Introduction

*Ambiguous Habits and the Paradox of Asian American Racial Formation*

It is in the everyday and its ambiguous depths that possibilities are born and the present lives out its relation with the future.
—Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*

Anybody American who really imagines Asia feels the loneliness of the U.S.A. and suffers from the distances human beings are apart. Not because lonesome Wittman was such a persuader but because they had need to do something communal against isolation, the group of laststayers, which included two professional actors, organized themselves into a play.
—Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*

Wittman Ah Sing, the restless, inspired, and oft-raging protagonist of Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1990), is immersing himself in a typing frenzy when a familiar problem confronts him: “And [he] again whammed into the block question: Does he announce now that the author is—Chinese? Or, rather, Chinese-American? And be forced into autobiographical confession. Stop the music—I have to butt in and introduce myself and my race.”¹ Although explicitly stating his “race” seems unappealing to Wittman, he also resists the obvious alternative, to leave himself and his characters racially unidentified.² He muses, “‘Call me Ishmael.’ See? You pictured a white guy, didn’t you? If Ishmael were described—ochery ecru amber umber skin—you picture a *tan* white guy” (34). Stymied as soon as he
begins to write, Wittman feels he must either assert his racial identity or allow a presumptive whiteness to assert itself. He suspects, moreover, that in making this choice, he alone would carry responsibility for insisting on the significance of race, or denying its importance. As Wittman ponders—or rather, fumes about—this dilemma, he decides to circumvent it by choosing a different literary form: “By writing a play, he didn’t need descriptions that racinated anybody. The actors will walk out on stage and their looks will be self-evident. They will speak dialects and accents, which the audience will get upon hearing” (34). Moving from textual description to embodied performance, Wittman disperses responsibility for racial identification among the various actors and spectators who will make theater from his writing. Although he avoids explicitly “racinating” his characters, he nevertheless assumes that identifications will happen in the encounters between those who look and speak and those who see and hear in historically informed and socially meaningful ways. Rather than write race, Wittman decides to let it materialize in the dynamic exchanges that constitute a performance. In picturing this theatrical event, however, Wittman hastily ascribes a transparency to what the audience “will get” and see as “self-evident.” Namely, he assumes that the performance itself will erase the fraught issues of racial identification raised by his attempt to write. He consequently evades questions of whether the walks, looks, dialects, and accents presented on the stage will be those of the actors, or those of the characters they are assigned to play; whether any friction might exist between performer and role; and whether the audience’s perception of bodies and behaviors will align with the intentions of those staging the performance. In other words, Wittman ignores theater’s uncertain mingling of the real and the fictive, and the possible conflicts between representation and reception that might produce something other than what he envisions. With this turn to performance, the novel becomes a lesson—for Wittman and the reader—on theater’s unruliness. Following Wittman into the theater, The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday delves into the very ambiguities that not only elude Tripmaster Monkey’s restive artist but ultimately trump him as well—a glorious defeat with which this introduction will close. Although Wittman imagines that simply having his actors walk in front of an audience will allow their features and man-
nerisms to speak for themselves, he neglects to consider the transformation that occurs at the threshold of the stage. Behaviors carried out with nonchalance in the everyday acquire a new context and style when they move into the spotlight of the theater. In the language of performance studies, performative reiterations become “twice-behaved behaviors.” However neatly a performance might attempt to align the look (appearance) of the actor with the look (gaze) of the spectator, the necessary gaps that emerge between actor and role and between the stage and the seats are spaces of dynamic interaction, spaces where social boundaries consolidate and dissolve, where affiliations emerge and shift. They are, moreover, sites where everyday behaviors shed their ordinariness to become subjects of marked interest, consequently revealing their unregistered importance, or taking on an altogether new significance.

The displacement of quotidian behaviors from anonymity into public scrutiny more broadly has played a crucial role in shaping Asian American racial formation. From the nineteenth century to the present, everyday scenes of eating, working, shopping, and studying have buttressed competing views of Asian Americans as ideal and impossible Americans. Even as the Asian body has remained persistently alien vis-à-vis the American national imaginary, the behavioral proclivities attached to that body have had a more flexible career. These everyday enactments are what I refer to as “the mundane” to underscore a fusion of the corporeal and the quotidian. Whether set in direct opposition to American living or regarded as particularly amenable to it, the presumed habits of Asian Americans have provided powerful if unreliable support for competing arguments about the permeability of racial and national delineations. For those who study Asian American racial formation, its vacillations between the extremes of the “yellow peril” and the “model minority” constitute an enduring paradox. The minutiae of daily life not only imbue these opposing characterizations of Asian Americans with an illusory precision, but also play a vital role in managing their contradictions. As this book elaborates, the paradox of Asian American racial formation is sustained through the mundane’s ambiguous relationship to the body: it is enacted by the body, but may or may not be of the body.

From inflections of speech and gesture to daily routines, the mundane is the slice of the everyday carried—and carried out—by the body. Although reading a newspaper in the morning might seem quite different
from physical tendencies such as an accent or a gait, they share a repetitive, consistent quality that places them at the limits of conscious action. It is not that the mundane proceeds completely unconsciously, but that it seems in some measure programmed into the body. At the same time, it leaves open the possibility of transformation through the repetition of alternate behaviors, a process that in one context is called assimilation, and in another, theatrical rehearsals. Different motions can suggest different levels of attachment to the body, with small mannerisms appearing more deeply embedded than quotidian practices of work and leisure, and therefore more resistant to change. Yet across the spectrum, the mundane manifests a bodily training that makes modification seem both plausible and difficult. Its equivocal relationship to the body lies in this tension between the endurance of previously acquired habits and routines, and the possibility that such behaviors are open to alteration.

In the long historical production of racial categories and hierarchies, the mundane has played dual roles, insisting, on the one hand, on the truth of difference (demonstrated not just in selected physical features but in ostensibly distinct ways of being in the world), and offering, on the other, a vehicle for erasing or ameliorating difference (through assimilation as a national or colonial subject). Richard Dyer’s argument that whiteness has been conceived as “something that is in but not of the body” contrasts the abiding belief that those who are white can transcend their bodies with the perception that those who are racially marked are reducible to their bodies. These beliefs, Dyer further contends, sanction the former to control the latter. The mundane, as something enacted by the body that is not necessarily of the body, inserts a productive uncertainty whereby the prerogative to manage racial others can be channeled into efforts to change their behaviors. Yet the presumed incompleteness of these endeavors, exemplified by Homi Bhabha’s “almost the same, but not quite” colonial subject, affirms the very boundaries that such efforts are meant to erase. American sociologist Robert E. Park thus mused in studies from the first half of the twentieth century that although people of Asian descent were capable of adopting American customs and mannerisms, an incongruity lingered between their conduct, which seemed typically American, and their physical appearance. The body may move differently, but the conglomeration of features used for racial classification continues to prompt questions about whether these new habits
supersede or merely mask prior tendencies. The project of assimilating racial minorities therefore sets the possibility of transforming people by modifying their everyday behaviors in tension with the inexorable corporeality that burdens those who are racially marked. Seductive but never satisfying, the mundane serves as a wedge between absolute difference and its complete unraveling.

In emphasizing this nebulous relationship between habitual behaviors and the body, I am not posing an epistemological problem or soliciting a biological explanation, but instead calling attention to the social usefulness of this ambiguity. Beliefs about the body are crucial to structuring the world, and even dated or contradictory beliefs (those that empirical or historical study could potentially discount) can have important effects. As Dyer demonstrates, the notion that a certain quality is not “of” the body but instead resides “in” the body has had, and continues to have, wide-ranging social consequences. Alternately, uncertainty has its own force, and it has been particularly effective in managing racial boundaries through the mundane. This book is therefore concerned not with habits and routines per se, but rather with the social significance attached to certain everyday practices and to the possibility of adopting and transferring those practices across racial lines.

These interests resonate with Pierre Bourdieu’s disquisitions on the habitus and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, but I diverge from these works in putting ambiguity at the core of the racial mundane. In describing, respectively, the transmission of practices through the habitus, conceived as “embodied history... internalized as second nature,” and the reiterated citations of norms that perform or “do” gender, Bourdieu and Butler argue that the enactment of conventional behaviors perpetuates the social stratifications and divisions that it seems merely to reflect. By appearing innate, bodily repetitions naturalize identity, status, and institution, legitimating, for example, the king’s authority or binary conceptions of gender. The transhistorical scope of these theories sets them apart from studies of the everyday that specifically link it to the experiences of modernity. For instance, in her recent study of Asian American literature’s engagement with capitalist modernity, Yoon Sun Lee observes that the writing of the everyday “tends to show the draining away of significance through the phenomenon of repetition.” The repetitions that concern Butler and Bourdieu, by contrast, are those that
are significant and efficacious precisely because of their continual, perfunctory embodiment. The normative identities and practices that they dissect propagate quietly through the body, their longevity and impact tied to their discreet rhythms.

Because of their interest in challenging accepted notions of the natural and the essential, however, Bourdieu and Butler are less concerned with the quotidian force of ambiguity, which draws attention to itself as the evasion or disruption of certainty. Ambiguity emerges when unfamiliar bodies take up familiar behaviors, when the relationship between body and behavior becomes an open question and consequently takes on a theatrical character: as the subject seems to split into actor and role, questions of imitation and authenticity surface. These more dubious performances, in Bourdieu and Butler's frameworks, are either innocuous because they lack a rote, compulsory quality or potentially subversive because they call norms into question. Ambiguity and theatricality nevertheless constitute the commonplace of the racial mundane: denaturalizing everyday behaviors (as strange, spectacular, quaint, or dangerous) is fundamental to naturalizing racial difference.

The association of theatrical performance with the willful playing of false roles generates a misleading opposition between the everyday and the theatrical that obscures their intimacy in the production of racial boundaries. In elaborating his theory of the habitus, for example, Bourdieu sets theatrical performance as its foil. Arguing that the habitus is “a practical mimesis (or mimeticism) which implies an overall relation of identification and has nothing in common with an imitation that would presuppose a conscious effort to reproduce a gesture, an utterance or an object explicitly constituted as a model,” Bourdieu stresses that when it comes to the habitus, “The body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it enacts the past, bringing it back to life.” Bourdieu implies that whereas theatrical performances involve self-reflexive, intentional acts, the habitus is the body’s involuntary enactment of history. Yet in asserting that “the body believes in what it plays at,” Bourdieu insinuates that the habitus is, in some ways, like theatrical performance. He suggests that the difference between mimesis and imitation is one of degree, and it is measured by the extent to which an actor believes in her or his role.
As sociologist Erving Goffman points out, however, individuals can move between belief and disbelief as they perform various social roles. Ultimately, the efficacy of a presentation depends on the performer’s ongoing interactions with an audience. Analogies to theater allow Goffman to conceptualize daily social interactions in terms of information exchange: everyday performances are efforts by their various participants to influence one another. By assuming the intentionality of participants, Goffman’s model sits uncomfortably with some poststructuralist critiques of the subject, but it nonetheless usefully envisions everyday performances as sites of ongoing struggles to control meaning and behavior, sites of asymmetries and disruptions as well as measures from all sides to maintain a common understanding of the scene. At the simplest level, Goffman’s model conceives of performance as an individual asking an audience to believe in her or his presentation. While the concept of the habitus focuses on the alignments of belief—the body and its audience believing together—that sustain the authority of established roles, the misalignment of belief can also affirm social hierarchies and distinctions.

Exemplary in this regard, racial difference maintains its credibility through performances in which beliefs are incongruent, when a body believes in its performance but the audience does not share this belief, or when a performance that should stretch belief is taken as natural and authentic. Audiences as well as actors draw the line between mimesis and imitation, and not always at the same point. This is the lesson embodied by Bhabha’s imperfect colonial mimic, and conveyed in W. E. B. Du Bois’s description of racial double consciousness as a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” Pressed to meet standards that are simultaneously used to cast their efforts as poor role-playing, racial and colonial others are trapped between two kinds of performances. Recognizing the complex imbrications of race, theatricality, and the everyday, Saidiya Hartman develops an expanded sense of “performing blackness” in her study of racial domination in the nineteenth century to reflect the blurry lines between racial performance and performativity. Whereas Bourdieu turns to theatrical performance to draw a contrast to the habitus, theories of racialization turn to theatrical analogies to describe the experience of being racially
marked. The racial mundane, which joins the repetition of habitual behaviors with the production of racial difference, is theatricality made ordinary, and everyday enactments made ambiguous.

If the racialization of nonwhite bodies renders them theatrical, it is not because race is a role willingly played, and not only because such bodies become the objects of spectacle or surveillance. Both racialization and theatrical performance rely on a productive tension between what could be termed the “actor” and the “role,” a doubling that is mediated by “the eyes of others.” Rather than focus on the agency of the actor, theater scholar Bert O. States and philosopher Umberto Eco choose involuntary performers—a dog and an intoxicated man—to explicate, respectively, the phenomenology and the semiotics of theatrical performance. States argues, “A dog on stage is certainly an object . . . but the act of theatricalizing it—putting it into an intentional space—neutralizes its objectivity and claims it as a likeness of a dog.”

To theatricalize a dog is to make it double as itself and its effigy—a simultaneous splitting and drawing together of the real and the representative. Explaining that in theater, “image and object, pretense and pretender, sign-vehicle and content, draw unusually close,” States implies that performance depends on both a centripetal and a centrifugal movement: “pretense” and “pretender” converge on one body, but without ever fully collapsing into each other. Eco similarly describes an inebriated man used by the Salvation Army to preach against intemperance as, at once, real and representative, singular and typical: unwittingly cast to perform the evils of alcohol, he enables and exceeds symbolization.

To the extent that all objects represent types, the exceptionality attributed to theatrical performance may seem arbitrary. The point, however, is that theatrical performance makes explicit a tense union between the body or the object that is present and the concept that it represents. Richard Schechner refers to this relationship as the “double negativity” of performance: an actor is “not” herself, but she is also “not not” herself.

The questions raised by these paradigms of theatrical performance point to questions that one might also ask about racialization, particularly at a historical moment when the notion of race as a social construction is gaining acceptance, but continues to chafe against beliefs about the indelibility of racial differences. When a person is “theatricalized,” which traits lend a reality to the performance and which ones exceed
the designated role, thereby disappearing into insignificance, challenging the “truth” of the performance, or extending the scope of the role? To ask similar questions about racialized bodies is to underline the social construction of race and to insist on an awkward fit between body and role, while taking seriously the drive to make them converge. What aspects of the body as a material presence moving through time and space are used to sustain or undermine the credibility of race, and what, conversely, does racialization make visible or obscure?

Many evocative parallels join them, but the critical relationship among racialization, theatricality, and the mundane in this book might be summed up thus: when racialized, the mundane takes on a theatrical quality that accentuates its ambiguous relationship to the body. The motions of the body throughout a day are innumerable, and not every gesture becomes racially representative. The racial frame instead captures certain mannerisms and behaviors, and in doing so draws them closer to the marked body while also turning their relationship into a question, a paradoxical dynamic familiar to theatrical performance, which, as States and Eco describe, holds actor and character in productive suspense.

Yet however useful theater might be as a paradigm for social interactions and processes, it is also a distinct cultural form with the potential to affect—as well as represent and explicate—those dynamics. Its privileged place in this book among various modes of representation and performance reflects its special relationship to the mundane. As I argued above, although theater and the mundane seem to be antitheses, they share an important feature: their aesthetic and social possibilities derive from the body’s ambiguous relationship to the behaviors that it enacts. However, this attribute of the mundane becomes evident only when it sheds its perfunctory character to become something that is scrutinized or actively reshaped. By contrast, theatrical performance explicitly manages the relationship between body and behavior—or more precisely, the convergence on one body of the mannerisms of both actor and character—as formal practice, even if this process is not always evident in the final production. Method acting, for example, encourages closing the gap between actor and character, whereas Brechtian alienation effect emphasizes the distance between them. In theatrical performances, more than in film and television where the ideal is often seamless integration, the space between body and behavior remains a
practical problem and a point of experimentation. As Karen Shimakawa argues, “As a medium theatre, by definition, depends on and exposes the fragility of identity (sexed/gendered, racialized, and national) and the complex, dynamic relations between subjects, objects, and the abject.”23 The performances considered in the following chapters purposefully intensify this quality of theater, its playful suspension and rupture of unitary selves, through devices such as role-doubling and cross-racial role-playing. Although these devices occasionally appear in other forms, they are primarily—and inherently—theatrical in their manipulation of the possibilities of the live body.24 In theater, the interstices between body and behavior bridged by the mundane have the potential to break open into palpable, unstable fissures that exert aesthetic and social force.

Performing the Asian American Mundane

The relationship between Asian American racial formation and the mundane is both historical and theoretical. As I establish below and elaborate in the following chapters, debates about Asian American immigration and assimilation have persistently located national controversies in the subtle motions of the body, in the minor dramas of doing chores or greeting a customer. These seemingly trivial behaviors have been fundamental to maintaining Asian Americans as what Shimakawa calls the “national abject”—that which must be continually expelled in order to maintain a coherent national identity.25 Reflecting a pervasive and abiding curiosity about how others live, the scrutiny of everyday behaviors is not exclusive to Asian American racial formation. Most racial stereotypes implicate the mundane, which enlivens their flattened portraits with the small details of how people walk, speak, eat, or hold their bodies. Furthermore, as mentioned above, projects of assimilation and colonization have long been preoccupied with how to change the tendencies of those deemed racial others. Nevertheless, the sheer extremes of idealization and alienation that constitute the paradox of Asian American racial formation illustrate with particular clarity the social and cultural efficacy of the mundane’s ambiguous relationship to the body. Likewise, this quality of the mundane is critical to elucidating how apparently inconsistent characterizations of Asian Americans remain persuasive.
At the turn of the last century, calls to end Chinese immigration put a spotlight on the habits of Chinese laborers. For those advocating immigration restrictions, these habits seemed to demonstrate the inability of the Chinese to assimilate, as well as the unfair advantage they might have over white workers. Lurid descriptions of the unsanitary practices and meager living standards of the Chinese filled government reports and fed fears that although Chinese immigrants could not adopt American ways of living, they would spread their tendencies to others. Everyday behaviors—considered intractable when it came to Chinese workers and dangerously vulnerable when it came to white Americans—offered a particularly expedient means of protesting Chinese immigration. The mundane could be called on to manifest racial difference and support claims of a fundamental incompatibility, but also arouse anxieties by suggesting the potential for traversal.

After the United States moved to restrict immigration from Asia and attenuated fears that “Chinese” habits would spread, the mundane—ever flexible—came to serve an opposing project, that of exploring the possibility (previously rejected) of transferring “American” habits to those of Asian descent already residing within the nation, and thus assimilating them. This project took on an added urgency as World War II ended and both the United States and Canada confronted the question of how to integrate Japanese North Americans after their release from internment camps. Each state pursued policies to hasten assimilation by dissolving ethnic communities: while for a short period the U.S. government encouraged voluntary relocations to various parts of the country, the Canadian government forcibly dispersed Japanese Canadians to areas east of the Rocky Mountains. These efforts assumed that separating Japanese North Americans from one another would compel them to absorb (white) American and Canadian tendencies, and result in the dissipation of difference. Japanese women who immigrated to the United States in the postwar era as wives of American servicemen became unwitting exemplars of this process: living in communities scattered throughout the country, they reportedly carried out domestic tasks just like regular American housewives. Yet if they seemed to fulfill a particular vision of individually willed integration, the curiosity they provoked for their adoption of American lifestyles simultaneously affirmed their alienation by pointing to a disjuncture between their racialized bodies and
their everyday behaviors. The mundane slyly tendered evidence of both the capacity of racial minorities to become model Americans and their abiding strangeness.

This indeed constitutes the signature duality of the model minority myth, which emerged in the 1960s with stories of the success of Japanese Americans and eventually encompassed Asian Americans as a wider demographic. The stereotype has elicited wary responses from activists and scholars who argue that in touting the apparent achievements of Asian Americans, it masks class disparities and ethnic diversity, fuels interracial resentment and anxieties, and falsely justifies cuts in public funding. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, friction in inner-city neighborhoods belied the innocuousness of the model minority myth, as Korean American merchants and black customers in economically depressed areas became engaged in a struggle over limited resources that was exacerbated by racial stereotyping of both groups. During this time, the daily practices of running a business (managing goods, interacting with customers, exchanging money) gave credence to divergent perceptions of Korean immigrants as hardworking Americans and unwelcome strangers. Although Korean Americans were lauded as bootstrapping minorities who succeeded without government support, their tendency to pass change in a certain way or to avoid eye contact also raised concerns about their “cultural difference.” Transforming these behaviors, rather than addressing economic inequities, became the focus of efforts by community and government organizations to alleviate hostilities. Set as the cause of and the solution to antagonisms, the mundane became the site where racial divides could be crossed—or not.

Just as the daily practices of Korean American merchants elicited criticism as well as praise in discussions of the “Black-Korean conflict,” recent accounts of high-achieving Asian American youths characterize their routines as models to emulate and causes for concern. Although activities like completing one’s homework, preparing for exams, and practicing musical instruments might seem unremarkable in themselves, the style with which Asian Americans purportedly carry out these activities (excessively, automatically, ceaselessly) casts them as signs of an un-American lack of creativity and playfulness. Deftly portraying Asian American students as hyperassimilated, such representations turn behaviors that seem to promise the erasure of difference into
further evidence of racial distinctions. Although ostensibly divergent characterizations of the Asian American mundane bookend the century with early depictions of the “bad” habits of Chinese immigrants and recent depictions of the “good” habits of Asian American students, in both cases public interest in the practices of these groups circled around questions of whether such habits were intrinsic to Asians or could be transmitted to others. Woven into arguments about whether or not “Asian American” is really “American” are arguments about whether or not habitual behaviors are separable from the bodies they set in motion.

As immediate, tangible embodiments of social and historical pressures, everyday enactments seem to make persuasive claims. Differing assumptions about what those claims are have allowed the mundane to support the paradox of Asian American racial formation. By setting the mundane at the center of the contradictory dynamics of national abjection, however, I do not intend to privilege it as the primary medium for shifting racial and national boundaries, or to neglect the force of other factors. Chapters 1 and 4 show that a focus on quotidian behaviors has at times moved public discourse away from thorny political concerns and issues of economic disparities. Nevertheless, the efficacy of small behavioral tendencies in shaping conversations about who can cross certain lines (economic, racial, national, or gendered) and who cannot—as well as their more subtle perpetuation of identities and social relations in the form of Bourdieu’s habitus or Butler’s performative citations—makes them crucial to investigations of how difference and inequity are sustained. Furthermore, because habitual behaviors seem to enact culture reflexively through the body, they bridge body-centered conceptions of race and a contemporary discourse of cultural difference. References to cultural differences often serve today as a euphemism for racial differences, yet they also imply the potential detachment of culture from racialized features. In joining the cultural and the corporeal, the mundane flexibly substantiates conflicting notions about how and where racial lines are drawn.

In probing the significance that everyday behaviors assume in debates about race, immigration, and assimilation, this book does not claim to describe the actual habits of Asian Americans. In other words, the day-to-day practices of those who might identify or be identified as Asian American are less my concern than how and why specific behav-
iors associated with Asian bodies attract attention. The racial mundane is always charged with spectacle—whether on the stage, in a magazine article, or in a government report—and only gives the illusion of representing the quotidian experiences of those who are racialized. As I stressed above, the everyday body is never reducible to a racial frame: its numerous motions catch and evade attention, shifting between the typical and the singular, the conscious and the unconscious. To the extent that this study is about habits and routines, it is expressly about habits and routines as mediated by various cultural forms. When selected behaviors and mannerisms become the object of public interest, they become more intelligible, but they also become estranged from the subtle unfoldings of the everyday. Thus dislocated, they pulsate with new consequence and potential, posing, to borrow Henri Lefebvre’s phrasing, complex problems that are both aesthetic and ethical.27

The critical potential of defamiliarizing the everyday, or making it strange, has been a primary concern of scholars and artists in the twentieth century. In theater, this inquiry is commonly associated with Bertolt Brecht, especially his work on the alienation effect and the *gestus*. Attentive to the possibilities offered by performances outside the theater as well as in it, theorists such as Butler and Elin Diamond propose that blatantly imitative, inappropriate, and excessive performances of naturalized behaviors might have a subversive force.28 Indeed, film, literature, and the visual arts, as well as theater, have all been part of investigations into the political efficacy of disrupting the ordinariness of the everyday. As Lefebvre puts it, such projects seek “to make [the everyday’s] latent conflicts apparent, and thus to burst them asunder.”29 Lefebvre himself chooses Charlie Chaplin’s “Tramp-figure” to illustrate his concept of the reverse image, “an image of everyday reality, taken in its totality or as a fragment, reflecting that reality in all its depth through people, ideas and things which are apparently quite different from everyday experience, and therefore exceptional, deviant, abnormal.”30 The reverse image is not the opposite of the everyday, but rather the everyday as reflected by and mediated through what appears to be its opposite. Breaking through the tightly patterned surface of the everyday to reveal its contradictions, the reverse image depends on both formal techniques of defamiliarizing the everyday and social delineations of otherness.
Like Chaplin’s Tramp, figures of geographic displacement—refugees, exiles, immigrants—have served as devices for critiquing the everyday. Representing the experience of migration, forced and voluntary, often involves envisioning the everyday of a particular place from an alienated perspective. Thus, the strange animals, dreamlike landscapes, and cryptic signs that greet the immigrant (and the reader) in Australian artist Shaun Tan’s graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006) convey the bewilderment that accompanies basic activities of sleeping, eating, and working in a new space. The immigrant can also be invoked to shed light on alternatives to conventional practices. Michel de Certeau, for example, explains his theory of everyday “tactics” by referring to the practices of the Kabylarian immigrant in France, who finds “ways of using the constraining order of the place or of the language.” Yet de Certeau is also sensitive to the dangers of critiquing the everyday through its others, and faults Bourdieu for depending on a “remote foreign element” to develop his theory of the habitus.

The risks and challenges of estranging the ordinary through those regarded as “exceptional, deviant, abnormal” become especially clear when it involves those marked as racially different. To the extent that practices of defamiliarizing the everyday depend on a common understanding of the familiar, how might their force and meaning change when enacted by unfamiliar bodies? How do such strategies reflect back (as Lefebvre hoped) the alienation of the audience, rather than simply affirm the alienness of others? Although stylistic manipulations such as excessive repetitions or alienation effects might disrupt our sense of the everyday by troubling the relationship between the body and its routine motions, the production of racial difference relies on similar strategies to make the quotidian enactments of certain bodies seem exaggerated, unnatural, and imitative. Aesthetic modes advanced with the explicit goal of critiquing established conventions can therefore have contradictory effects when they involve racialized bodies.

The cultural productions examined in the following chapters press into this complex juncture, defamiliarizing everyday behaviors specifically in order to unsettle racial delineations. They accordingly engage (and engage with) two key projects of modernity: endeavors by artists and theorists to render the everyday strange, and wide-ranging efforts
to substantiate racial distinctions. While public debates about Asian Americans have turned to small, recurrent behaviors as evidence of either the permeability or the inflexibility of racial lines, various works of theater, film, and fiction have experimented with the porousness of social boundaries by playing with the relationship between habit, body, and identity. The mundane’s uncertain attachment to the body thus becomes an opportunity to try different practices, to stage an exchange of bodies and behaviors, and to formalize and stylize quotidian activities.

Set within a larger discursive network composed of newspaper and magazine articles, government reports, and sociological studies, performances and works of literature intimately concerned with performance form the center of the following case studies. The mundane serves as a vehicle for managing racial and national identifications as these works integrate aggressively nonrealist performance modes, including ritual, mime, cross-racial role-playing, and caricature, with ethnographic and documentary elements. By mixing and moving between styles, they draw attention to how the mundane sheds or acquires its anonymity. They moreover show that as everyday behaviors move between ordinary and exceptional, racial boundaries concomitantly harden, shift, and dissolve. With the exception of the afterword, each of the following chapters pairs works of theater, film, and literature that put pressure on existing conceptions of racial difference by using parallel strategies of defamiliarizing habitual behaviors. By comparing two key works in each chapter, I investigate why, as they grapple with issues of immigration, assimilation, and interracial relations, they share not just a keen interest in the mundane, but similar modes of presenting it as well. Furthermore, I find in the discrepancies that emerge between the paired works new possibilities for performing the mundane differently, that is, for realizing alternate practices on the stage that might illuminate and reshape practices in the everyday.

In the era of prohibitions on Chinese immigration to the United States, when the line between “Chinese” and “American” was strictly maintained, a drama that purportedly offered Broadway audiences an authentic experience of the Chinese theater was hailed as a pioneering American play. Now largely forgotten, J. Harry Benrimo and George C. Hazelton, Jr.’s *The Yellow Jacket* (1912) nimbly accommodated a dual identity as an amusing spectacle of racial otherness and an important
work of modern American theater. In particular, the scripted property man's execution of routine tasks while “managing” the stage lent the performance an ethnographic verisimilitude that made possible its passages between entertainment and art, and moreover, enabled its viewers to conceive of themselves as both Chinese and Western spectators. Chapter 1 compares *The Yellow Jacket* to a dramatic work that bears its echoes: Thornton Wilder's iconic *Our Town* (1938). Like *The Yellow Jacket*, *Our Town* defamiliarized everyday behaviors to encourage audiences to identify with *and* distance themselves from the world depicted on the stage. The two plays' use of non-naturalistic theatrical conventions to present the mundane challenged established social demarcations by inviting multiple, sometimes competing identifications. At the same time, their projection of a distinct spectatorial position set limits on the crossings that they promised.

Chapter 2 further explores the potential for performances of quotidian behaviors to forge unlikely affiliations, but in the context of the broad pressures faced by Japanese North Americans after World War II to reject ethnic ties. Setting midcentury depictions of Japanese North Americans against retrospective accounts of their experiences of displacement, the chapter moves between “archives of racial representation” and “archives of ethnic self-expression,” an approach that Colleen Lye argues may “[put] into practice a fully social (and nonessentialist) consciousness of race.” In a striking convergence, Velina Hasu Houston's drama *Tea* (1987) and Joy Kogawa's novel *Itsuka* (1992) envision the everyday performance of community by Japanese North Americans as a rejection of post–World War II imperatives to disperse. Their characters materialize tenuous yet vital connections to one another by turning activities such as recycling, taking tea, and completing basic organizational tasks into shared rituals. Pairing a Canadian novel and a U.S. American play, Chapter 2 extends the book's analysis of the mundane both geographically and formally. It considers crucial parallels and differences between the postwar treatment of Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans, and assesses the distinct formal limits that drama and fiction impose on the project of “ritualizing” routines.

Cross-racial performances of the mundane, while a recurring interest in the book, are the focal point of Chapter 3, which interrogates the claim that the minor behavioral tendencies of Korean American merchants
were a major cause of antagonisms during the so-called Black-Korean conflict. Whereas community and government efforts encouraged merchants to adopt nicer conduct, Elizabeth Wong’s play *Kimchee and Chitlins* (1990) and Anna Deavere Smith’s solo show *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1993) asked instead what kind of change might result from assuming the gestures, mannerisms, and accents of those positioned as one’s enemy. *Twilight* and *Kimchee and Chitlins* together demonstrate that despite the risk of replicating stereotypes and further aggravating relations, performing the mundane across lines of race, gender, and class has the potential to bring to light the elusive networks of influence that make resolving conflicts across those lines so difficult.

Moving from cross-racial performances to those that cross divides within Asian America, Chapter 4 elucidates the contradictory desires incited by the model minority stereotype through an analysis of Justin Lin’s 2002 film *Better Luck Tomorrow* and Lauren Yee’s 2008 play *Ching Chong Chinaman*. These works feature characters who appear to be diligent, privileged high school students, but simultaneously seek to be the model minority’s “others”—either the yellow peril gangster or those whose hardships are obscured by tales of Asian American triumphs. As these characters attempt to expand their lives by doubling as their others or taking them on as surrogates, the mundane alternately enables these performances and upholds their material limits. Whatever doubling is made possible by borrowing and delegating everyday tasks, their obligatory physical execution and unpredictable social impact restrict the characters’ efforts to play different types of Asian Americans.

In recent years, the online video has become the quintessential form of the everyday, capturing life’s smallest moments and disseminating them globally through websites such as YouTube. It has also become a major vehicle for Asian American cultural production, as Asian American artists, actors, and entrepreneurs have become some of the most popular providers of online content. As the afterword demonstrates, their videos assert the ordinariness of Asian Americans, not only by focusing on the banalities of snacking, dating, and applying eyeliner, but also by strategically inserting spectacular performances of everyday practices. Set against these exaggerated depictions, the Asian American performer takes the position of the interested subject, rather than the interesting object. Yet in seizing on quotidian activities as a medium
for dissolving racial peculiarity, the videos also risk advancing a narrow conception of the Asian American ordinary as exclusively middle-class and heterosexual. Their informal quality nonetheless allows a tension to emerge between the ordinary body and the live one, the former arranging itself into accepted patterns and the latter perpetually escaping their strictures.

The following chapters largely revisit events and issues (Chinese exclusion, Japanese internment, the Los Angeles riots, and debates over affirmative action) that have held a significant place in accounts of Asian American history and racialization. By linking these critical episodes to shifting conceptions of the racial mundane, the book establishes the embodied everyday as a vital lens through which to reexamine the supposed paradox of Asian American racial formation. Instead of offering a comprehensive historical and cultural survey, the book lingers at sites where well-documented controversies about race that implicate the mundane meet works of theater, film, and literature that engage related issues through their estranged presentations of everyday behaviors. Attending to what might be considered high-density subjects in Asian American studies, *The Racial Mundane* replicates the field's initial focus on Chinese and Japanese Americans in Chapters 1 and 2. The analysis in Chapter 3 of representations of Korean American merchants during the Los Angeles riots and the explorations in Chapter 4 and the conclusion of less ethnically defined performances (in other words, Asian American performances without a strong connection to a specific ethnic group) widen the compass and reflect the demographic changes that followed the 1965 immigration reforms.

The book nevertheless confronts the perennial challenge of doing justice to the diverse affiliations subsumed by the designations “Asian American” and “Asian North American.” The myriad qualifications that must accompany these terms draw attention to their provisional quality and the historical and political contexts in which they are used. This inherent definitional ambiguity, however unsatisfying, is a valuable corrective to axiomatic thinking. The theoretical elasticity of the book's conception of the racial mundane, developed through readings of a necessarily finite set of texts and performances, is therefore meant to accommodate, rather than elide, the nuances that should follow any effort to conceptualize Asian American racial formation. One might note,
moreover, that the importance of the embodied everyday to representations of diasporic experiences exceeds the focus here on a distinct set of national controversies. Carlos Bulosan’s short story “The Story of a Letter” (1946), for example, conveys the impact of migration through a stylistic shift in how the narrator recounts his day-to-day activities in the Philippines and in the United States. In Wendy Law-Yone’s novel *The Coffin Tree* (1983), the narrator’s brother, Shan, becomes a kind of Lefebvrian “Tramp-figure” in the United States, where his continued disorientation after suddenly leaving Burma/Myanmar makes it difficult for him to carry out the basic tasks needed to maintain his life. Chapter 3’s discussion of *Tea* and the trilogy that it concludes touches on similar depictions of characters who must respond to abrupt changes in their quotidian practices as they move globally. These examples point to other potential areas of analysis outside *The Racial Mundane*’s primary interest in exploring the interface between national debates about Asian Americans that hinge on claims about racialized bodies and everyday behaviors, and performances that test those claims through their unconventional presentations and enactments of habits and routines.

To the extent that all notions of racial difference are comparative and articulate distinct understandings of the relationship between bodies and behaviors, the relevance of the racial mundane extends beyond its role in constituting the Asian American as a paradoxical figure. In the contemporary moment, recognizing its impact can help offset hasty pronouncements of an emergent postracial era. Although much of this book focuses on cases in which the public scrutiny of habitual behaviors heightened a sense of racial difference, *obscuring* the impact of race on everyday interactions and possibilities can also preserve existing distributions of privilege. During his first presidential campaign, Barack Obama made this point when he responded to a question about whether he was “authentically black enough” by joking, “When I’m catching a cab in Manhattan, in the past, I think I’ve given my credentials.” In its appropriate if awkward shift between past and present tenses, Obama’s quip turns from the exceptionality of his campaign to the everyday encounters that manifest the continuing force of racial stereotypes and discrimination. As legislative actions in the United States move increasingly toward color-blind policies that insist, as Patricia J. Williams puts it, on hearing no evil, seeing no evil, and speaking no evil, they raise
the stakes of making the daily impact of race legible without further turning racialized bodies into spectacles.

Tracing the intimate relationship between the embodied everyday and Asian American racial formation, the following chapters map a thick dialogue on the racial mundane. Each study brings together popular, canonical, and “minor” texts and performances of differing public reach and aesthetic cachet. Such categories of distinction, however, are also contingent, changing as the works move through time and space. Exemplified most spectacularly by *The Yellow Jacket,* many of the cultural productions discussed in *The Racial Mundane* have taken on different identities in front of different audiences. Such transformations pertain equally to the “archive” of written texts and recorded performances as well as the “repertoire” of embodied performances and practices, to borrow Diana Taylor’s distinction. Nevertheless, even when veiled by darkness, the audience impresses on the live performance a physical presence that has direct effects and cannot easily be discounted. Alain Badiou thus proposes, “Cinema counts the viewers, whereas theatre counts on the spectator.” As Chapters 1 and 3 illustrate, an actor’s effort to shift between roles by adjusting her or his physical bearing and the spectators’ attendant discomfort or pleasure can momentarily crystallize the interactive process by which social demarcations become more or less salient. Such encounters make tangible the mundane’s role in facilitating—or resisting—passages across those divides, and reveal the mutual involvement of audience and performer in adjudicating the lines between mimesis and imitation, propinquity and estrangement. In addition, theater necessarily (if not uniquely, as the afterword illustrates) exposes the impossibility of completely capturing and fixing the mundane, even as it asks actors and spectators to participate in that very project. Even when a performance puts the mundane under scrutiny, makes it unfamiliar, or strives to replicate it as closely as possible, it must contend with the tendency of the living body to strain against its form, or to slip past its perimeters. Theater therefore involves a process that parallels the production of racial difference in its attempts to frame and capture the mundane (thus, the redundancy of racial spectacle), while continually manifesting the limits of such efforts.

An audience’s relationship to a performance might well be conventional, conforming to the predictable shape that such exchanges have
taken over decades, even centuries. As Wittman Ah Sing learns at the end of *Tripmaster Monkey*, however, performances can also move in unexpected directions. Contingent and conventional, actual and historical, theatrical performance turns the body into a machine of spatial and temporal compression. Elin Diamond argues, “Performance, even in its dazzling physical immediacy, drifts between present and past, presence and absence, consciousness and memory. . . . each performance marks out a unique temporal space that nevertheless contains traces of other now-absent performances, other now-disappeared scenes.” When Wittman turns to theater believing that a performance will enable him to avoid “racinating” his characters, he hopes to take advantage of this convergence of the past and the present: “The actors will walk out on stage and their looks will be self-evident. They will speak dialects and accents, which the audience will get upon hearing.” Wittman fails to consider, however, that in the “dazzling immediacy” of the performance, what the audience will grasp may diverge from what he assumes is obvious. After the spectacular conclusion of his masterwork, a frenetic, exuberant medley of Chinese American history and mythology, Wittman pulls out reviews of the performance printed by local papers. Reading descriptions of the show as “East meets West” and “Exotic,” he rails at his audience, “Quit clapping. Stop it. What’s to cheer about? You like being compared to Rice Krispies? Cut it out. Let me show you, you’ve been insulted. They sent their food critics. They wrote us up like they were tasting Chinese food” (307). Wittman begins a long tirade explaining the offensiveness of the reviews and ranting against racism and racial self-hatred. Livid that the reviewers missed what he had intended to convey through the performance, he sets out to reinterpret the show and educate his audience.

And yet, at the end of Wittman’s long speech, his audience similarly transforms his monologue into something unexpected: “Out of all that mess of talk, people heard ‘I love you’ and ‘I’ll always love you’ and that about dying and still loving after a lifelong marriage. They took Wittman to mean that he was announcing his marriage to Taña and doing so with a new clever wedding ritual of his own making. His community and family applauded. They congratulated him” (339). Despite Wittman’s attempts to explicate his political views, the audience ignores his social critique and turns his angry performance into the paradigmatic
performative: the declaration of marriage. His exercise of authorial privilege thus falls short when confronted with the unpredictable chemistry of the performance as the competing interests and expectations of its participants intersect. Joining his community’s festivities, the once isolated tripmaster monkey concedes that there are no last words without an audience to celebrate them in unintended ways.