his passion, and his misinterpretation with his life, victim of the henchmen of the powerful Cardinal who is La Zambinella's protector. Gallimard and Sarrasine are almost perfect mirrors of one another. Signs of beauty and timidity act as proofs to both men that the objects of their love are indeed women. Both flee strong women. In Gallimard's case, this takes the form of escape via a brief affair with another refraction of himself and his fantasy, a young Western blonde also named Renée, who enacts a symbolic castration by commenting on his "weenie" and advancing her theory of how the world is run by men with "pricks the size of pins." But for Gallimard as for Sarrasine, "it is for having fled castration" that they will be castrated. Both men are unmanned as the world laughs at their follies. And both are undone by their view of gender as symmetrical inversions of mirrored opposites. For both, their own masculinity is defined in contrast to a "real woman" who is a collection of culturally conventional images, and each crafts the Other to conform to those conventions. Neither Gallimard nor Sarrasine is capable of really recognizing another, for in their insistence on clinging to their cherished stereotypes, both love only themselves. And in both cases, the truth kills.

Clearly, the parallels are stunning. But Hwang does not allow us to stop there. Like these literary critics, Hwang offers us a provocative reconsideration of the construction of gender identity as an inner essence. But for him, a challenge to logocentric notions of voice, of referentiality, of identity as open and undecidable, is only a first step. Hwang opens out the self, not to a free play of

22. Johnson, Critical Difference, 10–11, offers an incisive analysis of Sarrasine's interpretive errors, which turn on logocentric assumptions of meaning as referentiality and presence.
signifiers, but to a play of historically and culturally specific power relations. Through the linkage of politics to the relationship between Song and Gallimard, Hwang leads us toward a thoroughly historicized, politicized notion of identity, not understandable without reference to narrative conventions, global power relations, gender, and the power struggles people enact in their everyday lives. These relations constitute the spaces of gender, but, equally important, the spaces of race and imperialism played out on a world stage.

A double movement is involved here. As Hwang deploys them, Song's words open out the categories of "the self" and the "personal" or "private" domain of love relationships to the currents of world historical power relations. Simultaneously, Hwang associates gender and geography, showing "the Orient" as supine, penetrable, "knowable" in the intellectual and the carnal senses. The play of signifiers of identity is not completely arbitrary; rather it is overdetermined by a constitutive history, a history producing narrative conventions like Madama Butterfly. Hwang effects this double movement and plays with the levels of personal and political by situating Gallimard and Song historically, during the era of the Vietnam War and the Cultural Revolution, taking them up to the present. In so doing, he draws parallels between the relations of "Asian woman" and "Western man" and of "Asia" and "the West."

Act 1 ends by intertwining these two levels, as Gallimard's triumph in the diplomatic arena—his promotion to vice consul—coincides with his "conquering" of Song. Act 2 continues these parallels, as Song appeals to Gallimard's Orientalism in order to further his/her spying activities for the People's Republic. Extolling the progressiveness of France and exclaiming over her excitement at being "part of the society ruling the world today" (36), Song cajoles Gallimard into giving her classified information about French and American involvement in Vietnam. In his work, Gallimard uses his newfound masculine confidence and power and the opinions of "Orientals" he forms in his relationship with Song to direct French foreign policy. We reencounter in the diplomatic arena the exchange of stereotypes pervading the relationship between Gallimard and his Butterfly. "The Orientals simply want to be associated with whoever shows the most strength and power";
"There's a natural affinity between the West and the Orient"; "Orientals will always submit to a greater force" (37). Not surprisingly, Gallimard's inability to read the complexities of Asian politics and society lead to failure. Gallimard's predictions about Oriental submission to power are proved stunningly wrong during the Vietnam War: "And somehow the American war went wrong too. Four hundred thousand dollars were being spent for every Viet Cong killed, so General Westmoreland's remark that the Oriental does not value life the way Americans do was oddly accurate. Why weren't the Vietnamese people giving in? Why were they content instead to die and die and die again" (52–53)? And as the political situation in China changes, so does the relationship between Gallimard and Song change. Gallimard is sent home to Paris for his diplomatic failures; Song is reeducated and sent to a commune in the countryside as penance for his/her decadent ways.

Act 3 begins with Song's transformation into a "man," as he removes his makeup and kimono on stage, revealing his masculine "self." It is a manhood based on a collection of recognizably "masculine" conventions: an Armani suit; a confident stance, with feet planted wide apart, arms akimbo; a deeper voice; a defiant, cocky manner as he strides back and forth on the stage, surveying the audience. He brings together the threads of gender and global politics in a French court. Questioned by a judge about his relationship with Gallimard, Song offers as explanation his theory of the "international rape mentality": "Basically, her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes. The West believes the East, deep down, wants to be dominated. . . . You expect Oriental countries to submit to your guns, and you expect Oriental women to be submissive to your men" (62). And then Song links this mentality to Gallimard's twenty-year attachment to Song as a woman: "[W]hen he finally met his fantasy woman, he wanted more than anything to believe that she was, in fact, a woman. And second, I am an Oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man" (62).

Thus, Hwang—in a move suggestive of Edward Said's Orientalism—explicitly links the construction of gendered imagery to the construction of race and the imperialist mission to colo-

nize and dominate. Asia is gendered, but gender is also not understandable without the figurations of race and power relations that inscribe it. In this double movement, M. Butterfly calls into question analyses of race and colonialism that ignore links to gender, just as it challenges theories of gender that would ignore the cultural/racial/global locations from which they speak. In M. Butterfly, gender and global politics are inseparable. The assumption that one can privilege gender, in advance, as a category, setting the terms of inclusion without fully considering those for whom gender alone fails to capture the multiplicity of experience, is itself an Orientalist move. M. Butterfly would lead us to recognize that if the Orient is a woman, in an important sense women are also the Orient, underlining the simultaneity and inextricability of gender from geographic, colonial, and racial systems of dominance. And this is the "critical difference" between the implications of an M. Butterfly, on the one hand, and deconstructive analyses of gender identity, on the other. For Hwang, the matter surpasses a simple calling into question of fixed gender identity, where a fixed meaning is always deferred in a postmodern free play of signifiers. He leads us beyond deconstructions of identity as Voice, Logos, or the Transcendental Signified, beyond refigurations of identity as the empty sign, or an instantiation of "writing inhabited by its own irreducible difference from itself." And the

24. Julia Kristeva's About Chinese Women (New York: Urizen Books, 1977) is one of the most egregious examples. One wonders, too, about the placement of deconstructionist critics such as Roland Barthes, whose L'Empire des signes (Geneva: Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1970) reinscribes notions of the exotic Orient, and Barbara Johnson and other white "experts" on African-American women's literature. For other views, see Bell Hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (Boston: South End Press, 1984), and This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981). Some might argue that, in many cases, the scope of inquiry could justifiably be narrowed to an internal reading of the West. However, in appraising the work of Foucault, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak counters: "I am suggesting that to buy a self-contained version of the West is symptomatically to ignore its production by the spacing-timing of the imperialist project. . . . The clinic, the asylum, the prison, the university, seem screen-allegories that foreclose a reading of the broader narratives of imperialism." Quoted in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (New York: Routledge, 1988), 210.

difference lies in his opening out of the self, not to a free play of signifiers, but to a power-sensitive analysis that would examine the construction of complex, shifting "selves" in the plural, in all their cultural, historical, and situational specificity.26

In sum, *M. Butterfly* enacts what I take to be a number of profoundly important theoretical moves for those engaged in cultural politics. It subverts notions of unitary, fixed identities, embodied in pervasive narrative conventions such as the trope of "Japanese woman as Butterfly." Equally, it throws into question an anthropological literature based on a substance-attribute metaphysics that takes as its foundational point of departure a division between self and society, subject and world. *M. Butterfly* suggests to us that an attempt to describe exhaustively and to fix rhetorically a "concept of self" abstracted from power relations and from concrete situations and historical events, is an illusory task. Rather, identities are constructed in and through discursive fields, produced through disciplines and narrative conventions. Far from bounded, coherent, and easily apprehended entities, identities are multiple, ambiguous, shifting locations in matrices of power.

Moreover, *M. Butterfly* suggests that gender and race are mutually constitutive in the play of identities; neither gender nor race can be accorded some a priori primacy over the other. Most important, they are not incidental attributes, "accidents" ancillary to some primary substance of consciousness or rationality that supposedly characterize a "self."27 In *M. Butterfly*, we find a nuanced portrayal of the power and pervasiveness of gender and racial stereotypes. Simultaneously, Hwang de-essentializes the categories, exploding conventional notions of gender and race as universal, ahistorical essences or as incidental features of a more encompassing, abstract "concept of self." By linking so-called "individual" identity to global politics, nationalism, and imperialism,
Hwang makes us see the cross-cutting and mutually constitutive interplay of these forces on all levels. *M. Butterfly* reconstitutes selves in the plural as shifting positions in moving, discursive fields, played out on levels of so-called individual identities, in love relationships, in academic and theatrical narratives, and on the stage of global power relations.

Finally, perhaps we can deploy the spatial metaphor once more, to place *M. Butterfly* in a larger context and to underline its significance. *M. Butterfly* claims a narrative space within the central story for Asian Americans and for other people of color. Never before has a dramatic production written by an Asian American been accorded such mainstream accolades: a long run on Broadway, a world tour, Tonys and Drama Desk Awards for both Hwang and the radiant, charismatic B. D. Wong, and a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize. For me, as an Asian-American wom-

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28. This very mainstream success is the cause of considerable controversy among Asian-American scholars, where success is seen by some as an index of "sellout," pandering to mainstream stereotypes. A meeting of the Asian-American Studies Association in 1989 hosted a panel on *M. Butterfly*, including a response by Hwang himself. The session was impassioned, with the most heated criticism hurted by the heterosexual Asian-American men and their students, who apparently felt their masculinity impugned by the "effeminate" stereotype of the Asian man. Hwang's rejoinder was to say that he saw nothing particularly admirable about aping "white, male, macho" notions of masculinity. The issue raised here is a difficult and poignant one for any artist in a "marginal" position. Must one reinscribe stereotypes in order to subvert them? And in so doing, doesn't one inevitably, also, reinscribe other stereotypes—in this case, "sneaky Oriental"? Though the issue is vexed, I have argued elsewhere (*Crafting Selves*) that there can be no pristine space of resistance, and that subversion and contestation are never beyond discourse and power; consequently, there can never be a purely contestatory image, though we must remain sensitive to relative degrees of subservience. The panel highlighted a second, and even more poignant, issue: the extraordinarily small—though growing—number of Asian Americans who are in the position of being able to represent "the Asian-American experience"—as though there were only one. As so often happens, the few carry the burden of representing "the race," something no single work, or handful of works, could possibly do. Though artists' accountability to "the community"—a vexed collective identity—should always be a critical issue, perhaps the best strategy is to devote energies to opening more avenues for increasing numbers of artists/writers/scholars from diverse populations, rather than expecting the few to represent fully the experiences of any given group.

29. In a telling decision, the award was given to Alfred Uhry's play *Driving Miss Daisy* (Lexington, N.Y.: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), a white Southerner's nostalgic apologia for the good old days when people of color knew their place.
an, *M. Butterfly* is a voice from the Borderlands, to use a metaphor from Gloria Anzaldúa and Carolyn Steedman, a case of the “other speaking back,” to borrow Arlene Teraoka’s phrase. Hwang’s distinctively Asian-American voice reverberates with the voices of others who have spoken from the borderlands, those whose stories cannot be fully recognized or subsumed by dominant narrative conventions, when he speaks so eloquently of the failure to understand the multiplicity of Asia and of women. “That’s why,” says Song, “the West will always lose in its encounters with the East,” and his words seem especially resonant given the history of the post–World War II period, a history including the Vietnam War and the economic rise of Asia. The future that Hwang suggestively portrays is one where “white Western man”


32. Some critics note the lack of a “real” female presence in the play, and question whether Hwang has simply appropriated “woman” as something only a man really knows how to perform or create. Certainly, there is a sense in which “woman,” though not an essentialist category, does mark a position of subordination within a shifting field of power relations. It is also true that Hwang himself has seriously pondered the issues of the politics of gender and representation here. In his notes for those who plan future productions of *M. Butterfly*, he suggests that having a “real” woman play the part of Song might have the undesirable consequence of inviting the complicity of the audience in yet again enjoying the humiliation of an Asian woman. Hwang feels the use of a woman in the part of Song “runs the risk of exploiting the very sexual oppression it seeks to condemn, in the same fashion as violent movies that pretend to be anti-violence. If a woman plays Song, then we are watching a woman being oppressed in a very seductive and pleasurable manner. If Gallimard is actually oppressing a man, the effect on the audience is much more subversive” (Hwang, *M. Butterfly*, 89). My own reaction is that the use of a “man” to play “woman” highlights the discursively constructed nature of the gender binary and the collection of stereotypes that pose as “man” and “woman,” and consequently *M. Butterfly* is one of the most searing indictments of objectification—of “women,” of “the Orient”—I have seen. That “real women” are not principal characters is precisely the point, and paradoxically and subversively this makes *M. Butterfly* a stunningly effective critique of gender oppression and Orientalism. But of course subversion is never unproblematic or beyond power, as has already been noted, and the play can be read as both appropriative and subversive—though I would argue that the subversive elements “dominate.”
may become “Japanese woman,” as power relations in the world shift and as “the West” continues to perceive “the East” in terms of fixity and essentialist identity. And, when Gallimard’s French wife laments Chinese inability to hear Madama Butterfly as simply a beautiful piece of music, Hwang further suggests that his own enterprise, and perhaps by extension, ours, requires a committed, impassioned linkage between what are conventionally defined as two separate spaces of meaning, divided by the bar: aesthetics and politics. Those like Gallimard who seek to keep the bars erect run the risk, Hwang implies, of living within the prison of their culturally and discursively produced assumptions in which aesthetics and politics, the personal and the political, woman and man, East and West, form closed, mutually exclusive spaces where one term inevitably dominates the other. It is this topography of closure M. Butterfly—by its very existence—challenges.