

Performing Hybridity in Post-Colonial Monodrama¹

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This essay takes as its starting point Jennifer Harvie and Richard Paul Knowles's excellent article on dialogism in Canadian monodrama: "Dialogic Monologue: A Dialogue".² Working through Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic text as one which consists of "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses",³ Harvie and Knowles argue that certain kinds of monodrama produce a dialogic configuration of subjectivity by staging an open-ended play--as in game *and* performance--in which the speech or accents of multiple voices are inserted into one speaker's utterance (that of the lone actor) without being fully internalised or appropriated. The prime focus of their study is autobiographical monodrama, a specific sub-genre in which subjectivity is dialogised in performance through the very act of publicly constructing a social "self" and thus disclosing the fiction of a pre-existing character.⁴ Such texts foreground the fragmentary nature of subjectivity and work against the assumption that there exists an essential and authentic self which is wholly integrated and unchanged through time. Identity is shown to be performative in the sense that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which point to its existence. Hence, there is no "true" or "authentic" self, only multiple "selves" which come into being at the point of articulation in any one situation or event in time. These processual, decentred "selves" can

¹ We are using the term "monodrama" to refer to plays/theatre pieces performed by one actor, occasionally with the assistance of musicians (or a chorus) which do not have substantial speaking parts but rather function as part of the *mise en scène*. In contradistinction to the dramatic monologue, which can stand alone or constitute part of a multi-actor play, the monodrama is a specific theatrical form defined by its reliance on the solo performer.

² In *Theatre Research in Canada*, 15:2, 1994, pp. 136-63.

³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 6.

⁴ Harvie and Knowles, p. 142.

also be made manifest through indirect discourse, parody, hyperbole, mimicry, and various other performative techniques which suggest a polyphony of interactive voices--or “speech genres” (Bakhtin’s term)--located in the historical body of the communicating subject.

Bakhtin himself maintained that polyphony is most likely to be found in the novel, a genre which aspires to the free play of a variety of "voices" whereas he saw drama as the least dialogic of all literary forms:⁵ “pure drama strives towards a unitary language, one that is individualized merely through dramatic personae who speak it”.⁶ His premise that dramatic dialogue is rarely polyphonic appears to be based on a problematic conflation of performed subject/character and individuated voice.⁷ In other words, Bakhtin discounts the idea that the dramatic subject can be constructed in the nexus of intersecting--and often contradictory--discourses, to insist instead that the ventriloquised authorial voice speaks through all characters in order to create a unified text. This model shows an insufficient awareness of the possibilities (and limitations) of performance (as opposed to the written script) and would seem to deny not only the wide variety of “independent” and “unmerged” signifying systems implicated in all forms of theatre but also the theatrical *frisson* between actor and role which, as Brechtian theatre/theory teaches us, can become an important site of ideological intervention.

In applying current theories about dialogism to drama, Harvie and Knowles acknowledge that the Bakhtinian model of the free contestation of equal voices is a somewhat utopian concept which does not adequately account for the discourses of power that marginalise certain languages and consciousnesses.⁸ They conclude, however, by suggesting that theatre can provide a tentative space for a dialogic practice which might change perception and thus social structures. Our particular exploration of subjectivity in post-colonial monodrama extends Harvie and Knowles’s work by bringing the body into focus as an important site of,

⁵ It is interesting to note here that the monodrama more closely resembles the novel than does any other dramatic form in so far as it is commonly structured around a “story” developed by a single narrator who creates or evokes other characters as a function of his/her text.

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 405.

⁷ Harvie and Knowles, p. 139.

⁸ Harvie and Knowles, p. 153.

and player in, dialogic communication. We are looking at four monodramas by women (two by Canadians, one by a Singaporean, and one by a Malaysian-born resident of the United States of America currently working in Singapore) and will be considering how performative articulations of hybridity arise from these plays' particular uses of dialogic devices. Our analysis explicitly works against Jeremy Ridgman's notion that the play for one actor necessarily positions the performing body as a "filter through which a broader level of human action is witnessed".⁹ Whereas his metaphor of filtration suggests that monodrama produces a unitary dramatic language by dispelling dissonant bodies/subjectivities, our conception of the performing body highlights multiplicity, ambiguity and instability. Moreover, we wish to stress that this body is never simply given but rather constructed as a function of theatricality, which is itself constituted as a complex of relationships between performer and audience.

The body has recently become a hot topic across a range of academic discourses, especially those primarily based in cultural analysis. Post-colonial criticism's particular interest in the body stems from an increasing recognition that imperialism attempts to produce 'Othered' bodies as targets of constraint, surveillance and codification. As well as reinforcing stereotypes through systems of representation--the construction of the Orientalised body is a good example--imperialism's strategic inscriptions of the body have real material effects, felt not only through various kinds of discrimination but also as a form of self-regulation which is informed by the corporeal norms of the dominant society. This has important implications for the analysis of counter-discourse which is now more or less accepted as one of the defining features of post-colonial texts.¹⁰ As Pamela Banting argues, "if the postcolonial begins at the very moment when colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its Others, then we are compelled not only to analyse languages and discourses as sites of resistance but also to consider the inscribed bodies of postcolonial subjects".¹¹ Although Banting deals solely with literary texts in her examination of

⁹ Jeremy Ridgman, "The One-Actor Play in Australian Drama", in *Contemporary Australian Drama*, revised edition, ed. Peter Holloway, Sydney: Currency, 1987, p. 139.

¹⁰ See Helen Tiffin's influential article, "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse", *Kunapipi*, 9:3, 1987, pp. 17-34.

¹¹ Pamela Banting, "The Phantom Limb Syndrome: Writing the Postcolonial Body in Daphne Marlatt's 'Touch to My Tongue'", *ARIEL*, 24:3, 1993, p. 8.

discursive (and counter-discursive) inscriptions of corporeality, her insistence on the body's centrality is even more pertinent to theatre where the performing body becomes a locus for multiple systems of signification. The "readerly" potential of performance is especially crucial when the body is marked according to gender and racial hierarchies. In the plays we are looking at, performance positions the post-colonial female body as a particularly charged site of cultural contestation in the process of constructing a hybrid subjectivity.

The concept of hybridity stresses the productive nature of cultural integration as positive contamination. Hybridity offers an effective way of resisting the replication of Manichean binaries and the discourses of cultural purity which underpin colonialist relations. But as Homi Bhabha warns, hybridity "is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures";¹² that is, it is not a simple fusion of differences but rather a volatile interaction characterised by conflict between and within the constitutive cultures of a colonised society. Hybridity has been used as a political strategy in various forms and contexts to deliberately circulate historically marginalised knowledges and practices as a means of destabilising the power of the dominant culture. This abrogation of cultural hegemony is mobilised through what Bhabha calls a "Third Space", which introduces a degree of ambivalence into the act of communication between cultures: "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised, and read anew".¹³ For the purposes of this analysis, we will argue that the multiple signifying systems of theatre--particularly as they are utilised in post-colonial monodrama--provide a Third Space which enables writers and performers to dramatise cultural hybridity and the resignification of cultural difference.

The single performing body in the monodrama foregrounds the dynamic nature of the Third Space whereby the normative process of the identification--and objectification--of the Other is dialogised. Unlike forms of drama which employ a number of actors each assigned

¹² Homi Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817", in *Europe and Its Others: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature, July 1984*, Vol. 1, eds. Francis Barker et al., Colchester: University of Essex Press, 1985, p. 98.

¹³ Homi Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory", *New Formations*, 5, 1988, p. 21.

a discrete role, the monodrama often requires the solo performer to embody multiple characters, frequently without the aid of visual signifiers of difference in the form of costumes or masks. The fluidity of subject positions activated by the solo performer (especially when he/she transgresses ontological categories) disrupts conventional expectations of characterisation¹⁴ which require the effacement of the actor's "self" in the service of the role. In post-colonial monodrama, the distinction between actor and role is often foregrounded as the performer enacts multiple subjectivities which resonate against--and dialogise--others in the course of the performance. This enables the colonised Other, on the one hand, to draw attention to the dominant tropes of representation to which she is subject, and on the other hand, to subvert the monologic tendency by emphasising her hybrid identity which enables multiple subject positions to be played out--and played with.

The plays we are looking at here are characterised by this ludic impulse which serves to deconstruct representations of the generic Asian and native "Indian" woman. By requiring the solo actor to play (with) multiple roles, these texts foreground the tension between the performing body and its theatrical significations of race and gender. Harvie and Knowles maintain that multi-character monodramas "remain predominantly monologic--at least from the point of view of the audience--in that the virtuosity of role switching produces the illusion of dialogue among discrete characters for whom the need to create distinct, unitary voices is felt, for reasons of clarity, to be particularly urgent".¹⁵ What their analysis overlooks is that the very form of the monodrama necessarily constructs such characters as intersecting and overlapping precisely because they converge in and on a single performing body. For example, *Moonlodge* (1990), scripted and performed by native Canadian dramatist Margo Kane, positions the solo actor in and between a number of different roles, at times crossing both gender and racial boundaries. Agnes, the central figure loosely based on Kane herself, is "inhabited by characters of all sizes and shapes"¹⁶ as she enacts her story of a

¹⁴ By conventional or mainstream characterisation, we mean naturalistic acting which draws from the traditions of Stanislavsky and Lee Strasberg.

¹⁵ Harvie and Knowles, p. 141. It is important to note here that some single-character monodramas (though not necessarily the ones Harvie and Knowles cite) in fact consolidate the sense of a monologic subject by integrating potentially oppositional "voices" in the one subsuming character. See, for example, the "classic" Australian play by Jack Hibberd, *A Stretch of the Imagination*, Sydney: Currency, 1973.

¹⁶ Margo Kane, "From the Centre of the Circle the Story Emerges", *Canadian Theatre Review*, 68, 1991, p.

journey which helped her to recuperate some sense of her indigenous culture. Taken from her native parents as a child and raised in a white family, Agnes presents as the dislocated subject of an imperial and patriarchal system designed to neutralise her visible Otherness. As she travels from Canada to a Pow Wow in New Mexico, she meets, and embodies for the audience, men and women from different races and backgrounds, many of them also marginalised from the mainstream white society. At the level of performance, however, the play's various personae (including Agnes's intermittent persona as storyteller) cannot be completely separated; rather each new character leaves traces of signification on the performing body as part of an ongoing process of hybrid subject formation. The overall dramatic strategy can be seen to exemplify Brecht's theory of the "not, but" in so far as each signifying action not only constructs a particular character and/or role but also points to those others which are repressed in the process. A potent example of this occurs when Agnes conveys an image of the white pseudo-shaman dressed to resemble an Indian, a member of the famous "Wannabee" tribe whose attempted appropriation of native spirituality draws attention to what is *not* shown by such figures: a non-commodified form of native bodies/culture.

Performative articulations of the hybridised and unstable post-colonial body function in *Moonlodge* to dismantle stereotypes which have circumscribed images of native women in literature, history, art, and particularly in popular culture. In one sequence which targets for deconstruction both the subservient "Indian maid" and the sexy "squaw", the actor delivers a version of the 1960s song, "Running Bear", which is dialogised by a number of devices: visual and verbal irony, parodic war dances and chorus line kicks, extravagant gestures, and verbal interjections which form a running metacommentary on the patently silly lyrics. The following brief extract gives some indication of how such excesses of signification displace hegemonic renditions of the song at the same time as they demonstrate the limited (and limiting) identities ascribed to the native female subject. Agnes begins singing "Running Bear" then interrupts herself to position her performance as parodic mimicry:

Hollywood version. Lots of leg. (*Chorus line kicks.*)

Running Bear loved Little White Dove
with a love as big as the sky

Fringed mini-skirts. Lots of skin. (*More chorus line kicks.*)

Running Bear loved Little White Dove
with a love that couldn't die

Savage tragedy! (*Melodramatic pose. Dives onto floor and does frog stroke.*)

He couldn't swim the raging river
'Cause the river was too wide

(*Continues swimming various strokes.*) Because his name was Running Bear and not Swimming Bear.¹⁷

Here, the mode of excess in Agnes's *embodied* rendition of the song draws attention to the ways in which its seemingly "innocent" verse overdetermines images of the native subject. Another popular song, "On The Street Where You Live", is suffused by a different kind of dialogic corporeality when Agnes bellows out its lyrics as she is being raped. Here the Pygmalion myth--the Western male projection of ideal femininity--is exposed as a violation of women's body/agency. Throughout the performance, these moments of embodied dissonance consciously subvert the fixity of colonial stereotypes by foregrounding their constructedness.

Whereas Kane's text ultimately strives towards a reintegration of the fragmented native subject even while demonstrating its ontological impossibility, Wendy Lill's *The Occupation of Heather Rose* (1986) charts the disintegration of the colonising body through the story of a young nurse who ventures into the "romantic" north of Canada to work in a native community. Naive, idealistic and blind to her own cultural biases, Heather proposes simplistic solutions to complex problems, presuming that her particular style of exercise club, good food group, and alcohol and drug abuse committee will revolutionise the community. Ironically, her mission to reform native bodies results in the breakdown of her own corporeal integrity as she becomes increasingly unable to cope with life on the reservation. Her carefully regimented body--an icon of "civilisation"--is "contaminated" by binge drinking, rampant sexuality, and eventual hysteria. While Heather experiences these excessive somatic

¹⁷ Margo Kane, *Moonlodge*, in *An Anthology of Native Literature in English*, eds. Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 283.

states as an "occupation" by alien forces, the play as a whole confirms that such forces are also part of the selves she has denied and disavowed. The colonising body (like that of the colonised) cannot therefore be seen as discrete and self-contained; rather it is fractured--or hybridised--by the very act of suppressing its Others. This is most apparent towards the end of the play when Heather leaves the north after becoming "bushed" but is compelled to keep reliving her experiences without ever really being able to integrate the bodies/voices which are now "inside" her.

At the performative level, dialogic communication in this play is achieved less through role switching--the performer always plays Heather who herself imitates other characters, but only occasionally--than through manipulations of the enunciative space in which the solo actor playing a solitary character positions herself, or rather her *selves*, vis á vis the audience. Viewers are constructed, sometimes simultaneously, as empathetic collaborators, and/or native Others. At one point, Heather moves from a confessional mode, in which she recounts intimate details of her experiences, to an accusatory diatribe, confronting the audience as if they are her recalcitrant patients:

You know what really bothers me about you people? You expect me to stitch you up, give you pills, send you out to hospitals, wipe your bloody noses and I have never once heard anyone say what you're supposed to say when someone does something *nice* for you.

What do you say? You say "Thank you!" To just once hear "Thank you Miss Rose" would be music to my ears! But instead I get silence. Dark eyes. Secrets. Why is that?

... And you never bloody LOOK at me! Look at me! I know you watch me but you won't look at me. And you talk about me, don't you? Don't you?¹⁸

Constructions of subjectivity can be seen here as consonant with Bakhtin's model of dialogue "as at least a triad of self, other and the relation between the two"¹⁹--in other words, a triad of speaker, her audience and the productive ambivalence of the "Third Space".

Metatheatrically, this passage's direct audience address and its acute awareness of the ways in which both actor and character are positioned as objects of visual scrutiny activates a play of signification between the fictional text and the performance event. The (predominantly

¹⁸ Wendy Lill, *The Occupation of Heather Rose*, in *Modern Canadian Plays: Volume Two*, ed. Jerry Wasserman, Vancouver: Talon Books, 1994, p. 183.

¹⁹ See Mette Jørgensen's exploration of Bakhtinian theories in "Readings of Dialogue in Alex Miller's *The Ancestor Game*", *Kunapipi*, 15:3, 1993, p. 14.

white) viewers are thus reminded of their complicity in Heather's imperialist venture even as they attempt to distance themselves from her brand of misplaced liberalism.

Stella Kon's monodrama, *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1985), focuses more squarely on the issue of gender as it dramatises the hybrid subjectivities of a Singaporean woman who has learned that she must *perform* certain roles/identities in order to secure some power in a patriarchal and imperialist society. Set in the interior of a Peranakan²⁰ mansion, the play spans the period between the 1920s and the late 1980s and is comprised of a number of scenes which show the protagonist's transformation from an innocent child to an elderly dowager. As an orphan who marries into the wealthy Gan family, Emily survives by sheer cunning and wit, eventually outmanoeuvring her competitors within the family to emerge as the matriarch and owner of Emerald Hill. It becomes apparent in the course of the play that Emily adopts different personae to suit the circumstances and to serve her own hidden agenda. Not only is she deferential to powerful men such as Mr Chee, but she is also quick to gauge weaknesses in the Gan family hierarchy and so performs the role of the dutiful daughter-in-law to gain a privileged space within the household:

My mother-in-law used to spend her days playing cards with her friends. And when she did so, she liked to have one or the other of her daughters-in-law standing behind her chair, to make sireh and wait on her.... Before I came, Susie was the senior daughter-in-law, but she was so lazy.... I said, 'Oh Susie, you better go and look after your son. I'm so free lah, no children, I can help Mother'. I stood behind the old lady.

(Emily stands behind big chair--watches card game.)

'Neo, you want to drink tea ah? You want your sireh?' I made her sireh from her silver box and folded it and pounded it for her.

'Ahyo Neo, cherki eh, tan chit eh? ... Ah ... Amboi! Mampus! ... Ahyo, mak mau tombok kah?' ['Oh Mother you've lost. Shall I massage you?']

(Emily stands behind mother and pummels her shoulders. Mother wins the next hand.)

'Ah, ah, mata cherki! Chot! Chot! Ho-miah-la Neo.' ['You've won. Good luck'.]²¹

²⁰ The Peranakans or Straits Chinese are a culturally distinct group of people whose heritage dates back to the sixteenth century. It is generally believed that the early Peranakan community arose through intermarriage between Chinese immigrants and Malay women. The culture is therefore a hybrid of Malay and Chinese components, with British accretions since the onset of colonialism. The community has a distinct patois which combines elements of Malay, Singaporean English, and Hokkien (a Chinese dialect).

²¹ Stella Kon, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, London: Macmillan, 1989, pp. 10-11. Further references to this play appear in parentheses in the text.

As this example illustrates, Emily is adept at changing not only her personality but also her language, both verbal (from Standard English to colloquial Singaporean English to the Peranakan Patois) and gestural, to create an external image of a self based on the desires of those perceived to be in a more powerful position. The swiftness with which she adapts the tone and register of her language and bodily movements to the changing circumstances is a constant source of humour for the reader/audience. This metatheatrical device frames the actor who performs the multi-textual dramatic protagonist who, in turn, re-presents different personae so that "Emily" is not a single, unified and unchanging character but an ambivalent amalgam of gendered styles construed within specific power paradigms at each point in the performance. The play implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself, as well as its contingency. While women are taught to be feminine according to the space allocated to them within the male-female dichotomy, Emily's ostentatious mimicry of those limitations highlights gender constructedness and points to the levels of conscious and unconscious complicity required in the perpetuation of the sexist hierarchy.

The notion of gender mimicry advanced here centres on the thesis that gender is a social and historical construct which is manifest corporeally through both verbal and physical modes. This refutes the concept of an internal feminine essence which determines outer manifestations of gender and instead focuses on the disciplinary regimes of patriarchal society. Judith Butler treads a similar path in her analysis of female impersonators, arguing that gender parody "is a production which, in effect--that is, in its effect--postures as an imitation. This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualisation; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalised or essentialist gender identities".²² Mimicry or gender parody thus provides the space from which to subvert the view of a definitive female difference. The recognition of gender as a performative style focuses on the material and contingent conditions of constructing and reading difference as sexual, and therefore value-laden, discourses. From this revisionist perspective, feminine behaviour is understood

²² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 138.

not as an inherent or natural compulsion but as a strategy for survival within a hegemonic system.

In Kon's play, gender inscription as a means towards achieving social identity can be seen as a performance which requires perpetual repetition and consolidation. Lacking alternative means to some kind of autonomy, Emily must solicit the desires of others to construct and legitimise her presence and social worth at each point in time: "I learned that a woman is nothing in this world that men have made, except in the role that men demand of her. Your life is meaningless, you have no value, except as you are wife and mother: then be the very devil of a wife and mother" (p. 45). The fact that her responses are determined by social and temporal circumstances explains in part why many of Emily's actions appear contradictory. Feminine behaviour is here represented in reactionary terms as a historically constructed set of ritualised actions which affirm the dominant phallogocentric regulation of both the body personal and the body politic. The multiple performative levels of the overall play affirm Butler's point that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylised repetition of acts*" which are internally discontinuous and thus have merely "*the appearance of substance*".²³

As a piece of theatre which embraces dialogic discourse, *Emily of Emerald Hill* draws our attention to the ways in which patriarchal systems repress multiplicity and the possibility of actual difference by appropriating alterity in the name of gender opposition. The restriction of female identity to a clearly defined set of ritualised gendered actions thus renders the female subject at once knowable and controllable. Kon's play foregrounds these prescriptions as myths that validate specific power structures which we have come to accept as "normal" or "authentic". The protagonist's conscious playing of and with feminine roles highlights what Bhabha describes as "the area between mimicry and mockery"²⁴ wherein the (female) Other, the double who is at once desired and disavowed, retaliates by replicating, appropriating, and destabilising the power discourse. This performance of hybridity exposes levels of ambiguity obscured by a naturalised gender binary and foregrounds the tensions

²³ Butler, pp. 140-41.

²⁴ Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", *October*, 28, 1984, p. 127.

between and within competing elements of Emily's society. By emphasising the lack of an internal organising female body as essence and foregrounding instead the pressures that are brought to bear on the construction of an *embodied* female persona at each point in time, the play mimics the gender paradigms it stages and thus destabilises their authority. Most significantly, Emily's deftness in appropriating ascribed gender roles and creating various subjectivities foregrounds the extent to which she is able to (partly) resist over-determination by her milieu. The resonating presence she exerts in her many performative "faces" hints at the *jouissance*--that is, the traces of excess signification--which cannot be subsumed by the dominant discourse.

The protagonist in Chin Woon Ping's *Details Cannot Body Wants* (1992) capitalises on her hybrid position in a play of Selves which threatens the monologic impulse to fix her in the role of the Oriental female Other. This play is performed by a single actor accompanied by a chorus who sit crossed-legged at the side of the stage in a manner similar to that of Indian classical dance and the Dikir Barat performances from Malaysia. As in *Moonlodge* and *Emily of Emerald Hill*, the female actor's body functions as the primary site in and through which the drama of over-determination is negotiated and/or subverted, only in this case it is the representation of the generic Asian/Chinese woman which is held up to scrutiny. Indeed the very title of the play, *Details Cannot Body Wants*, points to the four constitutive categories which determine constructions of the Asian woman in both the "East" and the "West". The title becomes a ludic trope for a transformative female subjectivity which insists that the woman's sum is greater than her parts. These contradictory and sometimes competing subjectivities--for example the Oriental doll, the domestic labourer and the sex object--are, however, never fully formed; rather the various personae function dialogically to comment on each other and, in so doing, to expose the power relations implicit in the stereotyping process.

The following excerpt is from the "Cannot" section of the play. Earlier, the actor paints half of her face in the traditional colours of the Chinese opera heroine (predominantly pink and white) and the other in the black colours of the warrior.

(In a deep, husky voice, with black profile to the audience)

Hello Doll. Where are you from? I'll bet you're lonesome, aren't you? I bet I know what you want. I know *all* about you. How about some hunky chunky company. How about it, lovey dove?

And you're supposed to reply,

(In docile, 'Oriental' voice and posture, with white profile to audience)

Hai. Watashi karimatsu. Arigato gozaimas. Me China Doll, Me Inscrutable Doll, me sexy Miss Saigon, me so horny/so so horny/me so horny/me love you long time *(etc. from 2-Live rap song)*.

(The chorus pick up the beat and song.)

BUT WHAT YOU REALLY WANT TO SAY IS,

(Using loud, sassy Black mannerisms and tone, with black profile to audience)

Hey Muthafukka. Quit messin' round with me and mah sistahs you hear? We don't want yo jive talk and yo bullshittin. You know what's yo problem? You ain't got no RESPECT, that's yo problem. Pick up after yoself! Go wash yo *own* goddam underwear! Clean that toilet seat after you take a leak! Take yo goddam inflated inflatable prick and shove it up yo skinny ass!²⁵

It is worth noting here that the role of the heroine in traditional Peking opera was historically performed by a man; hence the performance of multiple gender and racial roles through the use of masks or makeup by the female actor in this extract foregrounds the gap between the signifier and the signified. By incorporating both male and female cultural markers and mimicking the verbal codes of racial stereotypes, the intertextuated body of the performer draws attention to the social and cultural codifications associated with the representations of Asian women.

The quoted passage demonstrates the performative and conceptual principles which shape much of Chin's play. Like *Moonlodge*, *Details Cannot Body Wants* displays an exemplary use of Brechtian techniques adapted in the service of a feminist, post-colonial politics. The Brechtian theory of estrangement advocates the disruption of audience empathy and an ongoing emphasis on the distinction between actor/character and story/history to allow "for a constructive disengagement (or, more accurately, a historicised 'reading') of the speaking body and its signifiers".²⁶ Central to Brecht's work is the notion of *Gestus*, which can be

²⁵ Chin Woon Ping, *Details Cannot Body Wants*, in *The Naturalization of Camellia Song and Details Cannot Body Wants*, Singapore: Time Books International, 1993, pp. 106-7. All further references to this play appear in parentheses in the main text.

²⁶ Deborah R. Geis, "Wordscapes of the Body: Performative Language as *Gestus* in Maria Irene Fornes's Plays", *Theatre Journal*, 42:3, 1990, p. 292.

realised through language as well as through physical movement. According to Patrice Pavis, *Gestus* is the radical displacement of two elements:

[I]nstead of fusing logos and gesturality in an illusion of reality, the *Gestus* radically cleaves the performance into two blocks: the shown (the said) and the showing (the saying). Discourse no longer has the form of a homogenous block.... Far from assuring the construction and the continuity of the action, it intervenes to stop the moment and to comment on what might have been acted on stage. *Gestus* thus displaces the dialectic between ideas and actions...²⁷

By disrupting conventional associations and meaning-making processes, *Gestus* enables the un-named woman in *Details Cannot Body Wants* to subvert Orientalist discourses in a wholly embodied and textual manner that is particular to live performance. Her presentation of many and sometimes dissonant subjectivities, each mediated by the gendered and racially-marked body of the actor,²⁸ demonstrates the very concept of hybridity--as the productive tension within the space of in-between-ness--which resists the privileging of any one subject position or cultural affiliation.

The text employs a range of languages--Cantonese, Mandarin, Bahasa Indonesia, English, French--and performance genres--rap, Peking opera, lyric poetry, Malay dance, Chinese pop music--which defy cultural essentialism. The diversity of cultural influences converge on, and are communicated through, the solo performer. At one point, this performer portrays the shy Chinese girl at her first dance before transforming with equal facility to enact "a hearty parody of Mae West" singing "Can't Help Loving That Man" (p. 106). Such performances confirm Bhabha's point that hybridity is characterised by creative tension rather than by assimilated differences--in this case, the dictates of a traditional Chinese upbringing collide with the influences of 1950s Hollywood glamour. The body of the woman functions as the prime medium for both the integration and the *maintenance* of cultural differences. Her corporeal gestures, along with her voice, change with each moment of narrative disclosure, portraying in turn the gawky, awkwardness of the Chinese girl-child, the languid sensuality

²⁷ Patrice Pavis, "On Brecht's Notion of *Gestus*", in *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of Theatre*, New York: PAJ Publications, 1982, p. 45.

²⁸ Despite its emphasis on non-naturalistic representation, Chin's play, like *Moonlodge* and *Emily of Emerald Hill*, implicitly calls for an actor whose visible race and gender markings are consonant with those of the central character. This strategy takes account of the fact that actors' bodies circulate within particular semiotic systems rather than being unmarked until the moment of theatrical inscription. As Geis notes, "the facticity of the actor's biological sex always reinscribes the performer with the cultural codes associated with his/her gender", p. 291.

of the poet awaiting her lover, and the angry rebellion of the tough-talking African American woman. This demonstration of cultural hybridity further decentres the notion of the unified gendered subject based on a single racial origin and foregrounds the positive contamination of cultures which is the heritage of the post-colonial diasporic subject.

The fluid subjectivities performed on stage in Chin's monodrama are experienced to a lesser degree by the audience. While viewers of *The Occupation of Heather Rose* become acutely aware of being situated as both Self and Other in the course of the performance, in *Details Cannot Body Wants* they are positioned in multiple and even conflicting roles--for instance as "Westerners" in the extract given above, or as girl-children being lectured on "how to get what [they] want" (p. 105). The dialogic structure of the performance and these multiple positions often draw on localised knowledges which further heighten the awareness of cultural and gendered differences within the audience. A case in point is the explicit detailing of the breaking and binding of Chinese women's feet followed by the "intoxicated" recitation of a poem in Mandarin which clearly sexualises the "lotus buds" from a masculine point of view.

The dialogic potential of the performance text is demonstrated on another occasion when the actor recites a litany of rules to discipline the female body while dramatising some of the actions they forbid:

Cannot tend (*bending forwards, backwards*)
Cannot bend.

Cannot jump (*jumping*)
Cannot hump (*making motions of copulation*)

Cannot cut
Cannot strut (*doing a flamboyant Black strut*)

.....

Cannot start
Cannot fart (*squatting as if to make a fart*)

Cannot whinge
Cannot cringe

Cannot fly (*making aeroplane motions, arms out*)
Cannot cry. (pp. 104-5)

The recitation suggests the extent to which patriarchal corporeal discipline is internalised and reproduced by the female subject but this is juxtaposed to the performer's unruly demonstration of the forbidden actions. Here the gap between the said and the shown disrupts the continuity between the idea/ideal and action. Instead the two sets of signification comment on and contradict each other in a dialogic encounter which challenges the hegemony of the docile body.

The texts/performances we have discussed position the body as a crucial aspect of feminist post-colonial theatre, but they also demonstrate an awareness of the dangers associated with celebrating a corporeal aesthetics which might inadvertently strengthen race and gender binaries and uphold biological essentialism. The body's role in theatrical representation poses some complex issues for politicised practitioners precisely because it is "not reducible to a sign free of connotation" but instead bears "the mark and meaning" of race and gender, which inscribes it within a cultural hierarchy.²⁹ For the racially-Othered female body, the process of social and cultural inscription is doubly stressed, necessitating a theatre which problematises the very point at which divisions between subject/object, victimiser/victim, and self/other are located and authorised. At its most innovative, the articulation of a post-colonial hybrid identity is founded on cultural dissonance rather than mutuality. It is also characterised by what Ien Ang calls "positive indeterminacy".³⁰ The precariousness of dancing between cultures is, however, only "experienced as such when processes of identificatory 'fixing' are denaturalised".³¹ Non-illusionistic and presentational forms of performance such as the monodramas analysed here provide one very powerful avenue for engaging with, inhabiting--or embodying--a hybrid subjectivity.

²⁹ Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988, p. 63. Dolan refers specifically to the ways in which the female body is always already inscribed with the mark of her sex, but this analysis can be applied in broader terms to include other markers of difference.

³⁰ Ien Ang, "Migrations of Chineseness: Ethnicity in the Postmodern World", *Cultural Studies: Pluralism and Theory*, ed. David Bennett, Melbourne: University of Melbourne English Department, 1993, p. 33.

³¹ Ang, p. 34.