Cultural / Sexual / Theatrical Ambivalence in *M. Butterfly*

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SUMMARY

This essay situates D. H. Hwang's "deconstructivist" *Madame Butterfly*, a play which critiques sexual imperialism by politically re-visioning the archetypal East-West romance perpetuated by Puccini's opera, at the intersection of feminist politics, postcolonial discourse and deconstructivist theory. My reading of the play intends to broaden the scope of feminist theorization of cross-gender dressing by analyzing the trope of "cross-cultural dressing" in its imperialist context. On the one hand an essentialist view of cross-dressing maintains the binary opposition of clothes/body by taking "body" as the ultimate reality that can be disclosed after removing layers of cultural and gender camouflage. On the other hand, a constructivist view tends to undermine the binary structures of body/clothes and West/East by exploring the construction of (a fictional) "Orientalism" under the western masculine gaze (Said) and of (a fictional) "sexuality" through the heterosexual matrix (Butler), thus laying bare the possibility of a role reversal in which West becomes East and man becomes woman (or vice versa).

KEY WORDS

cross-gender
dressing
camouflage
essentialist
binary
cross-cultural
constructivist
post-colonial
gaze
role reversal

In other words, it is only in so far as "Woman/Women" and "the East" are defined as *Others*, or as *peripheral*, that (Western) Man/Humanism can represent him/itself as the center.

—Chandra Talpada Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes"

I am not lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence--to me that Orient is a matter of indifference, merely providing a reserve of features whose manipulation--whose invented interplay allows me to 'entertain' the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own.

—Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*

The Orient is itself already a fictionalized place, essentially an absence, corresponding to the silent space of woman.

—Linda Peckham, "Not Speaking with Language/ Speaking with No Language"

M. Butterfly, the 1988 Tony Award-winning play written by the Chinese-American playwright David Henry Hwang, portrays an intriguing love/spy story of a French diplomat seduced by a Chinese opera actor masquerading as an Oriental *femme idéale*. Designed as "a deconstrctivist *Madame Butterfly*" (Hwang, "Afterword" 95), the play enacts a critique of

sexual imperialism by re-visioning politically the archetypal East-West romance perpetuated by Giacomo Puccini's opera.[1] Taking cross-dressing as the major trope, this paper will situate the play at the intersection of feminist politics, postcolonial discourse and deconstructionist theory, with a wish to bring these three methodologies into a productive crisis. The following reading is thus intended to broaden the scope of feminist theorization of cross-gender dressing (Case, Dolan, Gilbert and Gubar) by incorporating the dimension of cross-cultural dressing in the imperialist context (Low, Rowse, Wollen, Yau). By addressing not only the "fabrication" of gender but also the "fashioning" of race in a deconstructive gesture, it also attempts to foreground the performativity of cultural/gender roles and then relates this to the issues of feminine masquerade and colonial mimicry.

With male transvestism as the central complication of the plot, *M. Butterfly* simultaneously allows two different readings of cross-dressing responding respectively to two different discourses of identity.[2] On the one hand, an essentialist view of cross-dressing adheres to the binary opposition of clothes and body by taking the latter as the ultimate reality that can be disclosed after removing layers of cultural and gender camouflage. Here the Oriental feminine costumes--traditional Chinese garb, kimonos and chong sams--function not only as exotic fetishes but also as gender/cultural disguises under the binary oppositions of East/West, appearance/reality, signifier/ signified, clothes/body, and femininity/masculinity. As a stage play based on "a true story of clandestine love and mistaken sexual identity" ("Playwright's Notes"), *M. Butterfly* can only reach its climax at the very moment when Song Liling, the Chinese female impersonator, undresses himself in front of Rene Gallimard, the French diplomat, who still refuses to face the "true sex" of his lover even after the espionage trial. Song's naked male body is thus displayed on the stage as the final undeniable truth of the sexual identity. On the other

hand, a constructionist view of cross-dressing tends to undermine the binary structures of body/clothes and West/East by exploring through Song's cultural/gender performance the construction of Orientalism through the western masculine gaze (Said), the fictionality of sexuality through the heterosexual matrix (Butler), and the embedded instability and fluidity of the structures themselves through the final role reversal of West becoming East and man becoming woman. Therefore, it is against this background of these two contrasting, destructive possibilities of cross-dressing that I attempt to examine the dynamics of identity/différance in *M. Butterfly* and its subsequent cultural, sexual and theatrical ambivalence.

I. Cultural Ambivalence: The (Mis) Recognized Orient

Clothes always function as a major signifier in the play of identity and otherness in cross-cultural encounters. As Low points out in her discussion of the colonial fantasy of cross-cultural dressing, "Clothes trap the essence of the east; they objectify it. Like souvenir curios which represent fetishized totems, they present the oriental world for consumption" ("White Skins" 89). As the visual signifier of the exotic other, the Oriental costume becomes the most effective way for Western imperialists to view the Orient as a site of transgressive and fantastic sexuality (Wollen). Under the complexities of power/knowledge/pleasure in this imperialist project of the West, the Orient is always fetishized and commodified as decorative, artificial costumes. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that "slender women in chong sams and kimonos" (91) become the primary visual obsession in Gallimard's vision of the Orient. Accordingly, Song, a superb female impersonator in Peking opera, makes full use of Oriental costumes in his/her cultural/gender performance to play up to and exploit the feminine image in Gallimard's

imperialist sexual fantasy.

During the play, Song's body is always heavily costumed by indices of Oriental identity. At the very beginning of the play, Song, "who appears as a beautiful woman in traditional Chinese garb," dances a traditional Peking Opera piece, "surrounded by the percussive clatter of Chinese music" (1). When performing the death scene from *Madame Butterfly* at the German ambassador's house, Song puts on a kimono to play the passive and delicate Japanese woman. Later on, dressed in a chong sam, Song curls up at Gallimard's feet as his Chinese mistress in their flat on the outskirts of Peking. (43). These costumes have successfully helped Song to masquerade in Oriental submissiveness and feminine docility. However, Song's "Oriental womanhood" is also subverted at the same time by his/her constant change of costumes. The sartorial difference *between* Western and Eastern costumes is constantly destabilized by the sartorial differences *within* Western and Eastern costumes. When dressed in a Japanese kimono after his/her performance of *Madame Butterfly*, Song retorts to Gallimard's compliment: "Convincing? As a Japanese woman? The Japanese used hundreds of our people for medical experiments during the war, you know. But I gather such an irony is lost on you" (17). For Gallimard, Song is much more believable than those huge Western women in bad makeup who used to play the role of Madame Butterfly. But for Song, the cultural difference and historical antagonism between China and Japan are totally denied in Gallimard's fantasy of the submissive Oriental woman and the cruel White man. Song's reaction shows his/her indignation against the imperialist gaze which can only homogenize the "Oriental" as an undifferentiated and fetishized entity.

The costume that Song adopts during the transitional scenes of the Cultural Revolution is the Mao suit, a communist uniform designed to eliminate the traces of class, gender and cultural difference. In Act 11 scene ix, Song's

"rehabilitation" is achieved partially through his/her public confession of moral corruption by the West and partially through the process of "re-habilitating" the Mao suit. This uni-class and uni-sex uniform once led Roland Barthes to take China as the end of hermeneutics:

> As for the body, the apparent disappearance of any concern with stylishness in dress (no fashion, no makeup), the uniformity of the clothing, the prosaic gestures, all these absences, multiplied throughout the dense crowds, are an invitation to this extraordinary impression--perhaps a heartrending one--that the body no longer has to be understood, that here it stubbornly resists signifying, refusing to allow itself to be caught up in any reading, erotic or dramatic (except on the stage). (Barthes, "Well, and China?" 117)

Although the Mao suit in the above quotation seems not to function as cultural signifier and thus renders China a pluralistic void in the eyes of a Western theorist, it ironically becomes in the play another fetish whose power comes mainly from the Western fascination with Red China.

Besides Oriental costumes and the Mao suit, Song is also alternatively dressed in Western clothing, first in the feminine and then in the masculine forms. If Oriental female costumes are used in the play as exotic signifiers of seduction, then these Western clothes are primarily adopted as markers of modern, advanced societies. In Gallimard's first visit to Song's apartment in Beijing, Song is dressed elegantly in a black gown from the twenties. This seductive evening gown makes Song look like Anna May Wong, the Chinese-American actress who performed stereotypical roles in Hitchcock's early movies. Moreover, this Western feminine gown is manipulated shrewdly by Song as a counter-cultural disguise to create the alleged conflict of outward forwardness and inward timidity:

> Song: Please. Hard as I try to be modern, to speak like a man, to hold a Western woman's strong face up to my own . . . in the end, I fall. A small, frightened heart beats too quickly and gives me away. Monsieur Gallimard, I'm a Chinese girl. I've never. . . . never invited a man up to my flat before. The forwardness of my actions makes my skin burn (30-31).

Song's very "Chineseness" is now identified not by his/her costume but in an even more essentialized way by his/her Chinese heart which is "strapped inside this Western dress" (30). In Gallimard's words, "it is the Oriental in her at war with her Western education" (27). This essentialist emphasis will continue in the play to suggest a double discrepancy between the outer appearance and the inner essence both on the cross-cultural level (Western outside/Eastern inside) and on the cross-gender level (feminine outside/masculine inside).

During the five-minute intermission between Acts Ⅱ and Ⅲ, Song starts to remove his/her makeup and wig in front of a mirror. The process of his gender transformation is thus achieved when he removes the "surface" kimono to show the "underneath" western suit. Since this well-cut Armani suit still cannot force Gallimard to forsake his illusion, Song decides to strip himself in front of Gallimard to reveal the "nakedness" of his masculinity hidden beneath the covering of clothes. As the necessary sign of a "naturalized" sexual identity, the gendered surface of the body shifts first from the feminine kimono to the masculine suit and then from costumes as cultural signs of gender demarcation to the genitals as the physiological bedrock of sexual differentiation. Song's naked male body is now taken as the ultimate truth of his sex. Ironically, it is exactly when Song is *undressed* by himself on the stage that the issue of the *fictionality* of sex and gender is

left *unaddressed.*

Ⅱ. Sexual Ambivalence: The (Dis)Orientation of Desire

The above section has discussed the function of the costume in its (de)construction of cultural/gender identity and differance, this section will focus on the place of the costume in the (dis)orientation of desire, especially in terms of the relationship between transvestism and gender confusion. I will argue that while the political is successfully eroticized, the sexual is not sufficiently politicized since the connection between transvestism and homosexuality is not fully addressed in the play. I will further explore how this unbalanced political/sexual complication renders the final role reversal ideologically ambivalent.

As a play intended to "link imperialism, racism and sexism" (Savran 127), *M. Butterfly* successfully enacts a process of "gendering" imperialism by combining two systems of domination: the West over the East and men over women. In Act II scene iv, speaking from his own experience with his Oriental butterfly, Gallimard assures Toulon, the French counsel, of "the natural affinity between the West and the Orient": "Orientals will always submit to a greater force" (46) just as women will eventually submit to men's sexual power. In Act II scene vi, in his extramarital affair with a liberated Danish female student named Renée, Gallimard is shocked by her "emasculating" remarks which sarcastically relate international warfare and colonial expansion to men's anxiety about phallic potency:

> Renée: Like, I think the reason we fight wars is because we wear clothes. Because no one knows--between the men, I mean--who has the bigger . . . weenie . . . I mean, you conquer the country, or whatever, but you're still wearing clothes, so there's no

> way to prove absolutely whose is bigger or smaller. And that's what we call a civilized society. The whole world run by a bunch of men with pricks the size of pins (55-56).

Under this explicit phallus/penis connection, Renée, the daughter of a merchant who "exports a lot of useless stuff to the Third World"(52), regards men's political ambitions to conquer, to colonize, and to dominate as ways to compensate for their sexual insecurity. Similarity, in Act III scene i, when testifying in a French courtroom, Song gives the definition of the West's rape mentality towards the East:

> Song: Basically, "Her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes." The West thinks of itself as masculine--big guns, big industry, big money--so the East is feminine--weak, delicate, poor . . . but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom--the feminine mystique.
>
> Her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes. The West believes the East, deep down, *wants* to be dominated--because a woman can't think for herself (83).

Political power deployment between the West and the East is depicted here as a sado/masochistic sexual relationship between men and women. This colonial/sexual association in which the Orient can only be feminine and women submissive explains perfectly Song's culminating courtroom self-parody--"And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man" (83).

However, while the play has effectively eroticized the political in a combined critique of sexual imperialism, it leaves the sexual issue in limbo by refusing to name the unnameable. At first sight, the play seems to promise a radical questioning

of gender identity: the polarized difference between Man and Woman is continually displaced by the difference within men (straight and gay) and women (independent and submissive). For example, Gallimard is constantly troubled by the problem of sexual identification. At the age of twelve, he gets his first chance to read pornographic magazines hid in his uncle's closet; however, this scopophiliac experience turns out to be a mixture of power, lust, guilt and frustration. To his astonishment, the pinup girl in a sexy negligee now performing seductive sexual gestures on the stage returns his gaze: "I know you're watching me" (10). Gallimard is thus immediately degraded from an invisible thus powerful voyeur to a masochistic masturbator caught in the middle of his sexual fantasty. This intense sexual arousal caused by the other sex leads only to an embarrassing physical impotence: "My skin is hot, but my penis is soft" (11). Similarly, his first sexual experience is also scary and traumatic, full of rape images in an inverted power/gender relation. When making love with Isabelle, a schoolgirl who loves "the superior position" (33), Gallimard is pinned down to the dirt in the bushes and can only look up helplessly at the woman bouncing up and down on his loins. Besides, Gallimard has long felt inferior to his handsome friend, Marc, "the most popular guy in school" (32). After refusing to join a sexual adventure, he is even ridiculed by Marc as a "wimp" (9). If Marc reminds him of how far he falls short of the ideal of the heterosexually potent man, then Gallimard's sexual confidence is completely destroyed by Renée, the blonde Danish student portrayed as the stereotype of Western liberated women with the power to castrate. If the identically sounding first names, Rene and Renée, are supposed to represent respectively the masculine and feminine forms, then *M. Butterfly* plays successfully on the binary system to create a gender parody of the "masculine" woman and the "feminine" man.

Therefore, the cultural/gender confusion can never be

fully resolved even after Song's act of undressing. Another cultural/gender confusion created by costume appropriation culminates in the play's final role reversal: a white man is transformed on the stage into an Oriental Butterfly. While the dancers help him make up his face and put on the kimono and the Butterfly wig, Gallimard starts lamenting about the sexual mistake he has committed: "Love wrapped 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" (92). The image of the mirror here suggests the complex psychic dynamics of projection and interjection; of gaze and reflection; and of narcissism and idealization. Repeating Madame Butterfly's last line, "death with honor is better than life . . . life with dishonor," he imitates further the very Japanese ritual of seppuku to end his own life, while upstage Song in Western outfits "stands as a man" (93), smoking a cigarette and repeating Gallimard's first two words which begin the play--"Butterfly? Butterfly?" (93).

The central issue thus becomes whether the role reversal at the end of the play subversively foregrounds the artificiality and fluidity of cultural and gender identity, or it merely elides the racial/sexual power relationship and thus perpetuates the social hierarchy based on cultural and gender differences. Instead of reading it apolitically as "an androgynous fulfillments" (Skloot 60), I will try to explore not only how a white man (mis)recognizes his iamge in the fantasty of an Oriental Butterfly but also how the sexual deflects the political under this final clash of signs. From the psychoanalytic perspective, we are tempted to read the image of a white man in Oriental female costumes as doubly fetishistic in terms of its cross-cultural transposition and cross-gender appropriation. By donning the garments of his cultural/gender opposite, Gallimard seems to undergo a psychic transformation which might suggest an orgasmic release of libidinal energy at the culminating moment of his ritualistic death performed on the

stage. However, from a more political perspective, this final transformation seems to blur the line between the master and the slave that is politically necessary for a critique of colonialist imperialism by making the colonizer a pitiful victim and the colonized a cunning manipulator. Gallimard, the "adventurous imperialist" (21), is now portrayed as an exploited and subjugated victim on the basis of his "ambiguous" sexual inclination. His denial of homosexual tendency is further caricatured when he is literally "unmanned" on the stage by putting on Japanese whiteface makeup and feminine kimono. Therefore, his appropriation of Oriental costumes leads not to a mastery and control of the threat of the Orient/Woman; instead, it leads to a self-inflected humiliation under the feminized and thus castrated appearance. In a word, this final role reversal fails not only to disrupt the existing hierarchies in its reinscription of the Orient/the feminine as inferior but also to subvert thoroughly the gender binary opposition in its denial of gender/sex/desire complexity.

Besides, the play's treatment of Gallimard's sexuality also enhances the sexual/political ambivalence of the ending. Gallimard is neither identified as a "straight gay" who might prefer his male sexual partner cross-dressed as a woman nor a "Rice Queen," a gay Caucasian man primarily attracted to Asians. As the playwright has explained :

> To me, this is not a 'gay' subject because the very labels heterosexual or homosexual become meaningless in the context of this story . . . . 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' (Kondo 21).

However, the decision to render the heterosexual and homosexual categories as irrelevant in the play is itself a double-sided sword. On the one hand, when the question of Gallimard's sexual inclination is left unanswered at the end as the ultimate secret, the play seems to suggest the complexity and instability of human desire which cannot be exactly defined by strict sexual categories. More importantly, this "ambivalent" treatment of Gallimard's sexuality also keeps the sexual imperialist parallels of West/East and men/women at the center of *M. Butterfly* since the gendering of imperialism functions primarily under the unstated presumption of heterosexuality. On the other hand, the silence on the implicit connection between transvestism and homosexuality elides any in-depth exploration of the social system of compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia. Gallimard is finally left on the stage less as a repressed homosexual than as a laughing stock who has not even learned about the truth of his lover's sex after twenty years.

Ⅲ. Theatrical Ambivalence: (Asian) Woman as Absence

The above two sections have tried to foreground the cultural and sexual ambivalence in *M. Butterfly* by situating its intriguing politics in the context of a sexual/political (dis)connection. In what follows I will shift the focus to the theatrical aspects of the play with respective attention to the issues of the Oriental appeal, the stereotypical representation, and the male transvestite convention.

Given the glamorous Oriental spectacle it creates on the stage, *M. Butterfly* is theatrically ambivalent in the sense that it seems to criticize the Oriental myth which fetishizes cultural/gender differences, and simultaneously to perpetuate it by making the Oriental exotic elements--costume, music, dance--as the play's major market attractions. As I have elaborated in early part of this paper, Oriental costumes are

used not only as the emblematic totem of the East but also as the play's major visual signifiers of mystic and eroticized romance. Set against the background of huge decorative curtains of Oriental birds, Song, the leading fe/male, performs stylized dances as an ancient Chinese beauty in embroidered feminine garb. S/he moves around in mincing lotus steps, following the Peking Opera music played by a Chinese band with traditional instruments on stage. Identified at the beginning of the play as ideal listeners (or misplaced psychoanalysts) to Gallimard's confession, the audience in the theatre are thus constantly seduced by the play's cultural/ gender illusions and become sexual and theatrical voyeurs themselves. If the Orientalist gaze is activated by a knowledge/ power regime to see, to structure and to order the racial other for pleasurable consumption, to what extent can we argue that the play actively seduces and confirms such a disciplining and voyeuristic eye/I without successfully estranging or deconstructing it? To what degree does the international consumption of the play ironically testify to the prevalence of global neocolonialism?

According to one theatre critic, instead of articulating Asian desire in a subversive mode, *M. Butterfly* shows its complicity with Anglo-American desire in its representation of otherness: it provides "a good evening's entertainment and then float[s] as exotic Oriental fetishes articulating Anglo-American desire, now doubly displaced into the new order of stereotypical representations created by Asian-Americans" (Moy 55). However, whether the audience gains insight after the play's dismantling of traditional cultural and gender aasumptions or whether they merely indulge themselves further in the theatrical illusion of the exotic Orient and femininity is still debatable. As Hang himself has noted when addressing the inherent danger and difficulty in the play's cultural and gender representation, "*Butterfly* runs the risk of indulging the sin it condemns, like violent movies that are

supposedly antiviolence" (Savran 128). Although I should acknowledge Hwang's efforts at combining Western and Asian theatre forms, his stated intention to first present *Chinoiserie* in its full glory and then to question the audience's indulgence and the textual/theatrical needs of Oriental spectacle in *M. Butterfly*, I still believe that any discussion of the containment/subversion of the play's Oriental seduction should be constantly questioned as to whether the theatrical representation caters more to the appetites for cultural stereotypes and cliché than to a new politics of self-representation.[3]

Accordingly, the issue of stereotypical representation in *M. Butterfly* further complicates our discussion of the play's Oriental appeal. *M. Butterfly* is regarded by some heterosexual Asian-American men as a stage play pandering to mainstream stereotypes since they "apparently felt their masculinity impugned by the 'effeminate' stereotype of the Asian man" (Kondo 27). This accusation can be easily questioned on three accounts. First, if the Broadway success should not be celebrated naively as a positive gesture toward multiculturalism, it also needs not to be immediately accused of a "sellout," an index of the inevitable assimilation into white culture. Secondly, these heterosexual Asian-American men's indignation against "effeminate" stereotype should be read not only in light of the historically enforced feminization of Asian American men but also in light of the gender conflict long existing in Asian-American literary studies (Cheung). Thirdly, *M. Butterfly* is itself a play about stereotypes, dealing directly with the dual form of cultural misconception/stereotyping about how the West misperceives the East and vice versa. As Hwang has pointed out, Gallimard has fallen in love, "not with a person, but with a fantasty stereotype" ("Afterword" 94). However, the idea of reinscribing stereotypes in order to subvert them inevitably puts the play in a demythologizing/remythologizing dilemma. In terms of theatrical politics, we are entitled to doubt whether Comrade Chin is "more

stereotypical and cartoonish than the worst of the nineteenth-century stereotypes" and Song is "little more than a disfigured transvestite version of the infamous Chinese 'dragon lady' prostitute stereotype" (Moy 54). In other words, the play seems to repeat and to deconstruct at the same time the stereotypical representation of the Orient.

The third theatrically ambivalent dimension of the play comes from its self-conscious use of the male transvestite convention found in both the Eastern and Western theatres. In Act II scene vii, Song explains to Comrade Chin why women's roles are played by men in Peking Opera: "Because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" (63). This self-reflective comment on the textual and theatrical male transvestism is intended to attack this inherently misogynist belief that only a man can be a man's idealization of a woman. In Hwang's words, *M. Butterfly* is a play written to explore exactly "why it is that in Asian theatre and also in Shakespearean theatre men play women's roles" and to "deal with the concept of the onnagata in the context of a Western play" (DiGaetani 146). The play's transvestite acting thus carries the potential of foregrounding exactly the discursively constructed category of gender (Kondo 1990).

However, like the heated debate on the gender politics of theatrical representation, the same male transvestite convention can either be celebrated as a subversive means to highlight the artificiality and performativity of femininity, or be criticized as a male appropriation of femininity which recreates the essence of femininity by defining women according to their most essential traits (Case, Dolan). It is my contention that the playwright's decision to use a Chinese-American actor to play the Chinese female impersonator can only be fully addressed in the current debate on the issue of *strategic* (de)essentialization (Fuss). With the play's Chinese-American authorship and its politics of ethnic (self-)representation in mind, I will explore the implication of this casting

arrangement from several aspects. First of all, if it is radical to have a man play a woman in terms of gender construction, will it be equally subversive to have a woman "perform" a man masquerading as a woman, or to have a white to play an Asian to foreground racial construction?[4] Therefore, the insistence on using an Asian American actor to play the role of Song and the controversy over the casting arrangement of *Miss Saigon* point directly to the practicalities of employment in the theatre industry: it is not only a competition between whites and Asian-Americans but also one between men and women. The issue can be further complicated by taking into consideration the issues of theatrical essentialism--Asians must be played by Asians--and of the historical development of western theatrical institutions which have long used whites to play stereotypical Asian roles.

Secondly, in terms of the gender politics of theatrical representation, "Woman" in *M. Butterfly* can only be a rhetorical figure that is constantly dis-figured and re-figured through the masculine appropriation of feminine costume, gesture, movement and voice. Without sufficiently acknowledging the relationship between transvestism and homosexuality on the textual level, *M. Butterfly* fails also to interrogate the apparatus of desire on the theatrical level and thus sidesteps the issue of homoeroticism perpetuated by the male transvestite tradition.

Finally, although this casting decision might eliminate "the undesirable consequence of inviting the complicity of the audience in yet again enjoying the humiliation of an Asian woman" (Kondo 28, n32), it inevitably leads to a double erasure of Asian women. The "Oriental female" image perfectly portrayed in Song's cultural/gender performance substitutes the actual presence of Asian Women and thus excludes them from the spectacle of the homoerotic exchange in the theatre. In the absence of both the Orient and the women, the Oriental costume thus becomes on the stage a

doubly fetishistic mask of the western masculine gaze.

The above analysis has tried to read the initial M in the title of *M. Butterfly* simultaneously as the gender ambivalence of Monsieur/Madame, as the political ambivalence of master /slave, and as the psychosexual ambivalence of sadist/masochist. The play's dramatic use of Oriental dress and its Orientalist mode of address are politically examined in order to map out respectively its cultural/sexual/theatrical ambivalence. This reading strategy aims at constructing the play as a text with multiple sites of struggle and contestation. It also attempts to articulate the ways in which *M. Butterfly* can attack the imperialist misperception of the East and simultaneously destabilize gender and cultural identity from a post-colonial/post-structuralist non-subject-centered point of view as merely a corporeal "stylization" through costume, voice, gesture and body movement. This strategy inevitably renders the play ideologically ambivalent, caught up in the dilemma of the exposure of errors and the production of truth. Like costumes, cultural and gender identities are thus presented in the play as constantly oscillating between essentialism and constructionism.

Notes

[1] All references are to the Penguin edition of *M. Butterfly* with an Afterword by the playwright. For further discussion on gender politics in western operas, see Clement and McClary.

[2] In "*M. Butterfly:* Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity," Kondo has argued that the play offers a double movement of deconstructing and reconstructing identity: it leads the readers "beyond deconstruction of identity as Voice, Logos, or the Transcendental Signified . . . 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). She thus reads the play as more subversive than appropriative

since it can provide "a thoroughly historicized, politicized notion of identity" (23). However, what I attempt to do here is to focus more on the *ambivalent* politics of the play's cultural/gender representation in light of its cultural/sexual/theatrical use of costume.

[3] This Oriental facade has always been used as a market promotion for Asian-American writers, e.g. the cover designs of Maxine Hong Kingston'e *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *Joy Lucky Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*.

[4] Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* can be taken here as an example in which a female character is played by a man and a black character is played by a white in the first part of the play. This casting arrangement is intended to foreground the internalized white male standard in women and other minority people.

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