Robey Theatre Company's *Bronzeville* : Critical Historical Performance of Afro-Asian Political Economy in Los Angeles

Zachary F. Price

Theatre History Studies, Volume 43, 2024, pp. 48-78 (Article)

Published by The University of Alabama Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/ths.2024.a955982*

Robey Theatre Company's *Bronzeville*

Critical Historical Performance of Afro-Asian Political Economy in Los Angeles

—ZACHARY F. PRICE

In 2007, the Robey Theater Company, located in downtown Los Angeles, commissioned playwrights Aaron Woolfolk (Black American) and Tim Toyama (Japanese American) to develop a theatrical project about Japanese American mass incarceration during the 1940s.[1] The result of the Woolfolk/Toyama collaboration was a two-act play titled *Bronzeville* (2009), which had an initial five-week run in July 2009 at the Los Angeles Theatre Center (LATC) and a subsequent three-day run in May 2011 at the site of the Manzanar concentration

Figure 1. The cast of the 2009 production of *Bronzeville*, including CeCe Antoinette, Dana Lee, Iman Milner, Larry Powell, Adenrele Ojo, and Dwain Perry. Photo Source: Ed Kreiger

camp, which is now part of the US National Park Service.[2] *Bronzeville* was remounted in 2013 from June 29 through July 21 at LATC and has since had an afterlife through the work of visual artist Kathie Foley-Meyer's website curating Project Bronzeville, an interdisciplinary panel, musical event, symposium, and workshop of artists, public intellectuals, and academics that occurred during the run of the 2013 production.

Set in the Little Tokyo area of Los Angeles, the historically based fictional drama narrated the story of the incarceration of a Japanese American family named the Taharas and an African American family named the Goodwins who move from Mississippi to Los Angeles and into the Taharas' home once the Taharas have been forcibly removed under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, issued on February 19, 1942.[3] However, just as Roosevelt's order effectively caused the forcible removal of all Japanese American citizens and noncitizens from the American West Coast, African American families such as the Goodwins relocated in substantial numbers from the Jim Crow South to cities such as Los Angeles, Oakland, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and New York as part of the 1910–1971 period commonly referred to as the Great Migration. Black migrants relocated to Los Angeles in search of freedom from white terrorism as well as economic opportunities, a confluence of a demand for labor resulting in an expansion in the defense industries, small businesses, and the possibility of occupying new residences. Yet, many migrants found the political and economic conditions just as perilous as those of the South. When the Goodwins discover the Taharas' son, Henry Tahara, hiding out in the attic, a conflict unfolds as the Goodwins are forced to negotiate the choice between harboring an enemy of the state or turning Henry in to the authorities. The dramatic conflict embedded in *Bronzeville* collapses the cultural memory of racialized space and the continually contested racial, class, and gender relationships that have undergirded the formation of the city of Los Angeles as a "global city" and the gateway to the Pacific. The play takes its title from the area of Los Angeles that was referred to as Bronzeville when it quickly transformed from a Japanese American community known as Little Tokyo to a predominantly Black community during the Second World War.

Named after artist-activist Paul Robeson (1898–1976), the Robey Theater Company was founded by actor and director Ben Guillory and stage and screen actor Danny Glover in 1994 to "explore, develop and produce provocative plays written about the Global Black Experience. Located in the melting pot of the world's vibrant mixed-race milieu known as Los Angeles, Robey offers an encouraging environment of understanding and support where multicultural theater advances and stimulates discussions about universal themes that reflect life

as seen through the eyes of Black characters on stage struggling to survive, advance and simply maintain."[4] Robey theatrical productions have been embodied in various plays such as *For the Love of Freedom* (2001, 2003, 2004, a three-part trilogy about the Haitian Revolution), *Knock Me a Kiss* (2014, about the marriage between Countee Cullen and Yolande Du Bois), and the *Magnificent Dunbar* (2014, which tells the history of the Black-owned Dunbar Hotel located on Central Avenue in Los Angeles during the first half of the twentieth century). Similar to *Bronzeville*, *Yohen* (1999) by Japanese American playwright, Philip Kan Gotanda, explores a contested multiculturalism through the intimate relationship between Sumi (Japanese) and James Washington (Black) as they attempt to reconcile their marriage within a neoliberal Cold War Los Angeles that has fractured their identity and relationship.

As a performance scholar-practitioner, I had the opportunity to work closely with the Robey community through a collaborative course that I created called Black Arts and Black Publics (BABP). The course, which I have since developed into a broader practice-as-research platform, was a collaboration between the Robey and the Department of African American Studies at UCLA in 2015 that culminated with a staged reading of *Yohen* that was directed by Robey founder Ben Guillory, featured the actors Danny Glover and Karen Lew, and incorporated students from the course.[5] BABP is concerned with developing a Black public sphere that "is a transnational space whose violent birth and diasporic conditions of life provide a counternarrative to the exclusionary national narratives of Europe, the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa."[6] Through research, pedagogy, creative practice, and community engagement, BABP is a platform dedicated to exploring, organizing, sustaining, and disseminating information around Black artistic, cultural, and political practice. BABP organizes and connects students, faculty, and community members at the University of California with individuals and institutions such as theatres, museums, nonprofit community arts organizations, public-civic government entities, as well as tech and entertainment entities.

This essay takes up the possibility of an emergent Black public sphere based on Robey's history as a Black artistic community that developed *Bronzeville* as a mode of what I identify as "critical historical performance." Rather than simply dramatizing historical events, I suggest that critical historical performance has embedded within it an intersectional analysis and critique of history and provides an analytic framework for understanding how the intersection of race, gender, and class is performed in a myriad of modalities. In this discussion, critical historical performance includes the representation of intersectionality in the world of the play in which characters perform and critique racialized

structures, the education of audiences and general public as a counter-discourse about a topic that has been propagandized and erased, outreach to young audiences, and the afterlives of the play through exhibitions and symposiums. In the case of *Bronzeville*, Robey's staging of Black and Asian characters unearths how two different visions of America and two different subjectivities have been positioned by the state and private interests in order to suture what Cedric Robinson referred to as racial regimes.[7]

Robinson's term refers to constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power. A racial regime is "a makeshift patchwork masquerading as memory and the immutable. Nevertheless, racial regimes do possess history, that is, discernible origins and mechanisms of assembly."[8] By focusing on *Bronzeville* in this essay, I contend that critical historical performance enables a more nuanced understanding of the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories which in turn shape racial meanings. The critical historical performance of racial regimes in *Bronzeville* unearths the juncture between the denial of citizenship, property, and personhood by demonstrating how the state, in conjunction with private business interests, colluded to structure race-class inequity by controlling the development of residential neighborhoods through racially restrictive housing covenant laws, limiting access to capital, incarcerating families, extrajudicial violence, and denying citizenship to Black Americans and Asian Americans. Equally, the material conditions of racial regimes rely upon the performances of racialized, gendered, and classed relationships and conflicts that have been marred and marked by inflection points such as Black and Korean violence during the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings. Additionally, it is my contention that playscripts such as *Bronzeville* are pedagogical tools that not only explain how racial regimes were constructed during the early part of the twentieth century but also enable audiences, students, readers, scholars, pedagogues, and the general public to then anticipate, understand, and discern varying moments of Afro-Asian antagonism. Such moments of rupture again became visible beginning in 2020 during the Black Lives Matter response to the George Floyd murder (and anti-Black violence writ large) as former president Donald Trump (and white supremacists generally) hastened and stoked anti-Asian violence through anti-Asian rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The above examples of collisions take up much of the space within the immediate discourse of Afro-Asian intersections that are often framed around a mythology of American racial tropes. As a theatrical play and dramatic text, the critical historical performance of *Bronzeville* reveals the mythologies that undergird such contemporary flashpoints of Afro-Asian conflict. Such mythologies

are invested in rendering Black Americans as dysfunctional insiders and Asian Americans as unassimilable model minorities. Scholar Scott Kurashige contends that model minority ideology has its origins in the exclusion acts of the nineteenth century and Japanese American mass incarceration of 1942.[9] However, sociologist William Peterson's use of the term in his 1966 *New York Times Magazine* article titled "Success Story: Japanese-American Style" matters most as the performative speech act that would become a citational authority on the positionality of Asian American identity. According to Peterson: "By any criterion of good citizenship that we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born white."[10] Handing over temporary superiority around whiteness was part of the particular strategy of model minority mythology to further the work of racial regimes. Framing Asian Americans as model minorities assisted in eliding the history of Asian American oppression at the moment when the Civil Rights and Third World Liberation movements threatened to enlist Asian subjectivities into a collective challenge to white global hegemony. To thwart the possibility of coalitional solidarity between African Americans and Asian Americans, the ideology of model minority positioned Black Americans, especially the Black working class, as the polar opposite of Asian Americans.

However, it should not be lost that constructing a Black public through artistic and cultural expression requires resources and access to capital that Black Americans are constantly barred from accessing. Within my discussion of *Bronzeville*'s critical historical performance, I want to press the issue of the impact that racial regimes have had on the development of Black communities and Black theatre organizations such as Robey. While Japanese Americans lost property, time, and even their lives to the concentration camps, they were ultimately offered a formal apology and money by the US government in 1988 when Ronald Reagan and the US Congress paid $20,000 to each surviving member of the Japanese Americans who were incarcerated.[11] However, there has never been such redress for Black Americans for chattel slavery and its aftermath. Yet, as scholars Oliver and Shapiro demonstrated, "wealth inequality has been structured over many generations through the same systemic barriers that have hampered blacks throughout their history in American society: slavery, Jim Crow, so-called de jure discrimination, and institutionalized racism. How these factors have affected the ability of blacks to accumulate wealth, however, has often been ignored or incompletely sketched."[12] Compared with the "120,313 persons of Japanese descent that came under custody of the War Relocation Authority,"[13] between 1942 and 1946, at the end of the Civil War four million former slaves, while promised "forty acres and a mule" by General Sherman on behalf

of the US government, never received restitution and neither have their descendants. The ability to generate and pass intergenerational wealth is significant and determines the financial resources available for artistic communities. While Oliver and Shapiro focused their study on the wealth gap between Black and white Americans, the wealth gap between Asian (particularly Japanese) and Black people is acutely alarming. Currently, there is no greater example of racial economic wealth inequity than in the city of Los Angeles wherein in 2014 white households had a median net worth of $355,000 and Japanese Americans $592,000 compared to Mexican Americans and Black Americans, who had a median wealth of $3,500 and $4,000 respectively. Such a median net worth cannot be disentangled from the correlative of assets and home ownership. In 2014, Japanese American households had by far the highest median total value of assets at $595,000. When it comes to home ownership, white households are more likely to be homeowners (68 percent), compared to 42 percent of Black Americans and 45 percent of Mexican Americans.[14] The relevance of these numbers is important not only in the context of the racial regimes of Los Angeles political economy in terms of who has access to capital and hence education, justice, healthcare, and so on. As the playwright August Wilson argued in his treatise *The Ground on Which I Stand* (1998), access to wealth and capital fundamentally determines how the performance of history is staged.[15] And according to the US Federal Reserve and US Department of the Treasury, the racial wealth gap has only continued to widen in the twenty-first century since Wilson's articulation that "Black Theater doesn't share in the economics that would allow it to support its artists and supply them with meaningful avenues to develop their talent and broadcast and disseminate ideas crucial to its growth."[16] In 2023, Robey Theater Company still does not own its space. As with many Black theatre companies and arts endeavors, the struggle for a permanent location renders Black theatre to the precarious forces of the "market's dictates."

Critical historical performance should not be limited to geographical cartography or simply dollars and cents but understood as a struggle endemic to the contentious nature of and often systemic racism embedded in American theatre and drama. The *Bronzeville* script functions as an archival document as well as an interpretive framework through which to understand how racial regimes are also constituted through performance. *Bronzeville* demonstrates how varying forms of gendered racial passing, code switching, and acts of patriotism have contributed to the American consciousness of who and how one gains citizenship through their performance of identity. *Bronzeville*, as critical historical performance, contested what scholar Brandi Wilkins Catanese identifies as "the problem of the colorblind"[17] and the mythology of the American melting

pot. Thus, this article is invested in how Robey's work is part of a continuum of its namesake artist-activist Paul L. Robeson, who sought to use performance as a tool of critical resistance. Embodied in *Bronzeville*'s production, dramatic text, and Robey's approach to the development and craft of theatre is Robeson's legacy and his refusal to denounce his own approach to critiquing the history of the racial regime and its inequitable political and economic impingements through performance.

From Little Tokyo to Bronzeville

The opening scene for *Bronzeville* is set in Little Tokyo, in Sam Teraoka's camera shop on May 9, 1942. A family friend of the Taharas in his fifties, Teraoka attempts to pack up his belongings in preparation to board a bus headed for the concentration camps in Manzanar. The stage directions read: "from the outside, the chaotic sounds of an entire neighborhood being cleared out: thousands of people walking down the streets, announcements of bus assignments."[18] Yet, Sam's shop is still fully stocked as he has barely had time to process and prepare for the forceful removal of Japanese Americans from the Los Angeles area. He has consented to the leave his shop and all of its belongings virtually unprotected to the marauding hands of the state and white private business interests.

Henry Tahara enters the shop to grab some of his own photography items as Sam listens to Louis Armstrong playing on his phonograph. Surprised to find that Sam has not left for his bus yet, Henry confides in Sam that he is not going to the camps. Despite the fact that many of the men in the "neighborhood with the most sway" have disappeared, Henry has committed himself to noncompliance. Having graduated from UC Berkeley, he contends, "One of the first essays I wrote up at Berkeley was in my American Government class. I did it on the 14th Amendment. That's the part about citizenship. I wrote about what a wonderful thing it is that, once you're a citizen, you're 100% American, whether you're descended from a passenger on the Mayflower, or you've taken an oath of citizenship after living the bulk of your life in another country. Now they're saying that's all a lie. That the Constitution doesn't really mean it, that I'm not 100% American even though I was born here!"[19]

Henry's monologue is yet another example of critical historical performance within the metacommentary of the play that connects the fictional characters' struggles to the historical reality of US racial regimes. While Section One of the Fourteenth Amendment does make much of the guarantee of citizenship in that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the

jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside,"[20] in the above passage *Bronzeville* links the relationship between the denial of citizenship and the denial of personhood in the relationship between the African and Asian diasporas. While the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) had a history of denouncing racism and engaging in coalitional politics with Black Americans through the newspapers *Rafu Shimpo* (a Japanese American newspaper) and the *California Eagle* (a Black newspaper), as Kurashige notes, the pressures from the state on the Nisei (second generation Japanese Americans) became too much: "As the drive for internment intensified, they became consumed with the task of proving the Nisei's loyalty to the government. Thrust into harrowing straits and fearing resistance would be futile and self-destructive, JACL leaders found themselves in the difficult position of having to explain why Japanese Americans should cooperate with the state-sponsored internment."[21] Out of the JACL emerged multiple factions, some of whom engaged in a form of counterespionage surveillance of the immigrant group Issei (first-generation Japanese immigrants), hoping to curry favor with the state, namely the FBI, in the hopes of proving their loyalty—holding out hope that the state would not "make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States."[22]

In response to Henry informing Sam that he plans to hide instead of report for deportation, Sam states, "It might be weeks before the government lets us come back."[23] Sam's assertion that it "might be weeks" was indicative of the miscalculation and the predicament of the Nisei community in 1942, who counted themselves as part of the American cultural fabric that had a right of recourse and due process. The problem that the Nisei community encountered was not one of jurisprudence and interpretation of the law, but the fact that racial regimes are the actual rationale for the state to deprive people of life, liberty, and or property, without due process of law. The Nisei predicament of 1942 was equally bound up in the historical impact of the Compromise of 1850 when California was accepted into the union as a non-slave-holding state. The state continued to practice slavery, due to the California Fugitive Slave Law that enabled slave owners to transport their property with them to California. During the 1860s and into the Reconstruction era of the 1870s, Chinese immigration to the United States expanded and was sought after for cheap labor. Orientalist tropes of yellowface performance, conventional associations of signs and meanings that purportedly convey "Asian-ness" (as seen in the white actor Charles Parsloe's theatrical depictions of the stereotypical Chinaman character, who was often rendered a buffoon or lackadaisical dolt) reinforced white assumptions about Chinese migrants.[24] Such depictions existed contemporaneously with blackface

minstrelsy and anti-Black theatricality and print media, both of which were modulated to address white anxieties and shaped public policy justifying Black Codes, extrajudicial violence, and formal Jim Crow laws as well as the alien exclusion acts. Nor were Asian Americans exempt from the fury of angry white mobs that enacted terror in the form of lynching upon Chinese immigrants during the era of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which began officially in 1882.[25] The Exclusion Act initially restricted Chinese immigration and was subsequently applied to Filipino and Japanese immigration to the United States. During the twentieth century, terms such as "yellow peril" emerged as a discourse through which to regulate, control, and maintain racial hierarchy through the derogatory depictions of people of the Asian diaspora.[26] The incarceration of Japanese Americans through President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 in 1942 further affirmed Japanese American citizens' lack of Lockean ownership of their bodies as property. Hence, despite Japanese and Japanese American acquisition of private property, the historic conditions under which property had been accumulated collided with the interests of the state's demand for white supremacy.

The struggle over race, space, and ownership then regulated interminoritarian subjects. *Bronzeville's* critical historical performance brings the relationship to the surface through its dramatization of Black and Japanese American relationality in the most intimate of settings. When the Goodwins arrive at their new home—the Taharas' house—they discover a malnourished Henry who has been hiding in the attic and coming out to scrounge for food. The Goodwins, who have just arrived by car from Mississippi, are a multigenerational family whose matriarch, Mama Janie, was born a slave and carries with her both the literal and cultural memory of chattel slavery. When Mama Janie's son Jodie insists that they turn Henry in to the authorities because "he is in their house," Henry tells Jodie that his father paid cash for the house after he was disowned by his family in Japan for coming to the United States. Henry quickly invokes the immigrants' story of struggle in which his father came to the United States with nothing and worked hard to buy a house in 1926 in an area in which Asian, Black, and Mexican Los Angelenos were not allowed to purchase property because of racial restrictive covenant laws that prevented the sale of homes to anyone who was not white. Henry enacts the right to own property, proclaiming, "My father wasn't even allowed to own property, but he bought it anyway and put it in my name! They might have taken us out of here and given it to you . . . but my family's blood is in these walls."[27] And yet, Jodie's response to Henry, "Yeah, well tell that to the Indians,"[28] is indicative of not only the American Indian genocide by Spanish and British colonization and subsequent US imperialism practiced through the forcible removal of Indigenous peoples onto

reservations but also an African American awareness that the bodies meant to do the labor in place of Indigenous slavery were the bodies brought through the Middle Passage.

It is this tacit awareness of abolitionist struggle that catalyzes Mama Janie to instruct Jodie as to why the Goodwins cannot turn Henry into the authorities. Reminding Jodie's daughter, Princess, that she is the granddaughter of a slave, Mama Janie narrates the story of her Uncle Blue who had attempted to escape through the Underground Railroad. As part of the attempt to make it to the north, he was taken in and hidden by white families. However, when one of the white families that Uncle Blue was staying with suspected that Uncle Blue had been discovered, he was turned into the local marshal: "Uncle Blue was returned to the plantation. The owner . . . he was a mean man. And he wanted to make a lesson of Uncle Blue. So he made us watch while he had his overseer tie Uncle Blue to a tree . . . and burned him alive. Burned him until he was dead."[29] Mama Janie's monologue is both a warning and a premonition. Not only had the African continuum in the Americas been denied humanity, but the Supreme Court's ruling in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* of 1857 upheld the Fugitive Slave Act, removing the Black body (as text or corpus) from any conceptualization of civil society. Slaves were not citizens of the United States and could not sue in federal courts.[30] While the Thirteenth Amendment had determined that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction," punishment for the crime of being Black meant that extra juridical violence through lynching could be legitimated by an angry white mob or through the carceral system of convict leasing.[31]

The conundrum of Henry's condition is not only a juridical relationship to the Fourteenth Amendment but also a miscalculation of how one's positioning within the racial regime relative to whiteness was what determined who would be considered a citizen or a criminal. Thus, the performance of citizenship and noncriminality has become one of the arbitrary factors when determining relative status—people of color are at times willing to deny the pains of other minorities in order to gain concessions from state and private interests. The relationship between the Taharas and the Goodwins is hence a critique of the historical narrative of how minoritarian groups have been granted and denied citizenship as well as personhood in a complex web of what Claire Jean Kim has referred to as "racial triangulation," wherein interlinking chains of relative valorization position Asian Americans as superior/outsider, Black Americans as inferior/insider, and white Americans as the constant dominant superior/insider.[32]

However, Jodie's own experience with the racism of Jim Crow Mississippi leads him to the conclusion that the proscriptive answer for Black struggle is to enlist in the US Marine Corps—a point that he repeatedly impresses upon his younger brother Felix, who is an aspiring jazz musician. Boasting of the bravery of those Black enlistees who have journeyed to the Lejeune area of North Carolina for basic training, Jodie states: "Montford Point, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Something really wonderful is happening there right now. Really historical. Right now, at this very moment, they're training the first unit of colored men allowed into the United States Marine Corps. Colored men aren't just going to be infantry . . . they're going to be Marines. Marines fighting in Europe . . . and I guess Japan."[33] *Bronzeville*'s reflexivity allowed for a nuanced and complex discourse of the varying voices that confronted and negotiated US racial regimes. For Jodie, Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802, which partially desegregated the defense industry, was an opportunity for Black people to "come out ahead for once," by not only pandering to a politics of respectability but also suturing the wound between Black people and the violence of the state.[34] This not only meant participation within a still formally segregated military but also an opportunity for Black people to reinvent themselves in the gateway city of Los Angeles far from the "dead end life" of Mississippi. Hence, Jodie's quibble with his younger brother is also a reminder that Black migration had to contend with the legal parameters of citizenship and the ontological crisis of the denial of Black humanity while simultaneously negotiating the precarity of Los Angeles's political economy.

In 1943, Little Tokyo became Bronzeville overnight as signs produced by the Bronzeville Chamber of Commerce that read "This is Bronzeville. Watch us Grow" filled storefront windows and marked the African American presence in the neighborhood.[35] Black entrepreneurs seized the opportunity to establish themselves and opened a variety of new businesses that included restaurants, barbershops, laundries, and hotels. As Kurashige notes, "Perhaps the aspect of Bronzeville most often recalled today is its nightlife. The district featured dance spots, such as the Samba Club and Finale. Above all, club goers were drawn to Shepp's Playhouse, an elaborately decorated place that hosted early bebop performances by Charlie Parker and Miles Davis among others."[36] Equally Bronzeville was also a site where Black churches had to negotiate between the Christian epistemological framework of the Southern Baptists and Asian religions. Noncommercial institutions changed from Japanese to Black Americans and the Los Angeles Hompa Buddhist Temple leased its property to the Providence Baptist Church. In the play *Bronzeville*, the dialogic exists not between Buddhism and Christianity but also the Japanese indigenous polytheistic practice of Shintoism.

Suspicious of any religious formation that does not grow out of the Judeo-Christian framework, Jodie's wife, Alice, insists that Henry remove the Shinto altar that rests on the walls next to the door, but Henry refuses because his deceased mother's ashes are in the altar. Mama Janie and Henry in turn find common ground when she begins to work in the little garden that Henry's father has in front of the house. Under a morning sky, Henry and Mama Janie each offer a prayer for the garden, Mama Janie's a Christian prayer in English, and Henry's a Shinto prayer in Japanese. The garden becomes not only their bond but also a symbolic method through which to preserve the agricultural connections of the post-antebellum African American experience. Liberated people negotiated plots of land and resources, popularly referred to as "Forty Acres and a Mule," that they never received.[37] Moreover, many Black southerners who did acquire land had it taken away from them and were exploited during the sharecropping period, in which they were forced to lease the land that they worked.

When Japanese people began migrating to the Southern California area in larger numbers between the late 1890s and the 1920s, ordinances were passed that restricted the spaces that Issei and Nisei could occupy.[38] They were met with propositions that restricted them from purchasing land, and during the 1940s the Nisei lost land and property that was never recovered. Brett Esaki's work on Japanese American gardeners demonstrates the way in which the construction of Japanese gardens actively retained cultural memory as spaces of resistance as well as maintained a cultural memory of both spiritual and religious practice and cultural lineage: "Given the suspicion of Japanese religions and the support of gardening, Japanese Americans learned to pass on several religious beliefs and ways of being by outwardly assimilating aspects of religions into gardening. Before and after the time of the internment camps, gardening served the function of enfolding religious ideas into seemingly nonreligious practices."[39] Thus, the symbolic action of Mama Janie's gardening conjoins multiple diasporic echoes of struggle that reveal the multidimensionality of contested space and racial performance.

From Henry's refusal to participate in the forcible removal from Little Tokyo to Sam's willingness to cooperate despite his misgivings, Mama Janie's negotiation of Christianity and Buddhism, and Jodie and Felix's disagreements over Montford Point, the *Bronzeville* script is a repository for voices of dissent that simultaneously negotiate the racial regime's demand for segregation and subordination. This form of critical historical performance places the difficult conversations that historically oppressed groups have had to endure at the center rather than rendering them illegible at the margins. When Felix discovers the Sahara Jazz Club, he secures work for himself as a saxophone player from the

club's owner Tubby. He also gets a job for Henry as the club's photographer. The job means that Felix now has autonomy and is able to at least challenge his overbearing older brother, Jodie, on what Black entrepreneurship (and hence Black success) should look like. However, getting Henry to the Sahara poses a challenge, since any recognition of his Nisei identity would result in his arrest and potential injury to the Goodwins. Felix's solution is to create a new performative identity through which Henry is able to engage in a form of racial trespassing and impersonation.

Relational Afro-Asian Identity and Performance

In a scene that offers another glimpse into how critical historical performance of racial regimes are represented theatrically onstage and in quotidian spaces such as print media between minoritarian subjects, Felix instructs Henry on how to perform "Chineseness." In the living room of the Taharas' house, Felix reads from an actual December 22, 1941, *Time* magazine article titled "Home Affairs: How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs," as Henry wears an armband that reads "I AM CHINESE."[40] The cover of the magazine featured a caricatured drawing

Figure 2. The cover of the December 22, 1941, issue of *Time* magazine titled "How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs," which featured a distorted image of General Isoroku Yamamoto of the Japanese Imperial Navy.

of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's head with the top half of his torso dressed in Japanese imperial military regalia. In the ornamentation of Henry's body through the armband and the racialized costuming of Yamamoto's face alongside the two figures found within *Time* magazine that depict a stereotypical Japanese man compared to a stereotypical Chinese male body are a series of recursive tropes that rely upon sartorial markers and objects that Felix describes as he reads aloud from the magazine. Within the action of the scene, the markers articulated as Japanese or Chinese are juxtaposed to Felix's own racialized marked signification, which relies upon a different set of racialized markers that are rooted in the flesh, phenotype, and the performance of language. Felix's scripting of Henry's body and behavior is a moment of critical historical performance that echoes what scholar Anne Anlin Cheng has observed in her discussion on "ornamentalism" as a racializing methodology. As Cheng suggests, ornamentalism is a "conceptual framework for approaching a history of racialized person-making, not through biology but through synthetic inventions and ornamentations. First, ornamentalism names the critically conjoined presences of the *Oriental* and the *ornamental*. Second and more importantly, ornamentalism describes the peculiar processes (legally, materially, imaginatively) whereby *personhood is named or conceived through ornamental gestures*, which speak through the minute, the sartorial, the prosthetic, and the decorative."[41]

Yamamoto's face is drawn as a larger-than-life-sized puppet-like head, with exaggerated features that anthropomorphized his face into something akin to a monkey. The flesh of his face is colored in a bright yellow à la yellowface, which was emblematic of the yellow peril imagery found in US propaganda and public media of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, especially the 1940s. A caption just below reads "Japan's Aggressor: Admiral Yamamoto." With Henry donning the I AM CHINESE armband, Felix quotes from the *Time* magazine article and instructs Henry on how to perform his new identity.

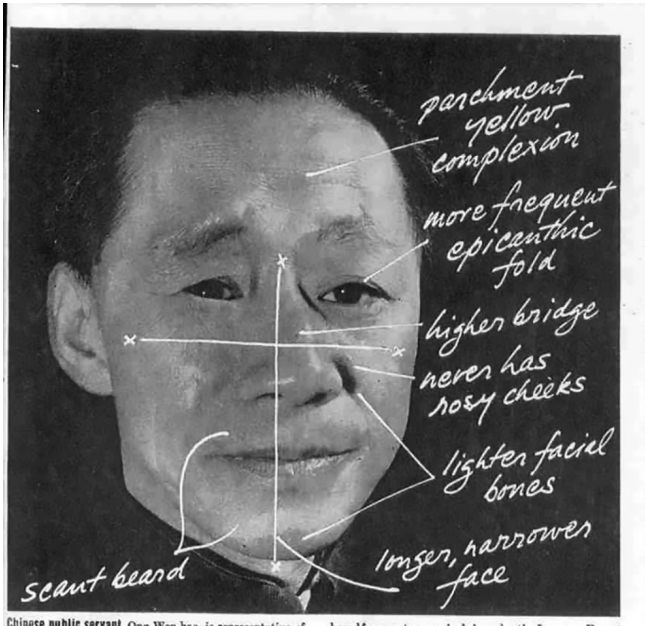
Reading from the magazine, Felix informs Henry, "Says here all Japanese are short." Looking Henry over and commenting on Henry's stature, Felix says, "You're pretty short, maybe get you some of those big-heeled shoes. 'Japanese are skinny. They often dry up as they age. Chinee are fat.' Okay, we gotta' put some meat on you. 'Japanese are hairy.' We'll shave your arms. 'Chinese avoid horn-rimmed glasses.'" The magazine's description becomes even more instructional as Felix continues to read a scripted and stylized form of twice-behaved behaviors that Henry is supposed to follow in order to not perform an assumed Japanese identity. Felix continues, "Japanese eyes are set close together. They have thin noses, narrow faces, little mouths. . . . You know, Henry, now that I've looked at you close, you are one ugly oriental! Okay, walk." Following along with

Felix's scheme, Henry begins to walk. The exercise in performing "Chineseness" continues with Felix now commanding Henry's gait: "Says here Japanese walk stiffly. Erect. Chinese are more relaxed. They Shuffle. Let's see you shuffle." At this point Henry has had enough and resists Felix's continued suggestions, but Felix reminds him of the stakes if he is caught. Henry responds, "No, I don't want to get caught! But this is ridiculous! Walking like a guy on stilts versus walking like The Mummy. Laughing like a badly acted radio villain versus laughing like . . . like I don't even know what! None of this is real!"[42]

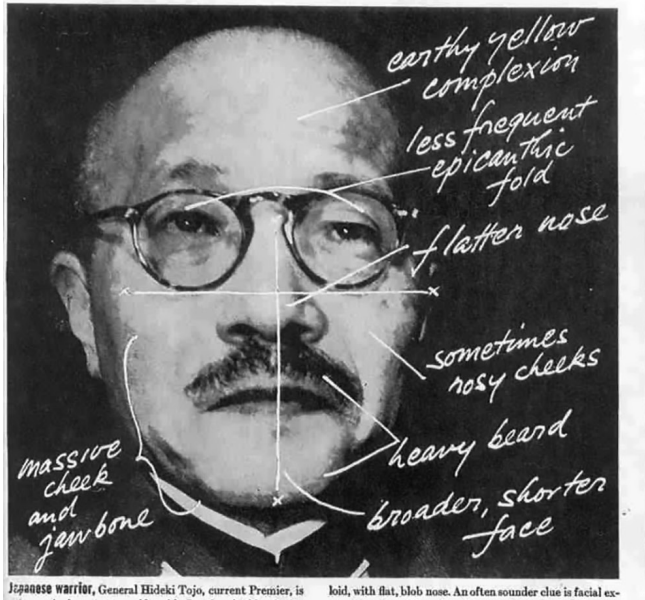
But Felix is all too aware of the demands that are made upon Black people by US racial regimes that cannot tolerate Black public performance that is not for the entertainment and amusement of white people. Felix's response to Henry is an edifying critique of the performance of race. He states: "Real? Whoever said anything about real? Real don't matter none. Take it from a colored man. . . . It ain't about what's real or not. It's about meeting folks' expectations to get what you want. . . . You know how much I've gotten out of white folks by acting like the colored people they see in movies? 'Yessuh . . . nossuh . . . I done gone doin' what I's says we's got's to be doin', Missuh Edwards.' Ain't none of that's real. But you give people what they think reality is, they'll give you room to do near whatever you want. So if *Time* magazine says that Chinese shuffle when they walk, and laugh like they're icy, then do yourself a favor if you want to remain a free man: shuffle when you walk and laugh like you've got ice in your veins."[43]

The actual contents of the article featured several photos of what the magazine described as Chinese versus Japanese faces. The descriptive summary included a ten-point bulletin that delineated how to discern a Japanese person from a Chinese person in dress, diction, and appearance. While *Time* magazine was indicative of the constitutive power of discursive racial regimes that sought to explicitly isolate, attack, surveil, and police Japanese American bodies and by extension Asian bodies more generally, it was in fact an instruction on how to perform race and to recognize the racial codes that determined which kinds of bodies could be in certain spaces.

Again, as Cheng suggests, "ornamentalism often describes a condition of subjective coercion, reduction, and discipline, but it can also provoke considerations of alternative modes of being and of action for subjects who have not been considered subjects, or subjects who have come to know themselves through objects."[44] However, rather than render *Time* magazine's article as simply an oppressive measure of gendered and racial performativity, Toyama and Woolfolk create a scene between Felix and Henry that uses the racial template produced by the periodical to work through a strategy for the performance of identity and impersonation. While cultural historian Eric Lott's work focused on the failures



Chinese public servant, Ong Wen-hao, is representative of North Chinese anthropological group with long, fine-boned face and scant beard. Epicanthic fold of skin above eyelid is found in 85% of Chinese. Southern Chinese have round, broad faces, not as massively boned as the Japanese. Except that their skin is darker, this description fits Filipinos who are often mistaken for Japs. Chinese sometimes pass for Europeans; but Japs more often approach Western types.



Japanese warrior, General Hideki Tojo, current Premier, is a Samurai, closer to type of humble Jap than highbred relatives of Imperial Household. Typical are his heavy beard, massive cheek and jaw bones. Peasant Jap is squat Mongoloid, with flat, blob nose. An often sounder clue is facial expression, shaped by cultural, not anthropological, factors. Chinese wear rational calm of tolerant realists. Japs, like General Tojo, show humorless intensity of ruthless mystics.

Figure 3. From the December 22, 1941, issue of *Time* magazine, in an article titled "How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs": an ethnological comparative between Japanese and Chinese men based on phenotype and supported by stereotypical and racist captions. At the top is Weng Wenhao, oil geologist and minister of industry. At the bottom is General Hiddeki Tojo.

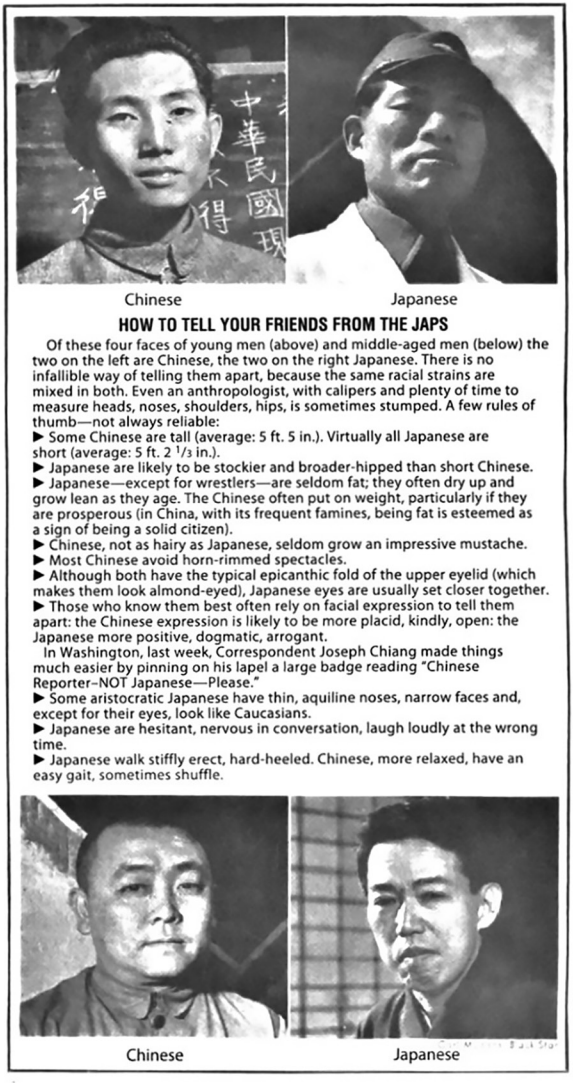


Figure 4. From the December 22, 1941, issue of *Time* magazine, in an article titled "How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs": an ethnological comparative between Japanese and Chinese men based on phenotype and supported by stereotypical and racist captions. These photos depict unknown figures who are described as Japanese and Chinese based on phenotypical features with a stereotypical explanation of the expected behavior and traits of each.

of racialized gendered impersonation in the blackface minstrel shows of antebellum New York that operated to dehumanize through lampooned acts such as folklore, dance, jokes, instrumental tunes, skits, mock oratory, satire, and racial and gender cross-dressing,[45] the exchange between Felix and Henry suggests a rehearsal for racial impersonation that evokes a form of passing—which of course is also a form of "stealing back" one's identity. Uncertain of the plan, Felix scrutinizes Henry's appearance placing emphasis on his sartorial presentation.

Felix's plan works. By persuading Henry to perform a stereotypical "Chineseness" as mandated by *Time* magazine, Felix and Henry operate in tandem to secure work at the Sahara where Felix swings with his saxophone and Henry takes photos of patrons enjoying themselves. However, when Princess arrives at the all-Black club, she makes every head turn and stokes the ire of the male patrons when she begins to dance with Henry. When one male patron attempts to interrupt Henry and Princess, he accidentally knocks Henry into another patron who then takes a swing at Henry, but instead winds up hitting someone else. A melee unfolds as the club erupts into fisticuffs.

Furious that his daughter went out to the club without permission, Jodie visits a bar operated by a local named Hamp. However, as the exchange between the two reveals, Hamp is not the owner of the establishment. Like Jodie, Hamp is from the South. Despite the acknowledgment by both Jodie and Hamp that the Los Angeles area presents economic opportunity for Black people, options for ownership and hence wealth accumulation are limited. When Jodie reveals to Hamp that he has been making good money handling all of the packages "coming to and from the west," Hamp also points out the temporal condition of their success, and this becomes clear when Jodie admits that he simply renting the house that he lives in.

HAMP

I know'd it all the time. I don't know a single colored man in this neighborhood that owns anything. Including this place too. Those white folks who I rented from, didn't even want to have a conversation about me buying it. They outright told me they're just caretaking it for the Japanese until they come back. Look.

(He points to a sign saying "Hamps Place" over the bar, then lifts it up to reveal a Japanese sign underneath.)

HAMP (cont'd)

They wouldn't even let me take the old sign down. That's why I tell everybody I come across: Don't get too comfortable here. Be thinking about putting down roots somewhere else.[46]

Unaware that Felix's family was involved in the altercation, Hamp explains to Jodie that the word is out around town about an incident that occurred at the Sahara. Even worse that there are members of the community who are looking for the Japanese troublemaker. Fearful of a potential reprisal against his family, Jodie visits a Los Angeles police station and informs the authorities "that he's got a Jap' living in his house."[47] Perplexed by the idea that "a Jap could be living in a nigger home,"[48] the LAPD informs the Federal Bureau of Investigations, which shows up at the Goodwins' to take Henry away. He is interrogated and tortured by FBI agents who accuse Henry and his father of being spies for the Empire of Japan. Once the agents are convinced that he is not a spy, they offer Henry an alternative to the Japanese concentration camps.

Despite Henry's initial resistance to the FBI, he is offered the "opportunity to prove his loyalty" to the United States by joining the segregated all-Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team. He is sent off to Germany and ultimately killed in action. Henry's story is one of both resistance and capitulation that cuts to the heart of the insider/outsider conundrum in the Japanese American community. When FDR signed EO 9066, it also authorized the War Department to form the War Relocation Authority (WRA). The WRA was not only responsible for orchestrating the removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast and into concentration camps but also produced the propaganda campaign to present Japanese Americans as happy, docile subjects who were compliantly volunteering to "evacuate" themselves. Films such as *Japanese Relocation* (1942) were created by the Office of War Information in conjunction with the WRA and the Office of Strategic Services.[49] *Japanese Relocation* was written, directed, produced, and narrated by Milton S. Eisenhower (younger brother of President Dwight D. Eisenhower), who was a career academic administrator and head of the WRA. The film presented the Nisei and Issei community as being completely content in their "relocation." Subsequently, the film *A Challenge to Democracy* (1944), also created by the WRA, presents Japanese Americans as seemingly compliant subjects happy to be arriving by train to the concentration camps where they are then directed into barracks.[50] The two films also clarify the point that this all occurs under the surveillance of Caucasian US Army soldiers. The WRA's films helped to elide any kind of critical analysis of the fact that Japanese incarceration was racially motivated under the racial regime.[51] *A Challenge to Democracy* was an eighteen-minute film showing Japanese American schoolchildren going to classes, mothers at home taking care of the house, and men working the farms, doing dental work, and operating the post office, always under the supervision of a white male supervisor. The propagandistic film presents a placid, serene, and happy simulacrum to persuade the viewer, a

predominantly white American public who would have seen the propagandistic pieces at local movie theatres in between feature films, that there were no problems in the camps and certainly no financial hardships that fell upon Nisei and Issei despite the fact that the film explicitly states that evacuees draw upon their savings if they want to maintain a certain standard of living. What is more, *A Challenge to Democracy* prepared white viewers to become employers of the formerly incarcerated once they returned from the camps. Whereas the majority of Japanese Americans had been self-employed as small business owners and proprietors prior to the war, many became employees of white businesses upon their return from the camps. As Hillary Jenks observes, mass incarceration "forced most returning Japanese Americans out of the economy and into the general employment market, with the result that whereas 10 to 20 percent of Japanese American Angelenos worked for whites in 1940, that number had risen to 70 percent by 1948. Contract gardening—primarily for Anglo homeowners—became a particularly attractive occupational choice for returning Japanese Americans."[52] It is my contention that the scripted performances within these films were partly created to assure a white civilian population as well as a white veteran population that Japanese Americans would not cause problems and were compliant subjects ready to enter the labor force despite the intrusion and the burden of the state's violence and acquisition of private property.

As a form of critical historical performance, *Bronzeville* works against the grain of the WRA's false narratives and brings an awareness of how the state controlled and manufactured race and place through the performances in and about the camps. Such performances included acts of patriotism captured in the film that showed Japanese American Boy Scouts folding the American flag at the pole. In his discussion on the "Pledge of Allegiance: Performing Patriotism in the Japanese American Concentration Camps," Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson addresses the way symbolic interaction between Japanese American schoolchildren and the American flag took on an important ritual in the camps that enabled the state to compel its subjects to perform patriotism and "loyalty to country" at the very same moment that the state denied citizenship, stole subjects' property, and by and large denied Japanese and Japanese American subjectivity.[53] In a haunting description of forced patriotism, Chambers-Letson describes how incarcerated Nisei children in the Manzanar concentration camps were forced to say the Pledge of Allegiance to an empty corner—a corner that was literally devoid of a flag. The Pledge of Allegiance is an embodied ritual structured by a uniform choreography in which one stands at attention, body erect with the hand over the heart and gaze cast outward. The "choreography of the pledge is an embodiment of the subject's implicit trust for and

surrender to the nation."[54] The description is a rejoinder to the vacuous words of the FBI agent in *Bronzeville* who persuades Henry, "There's a lot of Japanese in this country that want to prove themselves right now."[55] Exhausted by the pressure of the FBI who accuse Henry and his father of being spies for the Empire of Japan and after threatening Henry and his father with murder, Henry finally relents and agrees to enlist in the US military. Yet at the beginning of the play, Henry's character was emblematic of the "No No Boys": those Nisei who refused when pressed by the WRA to sign a "loyalty questionnaire."[56] This questionnaire read, in part:

> 27: Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States wherever ordered?
> 28: Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the U.S. from any and all attacks by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiances or obedience to the Japanese Emperor, or any other foreign government power or organization?[57]

While the Nisei waged an active campaign from within the camps against conscription into the US military and against the abusive treatment of US racism more generally, much of the history of resistance against US imperialism has been elided by the narratives created by institutions such as now the defunct WRA. At the end of the film, *A Challenge to Democracy* focuses on the Nikkei soldiers who were training as part of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the unit that Henry joins in the play. The narrator offers what is now considered the ludicrous claim: "The Americanism of the great majority of America's Japanese finds its highest expression in the thousands who are in the United States Army, almost half of them are in a Japanese American combat team. . . . Hundreds of them volunteered while they were in relocation centers. . . . They know what they're fighting against and they know what they're fighting for—their country and for the American ideals that are part of their upbringing—democracy, freedom, equality of opportunity regardless of race, creed, or ancestry."[58]

The critical historical performance of *Bronzeville* intervenes in the grand narrative of propagandistic Americanism embodied in the films of *Japanese Relocation* and *A Challenge to Democracy* and gestures to the fact that for Japanese Americans the notion of "self-removal" under the threat of state-sanctioned violence was an oxymoron. The play deftly reveals the ways in which print media such as the *Time* magazine article worked in tandem with the films to produce a form of ornamentalism, a kind of subjective coercion, reduction, and discipline

that trained an American readership to read phenotype through a racialized parallax. Yet, ironically, ornamentalism becomes a strategy through which to reinvent Henry's identity in order to hide in plain sight. By fulfilling the assumptive logic of yellowface tropes as described in *Time* magazine, Felix and Henry deploy ornamentalism as a strategy to enable Henry to "pass" as Chinese in order to move about in public. Such a tactic in turn creates a possibility for a fleeting coalitional politics within the relative positioning between Black and Japanese Americans.

From Bronzeville to Little Tokyo

Just as *Bronzeville*'s story opens with an acute awareness of how the political economy of racial regimes hastened the collision between the Goodwins and the Taharas, the play's closing critically portends the continuing racial stratification of Los Angeles's multicultural community. The final scene of *Bronzeville* helps contextualize the reality of the emergence of a contested and multiethnic Los Angeles. The scene begins with the Goodwins preparing to move out of the Taharas' home. The war has ended and the Nikkei are returning to what was formerly Little Tokyo, shifting the racial demographics of the neighborhood once again. At the top of the scene, the house is completely packed and the car is loaded with the Goodwins' belongings when Princess meets an elderly Japanese American man who approaches the house. He is introduced to the family as Naoma Tahara, Henry's father. The scene brings together a convergence of African American and Asian American disorientations. As the Goodwins prepare to leave, Naoma Tahara, a widower and now a grieving father, must pray for the loss of his son. The scene closes with Naoma leading the Goodwins in a Shinto prayer in memory of Henry. The prayer is both a hope for the future in a multiethnic Los Angeles and a performative reminder of the structural violence of the racial regime that has murdered his son.

At the end of World War II, Los Angeles, like most US cities and towns, was still formally racially segregated. Developers such as the Janss Investment Company, creator of Westwood Village where the University of California, Los Angeles, is located, designated such communities specifically for white residents and property owners only. As one of the region's largest developers, Janss Investment Company announced the restrictions of interracial housing on their homes with signs that stated, "No part of said real property shall ever be leased, rented, or sold or conveyed to any person who is not part of the white or Caucasian race, nor be used or occupied by any person who is not of the white or the Caucasian

race whether grantee hereunder or any other person."[59] Such racial restrictions, created by private enterprises such as developers or homeowners associations or both, were supported by state and federal courts in cases such as *Buckley v. Corrigan*. Like Janss, Walter Leimert, the developer of Leimert Park, was adamant about maintaining the subdivision as a segregated space. Furthermore, the National Association of Real Estate Boards created careful guidelines for instructing its "affiliates on how to promote segregation in a manner that was consistent with the law," and the federal government boosted this effort in the 1930s, when the Federal Housing Administration structured race restrictions into the standard housing and mortgage practices.[60]

While the Nisei returned to Little Tokyo and reclaimed their property, or searched for what had been taken from them, some African American families headed north to the cities of Pasadena and Altadena. Many Black families like the Goodwins headed south toward what is commonly referred to as Central Los Angeles (comprised of Watts, Crenshaw, Adams District, Leimert Park, and Baldwin Hills). These communities became the bedrock foundation of art, entertainment, and culture, and, yes, an essential component of the political and economic machinery of the second-largest city in the United States. While families such as the Goodwins would not have been allowed to go to Westwood, and to this day Westwood and its surrounding communities (Brentwood, Bel Air, Holmby Hills, and Beverly Hills), remain racially segregated by default, beginning with the 1948 Supreme Court decision of *Shelley v. Kramer* that struck down racially restrictive covenant laws, subdivisions such as Leimert Park were absorbed into the Central and Crenshaw communities. Yet, much of this community was displaced in May 1954 when the California Highway Commission unanimously decided to construct the Santa Monica Freeway (also known as the I-10 Freeway) straight through the heart of Los Angeles's Black communities. The Santa Monica Freeway then became a concrete barrier that ensured that the intentional racial segregation of the early twentieth century would continue despite legal advancements in fair housing practices. Central Los Angeles was also a place where Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, Black Americans, and those white Americans who resisted white flight into the suburbs would re-create a Third World space of racial mixture.

Robey Theater Company's struggle to tell the stories of the Black experience continues, and so does the struggle to find a permanent location for producing critical historical performances. While the Asian American theatre company East West Players managed to find the capital through which to obtain a permanent space, it is not ironic that the Vision Theater, located in Leimert Park, has been a space that the Robey has used to hold readings of various projects.

Originally built by film producer Howard Hughes in 1931, the art deco tower (formerly named Leimert Tower) has been a contested landmark, as ownership of the venue changed throughout the twentieth century. Built as a movie house, the venue ceased showing films when it was bought by the Jehovah's Witnesses in 1968. The theatre was then purchased in 1977 by actress Marla Gibbs, who renamed the space the Vision Theater and attempted to transform it into a performing arts space, but the City of Los Angeles wound up taking over the space in 1999.[61] With business interests' continual eye toward framing the city as a "global" space, white capital continues to marginalize Black communities through the convergence of private and public interests. Leimert Park, much like other parts of Central Los Angeles that were predominantly Black spaces throughout the middle of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, has been under the assault of gentrification with many Black homeowners forced into foreclosure or offered cash for their homes. Many of the Nikkei of Little Tokyo and the greater Los Angeles area played the role of model minorities and followed the path of white flight into the suburbs of Orange County and the San Fernando Valley and attempted to leave the ghosts of the camps behind. As playwright Tim Toyama explained, "Our parents told us to never talk about camp." Robey Theater Company's productions of *Bronzeville* that were staged at LATC and at the Manzanar National Historic Site provided the opportunity for Japanese Americans and African Americans to create for their voices, memories of the past, and vision for the future.

As Woolfolk and Toyama both suggested, the 2009 and the 2013 productions that took place at LATC were consistently sold out and well received, with the 2009 production extending its run due to popular demand. Reviews in the *Los Angeles Times* as well as local periodicals such as *Culver City News* and the Japanese American newspapers *Rafu Shimpo* and *Japanese Art and Culture in LA* all provided supportive and enthusiastic reviews. According to the playwrights, the majority of the audiences were Black and Japanese as well as Latinx and Euro-American. As Woolfolk suggested, the racial mixture of the audience not only reflected the desire to see Black and Asian bodies onstage but also embodied a history of the actual area in which the historical events took place: Little Tokyo and Bronzeville. To that extent, the two productions occurred at LATC, which is located several blocks from the heart of current-day Little Tokyo Los Angeles and is by extension a part of the current Little Tokyo community. The productions of *Bronzeville* acknowledged and affirmed the events of the 1940s, as well as the subsequent development of the immediate community. Many of the audience members who came to see the productions at the LATC location were Japanese American survivors of the camps, their children, and

their grandchildren. Many of the audience members were also Black Americans who had experienced the emergence of the Bronzeville community as well as the Crenshaw district during and after the end of the war. Active in outreach efforts to young audiences, the cast and Robey company performed scenes at local high schools and provided information pamphlets and discussions about the history of Bronzeville and the development of Los Angeles.

Such outreach efforts hastened Robey's decision to take the cast, crew, and makeshift set to Inyo County, California, and stage a production of *Bronzeville* over the course of three days in May 2011 at the site of the Manzanar concentration camp. The production was a collaboration between Robey, the National Park Service, and Inyo Council for the Arts, and the production was presented to students from local schools, the general public, and, again, survivors of the camps and their living relatives. For the cast and crew, it was their first time visiting Manzanar. The six days of rehearsal prior to the production became another example of critical historical performance during which the cast and crew were immersed in another contested site that was part of the greater Bronzeville story. Hauntingly, the *Bronzeville* production at Manzanar was staged in the prisoner-constructed auditorium that houses a theatre where Manzanar prisoners performed. As scholar Emily Roxworthy has observed, the performances by the incarcerated at Manzanar ranged from "Japanese" odori (dancing) numbers "intermingled with Kabuki theatre scenes and utai (Noh-theatre chanting), but also with tap-dance numbers, a hypnotism display, and even a Nisei interpretation of a Mexican dance."[62] Similar to the WRA propaganda films, there were also obligatory speeches by "WRA officials congratulating the internees on the hospital construction, along with typical demonstrations of American youth culture such as Manzanar band performances (including 'The Star-Spangled Banner'),"[63] as well as more quotidian performances such as "internee magic tricks, popular-music vocal solos, and more tap dancing."[64] Furthermore, as Chambers-Letson and Roxworthy have both observed, popular representations of American youth dramas also included Japanese Americans performing in blackface. The performance of *Bronzeville* continued to open up critical discussions about race, power, space, and representation as a contested history of Afro-Asian juncture and disjuncture.

In working through my discussion on *Bronzeville*, I have attempted to consider the possibility of an emergent Black public sphere based on Robey Theater Company's history as a Black artistic community that developed a play such as *Bronzeville* as a mode of what I have referred to as "critical historical performance." While in so many ways a "Black public" in the United States is inherently a foreclosed project—since to imagine a world where Black life can exist

unfettered from the impingements of anti-Blackness is an impossibility—this essay has chosen to focus on Black cultural production that occurs under the continued duress of modernity à la Paul Robeson's commitment to internationalism. The discussion of Robey's critical historical performance modality is one in which theatrical production attempts to intervene in anti-Blackness rather than simply dramatizing historical events. Critical historical performance is an intersectional counter discourse of history and provides an analytic framework for understanding how the intersection of race, gender, and class is performed as the representation of identity in the world of the play in which characters critique racialized structures. Furthermore, as I have demonstrated, critical historical performance is concerned with the education of audiences through outreach to young audiences and the public and through the afterlives of the play through exhibitions and symposiums about a topic that has been propagandized and erased. In the case of *Bronzeville*, Robey's staging of Black and Asian characters unearths how two different subjectivities have been positioned by the state and private interests to suture racial regimes that regulate racial hierarchy and maintain racial capitalism as both anti-Black and anti-Asian.

By focusing on the play *Bronzeville* as the object of my discussion, I have attempted to manifest how critical historical performance enables a more nuanced understanding of the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, which in turn shape racial meanings. The critique of racial regimes in *Bronzeville* unearths the juncture between the denial of citizenship, property, and personhood by demonstrating how the state, in conjunction with private business interests, colluded to structure race-class inequity by controlling the development of residential neighborhoods through racially restrictive housing covenant laws, limiting access to capital, incarcerating families, extrajudicial violence, and denying citizenship to Black Americans and Asian Americans. *Bronzeville* generates multiple pathways for dialogues around a history that has been propagandized, erased, and rendered unclear. The play is a critical generative tool and repository that enables audiences to understand how the material conditions of racial regimes hasten conflicts that have been marred and marked by inflection points such as Black and Korean violence during the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings. Hence it is no surprise that there was and is a continued disconnect between Black and Asian American communities. During moments of rupture such as the Black Lives Matter response to the George Floyd murder (and anti-Black violence writ large), there had been a seeming silence from Asian American communities not only about Floyd's murder but about anti-Blackness in general. Yet, when Donald Trump (and white supremacists generally) hastened and stoked anti-Asian

violence through anti-Asian rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a sudden awareness of US racism at a foundational level when anti-Asian violence became clearly palpable and viscerally experienced by Asian communities and those bodies that were marked by phenotype as Asian.

As I have discussed, the relative positioning of the Afro-Asian political economy within Los Angeles framed around a mythology of American racial tropes functions as part of a larger system of anti-Blackness, and such relative positioning relies upon the mythologies that undergird contemporary flashpoints of Afro-Asian conflict. Such mythologies are invested in rendering racial triangulations in which Black Americans are framed as dysfunctional insiders, Asian Americans as unassimilable model minorities, and the Euro-Americans (read white) as the constant superior insider. Playscripts such as *Bronzeville* are pedagogical tools that not only explain how racial regimes were constructed during the early formation of the United States but how they reconstituted themselves during the late nineteenth century and into early part of the twentieth. Such explanations in turn enable audiences, students, readers, scholars, pedagogues, and the general public to then anticipate, understand, and discern varying moments of Afro-Asian antagonism.

Lastly, it should not be lost that constructing a Black public through artistic and cultural expression requires resources and access to capital that Black Americans are constantly barred from accessing. Within my discussion of *Bronzeville*'s critical historical performance, I have pressed the issue of the impact that racial regimes have had on the development of Black communities and Black theatre organizations such as Robey. Equally, I have troubled and problematized how the relative positioning of Black and Asian Americans in the United States has yielded continued inequitable access to resources. I have contended that critical historical performance reveals how wealth inequality has been structured over many generations through the same systemic barriers that have hampered Black people throughout their history in American society and have affected their ability to accumulate wealth relative to people in the Asian diaspora. The relevance of these facts is important not only in the context of the racial regimes of Los Angeles's political economy but also, again echoing playwright August Wilson, in determining how race, gender, and class is performed and how history is remembered.

Notes

1. Robey Theater Company is in residence at the Los Angeles Theater Center, which is managed by Jose Luis Valenzuela's Latino Theater Company. Regarding my spelling of

"Black": similar to Asian and Asian American, Latinx, or Euro American, Caucasian, Filipino, Japanese, Irish American, and Italian American, I capitalize the "B" in Black when referring to people of the African diaspora in North America and I use the terms "Black," "Black American," and "African American" interchangeably. This is also the policy of the *Theatre History Studies* journal more generally.

2. The play made its first five-week run in July 2009 at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in downtown LA. Robey Theater Company then remounted the play for three days in May 2011 at the site of the Manzanar concentration camp (now part of the US National Park Service), located in Independence, California, which is at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California's Owens Valley, approximately 230 miles north of Los Angeles. Manzanar is now a National Historic Site and maintained by the federal government.
3. To view an official copy of FDR's Executive Order 9066, visit the National Archives' website.
4. As written in the mission statement on the Robey Theater Company's homepage and in their brochures and literature.
5. The original 1999 production of *Yohen* featured Nobu McCarthy and Robey Theater cofounder Danny Glover and was produced by the Los Angeles-based Asian American theater company East West Players. *Yohen* was subsequently remounted as a staged reading on May 30, 2015, by the Department of African American Studies at UCLA in conjunction with Robey Theatre Company and directed by Ben Guillory. I taught this course as part of my graduate and undergraduate seminar at UCLA in the Department of African American Studies. The course was titled Black Arts and Black Publics: Robey Theatre Company and the Continuum of Black Performance in Los Angeles, and the staged reading took place in the James Bridges Theater. A clip from the reading featuring Danny Glover and Karen Lew can be found on YouTube. The staged reading then catalyzed another production of *Yohen* between Robey and East West Players directed by Guillory in 2017. There had been previous productions of *Yohen* including a New York run in 2006. For a review of the New York run, see the Anita Gates review titled "A Kiln Test for a 30-Year Interracial Marriage" in the October 24, 2006, issue of the *New York Times*. Versions of this paper were presented at the American Society for Theatre Research, the Black Arts Initiative at Northwestern University, the Japan Black Studies Association, and the National Conference of Black Political Scientists. Lastly, a special thank you to my colleagues and students in the Department of Performance Studies at Texas A&M University, College Station, who supported a workshop and post-workshop discussion of *Bronzeville* as part of my Directing for Performance course.
6. Black Public Sphere Collective, ed., *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996), 7.
7. Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theatre and Film Before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2007, 2012), xii.
8. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*.
9. Scott Kurashige, *Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 186, 187.
10. William Peterson, "Success Story: Japanese-American Style," *New York Times Magazine*, January 9, 1966, 22.
11. According to the United States National Archives, which can be accessed on their website,

Japanese and Japanese Americans who were incarcerated were offered restitution through the Office of Redress Administration (ORA), which was established in the Civil Rights Division by Section 105 of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988: "ORA acknowledged, apologized, and made restitution for the fundamental injustices of the evacuation, relocation, and internment of Japanese Americans during World War II (WWII). The redress program was charged with administering the ten-year program, which, by operation of law, officially closed on February 5, 1999. ORA was responsible for identifying, locating, and authorizing tax-free restitution payment of $20,000 to eligible individuals of Japanese ancestry. Since the redress program's inception, ORA has provided $20,000 in redress to more than 82,219 eligible claimants, totaling more than $1.6 billion." To have been eligible for restitution, applicants had to have met the following criteria:

1. Alive on August 10, 1988.
2. A United States (US) citizen or permanent resident alien during the internment period December 7, 1941, to June 30, 1946.
3. A person of Japanese ancestry, or the spouse or parent of a person of Japanese ancestry.
4. Evacuated, relocated, interned, or otherwise deprived of liberty or property as a result of federal government action during the internment period and based solely on their Japanese ancestry.

12. Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth White Wealth: A New Perspective of Racial Inequality*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: NJ: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 12, 13.
13. United States Department of the Interior: War Relocation Authority, *The Evacuated People: A Quantitative Description* (Washington, DC, in 1946), 20.
14. These statistics are from *The Color of Wealth in Los Angeles* (2016), a joint publication by Duke University, the New School University, the University of California Los Angeles, and the Insight Center for Community Economic Development. The report was commissioned and published by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco. The contributing authors were Melany De La Cruz-Viesca, Zhenxiang Chen, Paul M. Ong, Darrick Hamilton, and William A. Darity Jr.
15. August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand," *Callaloo* 20, no. 3 (1998): 493.
16. Racial wealth gap: According to the 2021 US Federal Reserve's report *Wealth Inequality and the Racial Wealth Gap* and the US Department of the Treasury's 2022 report *Racial Differences in Economic Security: The Racial Wealth Gap*, the structural economic inequity between Black and non-Black people has increased since the late 1990s when Wilson delivered his polemic address, and the racial wealth gap only continues to broaden. "Wilson's Articulation": Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand," 495.
17. See Catanese's introduction in *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014). Equally Jared Sexton's discussion in *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
18. Tim Toyama and Aaron Woolfolk, *Bronzeville* (July 30, 2009), 1, unpublished playscript.
19. Toyama and Woolfolk, *Bronzeville*, 3.
20. House of Representatives, *The Constitution of the United States of America As Amended Unratified Amendments, Analytical Index*. United States Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 2007. To read in full, visit their website. In its entirety, the Section 1,

Article XIV reads: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

21. Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 108, 109.
22. Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*.
23. Toyama and Woolfolk, *Bronzeville*, 4.
24. "That purportedly convey 'Asian-ness'": Sean Metzger, "Charles Parsloe's Chinese Fetish: An Example of Yellowface Performance in Nineteenth-Century American Melodrama," *Theatre Journal* (2004): 627–51.
25. Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 15, 19.
26. "Yellow peril" is a derogatory term that was broadly used to legitimate anti-Asian discrimination and violence. The film *Yellow Peril* (1908), directed by Wallace McCutcheon, also served to promulgate the slur; that movie also starred D. W. Griffith, who went on to make *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)—a film that justified anti-Black violence and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. See Gina Marchetti's *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
27. Toyama and Woolfolk, *Bronzeville*, 21.
28. Toyama and Woolfolk, *Bronzeville*, 21.
29. Toyama and Woolfolk, *Bronzeville*, 24.
30. "Economies of Enjoyment and Terror in *Django Unchained* and *12 Years a Slave*," *Postcolonialist* 2, no. 2 (2014). Tauney's opinion declared that slaves were not citizens of the United States and could not sue in federal courts. This decision declared that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional and that Congress did not have the authority to prohibit slavery in the territories. For more, see the Library of Congress on its website.
31. See the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, House of Representatives, *The Constitution of the United States of America As Amended Unratified Amendments, Analytical Index*, United States Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 2007. To read in full, visit the website.
32. Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics and Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–38.
33. From the unpublished script *Bronzeville* by Tim Toyama and Aaron Woolfolk, 36. This was the final version dated July 30, 2009. For more on the history of Montford Point and the history of Black soldiers during World War II, see Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1998); Gail Buckley, *American Patriots* (New York: Random House, 2001); Bernard C. Nalty, *The Right to Fight: African-American Marines in World War II* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, United States Army, 1985).
34. To view an official copy of FDR's Executive Order 8802, visit the National Archives' website.
35. Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 159.
36. Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 161–62.

37. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Truth Behind '40 Acres and a Mule,'" in *The Root*, January 7, 2013.
38. Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 24.
39. Brett Esaki, "Multidimensional Silence, Spirituality, and the Japanese American Art of Gardening," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 16, no. 3 (2013): 235–65, 240.
40. See the *Time* magazine article by the same title "Home Affairs: How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs," from Monday, December 22, 1941.
41. Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). 17, 18.
42. Toyoma and Woolfolk, *Bronzeville*, 40.
43. Toyama and Woolfolk, *Bronzeville*, 40.
44. Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 18.
45. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.
46. Toyama and Woolfolk, *Bronzeville*, 60.
47. Toyama and Woolfolk, *Bronzeville*, 63.
48. Toyama and Woolfolk, *Bronzeville*, 63.
49. United States Office of War Information and the United States Office of Education, dirs., Bureau of Motion Pictures, *Japanese Relocation*, US Office of War Information Domestic Branch Released also through US Office of Education (Washington, DC: US War Relocation Authority/War Activities Committee of the Motion Picture Industry, 1943).
50. United States War Relocation Authority, dir., *A Challenge to Democracy* (Washington, DC: US War Relocation Authority with the cooperation of the Office of War Information and the Office of Strategic Services, 1943).
51. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, xii.
52. Hillary Jenks, "Bronzeville Little Tokyo and the Unstable Geography of Race in Post-World War II Los Angeles," *Southern California Quarterly* (2011): 201–35.
53. Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *A Race so Different: Performance and Law in Asian America* (New York: New York University Press 2016).
54. Chambers-Letson, *A Race so Different*, 110.
55. Toyama and Woolfolk, *Bronzeville*, 73.
56. John Okada, *No No Boy* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1957).
57. As quoted in the Statement of United States Citizen of Japanese Ancestry, a document of the US Selective Service System.
58. As quoted in *A Challenge to Democracy*.
59. Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 28.
60. Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 29.
61. Yosuke Kitazawa, *Leimert Theater: Envisioning a Neighborhood Landmark*, in "KCET: Public Media Group of Southern California," October 17, 2013.
62. Emily Colborn-Roxworthy, "'Manzanar the Eyes of the World Are Upon You': Performance and Archival Ambivalence at a Japanese American Internment Camp," *Theatre Journal* (2007): 189–214.
63. Emily Colborn-Roxworthy, "'Manzanar the Eyes of the World Are Upon You.'"
64. Emily Colborn-Roxworthy, "'Manzanar the Eyes of the World Are Upon You.'"