



# National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage

*Karen Shimakawa*

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*National Abjection* explores the vexed relationship between "Asian Americanness" and "Americanness" through a focus on drama and performance art. Karen Shimakawa argues that the forms of Asian Americanness that appear in U.S. culture are a function of national abjection—a process that demands that Americanness be defined by the exclusion of Asian Americans, who are either cast as symbolic foreigners incapable of integration or Americanization or distorted into an “honorary” whiteness. She examines how Asian Americans become culturally visible on and off stage, revealing the ways Asian American theater companies and artists respond to the cultural implications of this abjection.

Shimakawa looks at the origins of Asian American theater, particularly through the memories of some of its pioneers. Her examination of the emergence of Asian American theater companies illuminates their strategies for countering the stereotypes of Asian Americans and the lack of visibility of Asian American performers within the theater world. She shows how some plays—Wakako Yamauchi's *12-1-A*, Frank Chin's *Chickencoop Chinaman*, and *The Year of the Dragon*—have both directly and indirectly addressed the displacement of Asian Americans. She analyzes works attempting to negate the process of abjection—such as the 1988 Broadway production of *M. Butterfly* as well as *Miss Saigon*, a mainstream production that enacted the process of cultural displacement both onstage and off. Finally, Shimakawa considers Asian Americanness in the context of globalization by meditating on the work of Ping Chong, particularly his *East-West Quartet*.

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