UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Mifune and Me : Asian/American Corporeal Citations and the Politics of Mobility

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5720m2d3

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 4(1)

Author

Metzger, Sean

Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.5070/T841012824

Copyright Information

Copyright 2012 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at https://escholarship.org/terms

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Mifune and Me: Asian/American Corporeal Citations and the Politics of Mobility

SEAN METZGER

This essay examines how public spectacles animate what I call Asian/American corporeal citations.[1] This phrase revisits and extends the second half of my subtitle, which conjures Sau-ling Wong's theoretical engagement with "myths of mobility" as transformed through Asian American narratives. Articulated in her 1993 chapter, this research was then reengaged through her cautions about diasporic discourse. Whereas Wong grounds these early discussions of mobility in a North American geography with particular attention to the regulatory effects of nation-states, I attend to circulations across the Pacific that might activate national contexts even as they seep past such borders. Inspired by the roughly contemporaneous passing of two men—Toshiro Mifune (1920-1997) and my grandfather, Bo Jung (1901?-1998)—this essay performs three interrelated tasks. It examines how mechanisms of racialization inflect particular performances of mourning. Secondly, the analysis interrogates the relationships between "screen" (mediation) and "meat" (flesh) that facilitate these processes.[2] My move away from Wong's concern with literature to performance quite intentionally foregrounds bodies as they move through space as much as rhetorical constructions that describe movement. Finally, this essay uses this nexus of mourning, performance, and racialization to re-articulate modes of cultural passing.

In pursuit of the above goals, I construct a lineage through three bodies: Mifune's, actor Lane Nishikawa's (which invokes Mifune's through Nishikawa's elegiac solo piece *Mifune and Me*), and my own (disciplined through acting classes with Nishikawa). The sequence of bodily transmission I map among Mifune, Nishikawa, and me serves to throw into relief the more conventional genealogy I share with my grandfather. To be more precise, the performances that occurred in the wake of Toshiro Mifune's death, on the one hand, and Bo Jung's, on the other,

raise the question of how Asianness might register in bodies linked by the citation of physical acts. Although often racially marked, such cultural insinuations may not have anything to do with either genetics or political affiliations, analytical frames historically used to explain ethnic kinship and racial difference. Indeed, these processes of corporeal citation facilitate an understanding of cultural transmission not dependent on heterosexual coupling as the *sine qua non* of racial, ethnic, and diasporic discourses.

To pursue a trio of objectives in relation to a trio of bodies, this essay interweaves two narratives. The first narrative is an analysis of Nishikawa's solo show *Mifune and Me*. After clarifying the ways in which *Mifune and Me* instrumentalizes the bodies it invokes, I examine the performance itself with specific attention to its use of film stars. Turning toward an analysis of motion, I discuss how live bodies cite the movement practices on screen and how such citational practices might yield an analytic produced through Asian/American corporeal citations. Because I situate my scholarship vis-à-vis the performed mourning of bodies, my analysis relies on the montage of memory for its structure. To foreground the role of subjective remembering in writing these performances—in passing lived experiences to the page—I situate the self-reflexive stories about my grandfather and my own acting training as a second narrative, a discourse that interrupts, supplements, and sometimes contradicts my less emotional engagement with Lane Nishikawa's theatrical endeavor. My aim in writing is to gesture toward the stakes in which the passing of lives and cultural contexts matter with regard to my own racialized body and my own psychic investments in such racialization. At the same time, my writing evinces a desire and struggle to recollect experiences of people and things past/passed. In this vein, my essay serves to perform my own mourning and sense of loss through complex, non-linear structures of memory. The juxtaposition of these different prose forms mimic the often subjective associations that watching performance might elicit.

The intertwined narratives in this essay proceed in three sections. In the first, I outline the theoretical concerns of thinking about mourning through performance; here I would underscore the perhaps commonplace assertion that death is generative in the sense of setting into motion processes of remembering. The second section turns to a thick description of moving bodies. In the final coda, I consider questions of legacy in the shift from myths to a politics of mobility.

Beginnings and Endings

1999: In need of distraction, I rushed to the theatre. My old acting coach, Lane Nishikawa, opened a new solo performance. I hoped he would evoke my laughter.

This first anniversary of my grandfather's death conjured the string of events preceding his funeral. I graduated from college one week before my twenty-second birthday. That same evening, my grandmother suffered a heart attack in her sleep. The

following Sunday morning, my mom laughed over breakfast, all smiles and giddiness. That afternoon she returned home to California; my father took her for a drive to break the news. That Sunday also happened to be Mother's Day.

My dad had actually picked up the message from home the day before. He withheld the information through the weekend. As they left for the airport, my father told me that something had happened, that I should stay home and wait for a phone call, that he would explain everything later.

The phone rang; my focus faded.

In his book *Cities of the Dead* Joseph Roach takes up the issues of "memory, performance, and substitution."[3] His text interrogates the stakes of resurrecting the non-living to signify in the present, particularly in what he terms the "circum-atlantic" region. When the departed speak, Roach suggests, some histories become validated, while others fall into obscurity. In other words, the construction of cultural memory depends on the continual reimagining of the deceased and how they might function as templates and guides for the present. Moreover, as Roach points out, specific spatial systems mediate this generational communication in various ways. For example, in the Atlantic arena, the traffic in human flesh and labor resulted in the creation of particular power differentials—the destruction of certain cultural and spiritual mediums and the assertion of others. In order to move beyond those instruments of social expression that have become affirmed as traditions, a pressing need exists for minority groups, who find limited representation in the dominant socio-cultural imaginary, to improvise relationships between past and present. As a case in point, Roach traces the various ethnic and class struggles that materialize through the events of Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

In its careful delineating of the African, Caribbean, Creole, European and Native American practices and fusions that define the festival, Roach demonstrates memory's reconstruction through performance and the ways in which specific performances become legitimized, leading to the writing and valorizing of dominant (in this case, white British and American) histories. Through analysis of cultural legacies, Roach illustrates how certain bodies have become inscribed with cultural currency. Explaining this point and gesturing toward the signifying potential of the corporeal, Roach writes that "[g]eneaologies of performance . . . attend to 'counter-memories,' or the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences."[4] Partially inspired by *Cities of the Dead*, I interrogate generational contiguity, that is, the practice of kinship in the determination of cultural identity as well as the fantastic assertion of a discrete cultural lineage. By raising one or two corpses in order to reveal the mechanisms that constitute a cultural core/*corps*, I hope to move the body out of the wings and into the spotlight on contemporary debates concerning Asian/American movement.

At my grandfather's funeral, I was one of the few who could not stifle tears. Try as I did, they spilled from my eyes in hiccup-like convulsions.

Atop the metal casket sat a 16x20 photograph of my grandfather. I thought he resembled my brother. The fact that we are identical did not impede my assertion. But, turning toward my twin, I realized it is not he but I who now have the narrow face of my grandfather, his pronounced jawline.

Ge eyed me anxiously to see how his rather emotional double would bear the scene. I would later write to a friend of my brother's presence beside me, stoic and very, very butch . . . even at the grave. My father had always tried to instill in us the quality of emotional control. My eldest brother had learned best—"vulcan mode," Ge called it. But as I scanned the family, I realized that almost no one betrayed her or his feelings. I wondered what legacy my grandfather had left; sons and daughters alike learned to mask bodily displays of emotion. Funny, I thought. I did not inherit that capacity.

At the site of his burial, I thus began to ponder how my grandfather had influenced me. Perhaps my thoughts stirred from the minister's prodding; the man droned in endless monotone about someone with whom he had shared nothing prior to their arrival at the empty grave—a hole that unified them, if only for a few minutes.

Although unlikely bedfellows given their theoretical inclinations, Peggy Phelan and Sue-Ellen Case both offer potential means of extending Roach's theories in *Cities of the Dead* by articulating, respectively, the psychic and material stakes of live performance. Phelan's work links performance to the evanescence and imaginative reconstruction that informs death and mourning. Because a live performance event is unique in terms of gesture and intonation, no exact replication is possible. She elaborates on this phenomenon, writing that "[t]he enactment of invocation and disappearance undertaken by performance and theatre is precisely the drama of corporeality itself."[5] Phelan would seem to concur with Samuel Beckett here, observing that bodies move inevitably toward death. She thus conceives of the body in dual fashion: "At once a consolidated fleshy form and an eroding, decomposing formlessness." As this paradoxical double, dying bodies leave more than a physical skeleton (as one might observe from the proverbial phrase "skeletons in the closet"). Phelan therefore focuses on the psychic remainders of bodies and what those engender. As she explains, "the body beckons us and resists our attempts to remake it."[6] The psychic toll of loss and the manifest reactions to such a situation become the subject of her analyses.

Phelan's interest in absence seems to parallel the concerns of Roach's project, for the nominal insertion of something in lieu of the deceased connotes the process of surrogation, as defined in *Cities of the Dead*. Roach coins the term "surrogation" to describe how "survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates" "into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure."[7] Following the logic of this claim, he reaches the conclusion that "[d]eath, as it is culturally constructed by surrogacy, cannot be understood as a moment, a point in time: it is a process."[8]

Phelan and Roach together, then, take the body as the vehicle that leads us to various social, cultural and psychic displacements. Emphasizing the body enables these other issues to come to the fore. Both Phelan's and Roach's respective models thus seem to construct the body as a kind of cipher, a physical base upon which social, psychic, cultural and juridical forces inscribe themselves. Nevertheless, Phelan usefully articulates a relationship between the body and the psychic that foregrounds imagination in the work of mourning.[9]

Mapping Phelan's work onto *Cities of the Dead* may clarify this point. Discussing the renowned English actor of the seventeenth century Thomas Betterton, Roach writes of the "kinesthetic nostalgia" that the player engendered. The manner in which Betterton moved became a fetishistic interest for spectators when the "original" no longer appeared on stage. The desire to achieve a style that mimicked Betterton's suggests, as Phelan would have it, a mourning for Betterton's absent physicality. The desire expressed in the post-mortem-Betterton performances suggests a corporeal communication of culture. The kinesthetic nostalgia for the movements of Betterton's body indicates a grieving for the English cultural identity that Betterton represents. To act English, in other words, is to act like (that is, mimic the gestures and actions of) Thomas Betterton. The example of Betterton illustrates what I call a corporeal citation.

The emphasis on the body in live performance particularly enables a tracking of physical passing. Sue-Ellen Case, in contrast to Roach and Phelan, invokes the body more traditionally and specifically configured "as flesh." As she explains as part of her inquiry into the "meat" (fleshy body) and the screen (technologically-mediated filters), Case argues that the corporeality of live performance can resist the kind of discursive determinism that currently dominates post-structuralist theory: "The performer focuses on training the body, listening to the body, working with the body, and enjoying the body. The body is the performer's primary interface with the social. Breath control, voice technique, body training, choreography, techniques for handling props—all compose the interface. Words do not reign supreme; rather they are only one kind of sound among many."[10] The flesh does not house but instead produces subjectivity. Case upholds the body and live performance for their potential in "intervening in the seamless screenic world."[11] In the realm of mourning, death, and cultural transmission so well articulated by Roach and Phelan, Case insists on a language of stage performance to examine fleshy bodies—both living and dead—to intervene in discussions of national, ethnic, and racial construction. As a further qualification, although Roach's framework partially enables my own conversations with the departed, the burials that interest me involve bodies positioned in what has become known as the Pacific Rim.[12]

I concentrated my gaze on the black and white image of my grandfather. I closed my eyes and attempted to envision him so much younger; he was already in his seventies when I knew him.

After my grandmother's death, I watched my grandfather's health deteriorate over a three year period. The cane had already become part of his comportment some year or so before his wife's demise, but the wheelchair soon rolled into place, and the catheter found a reasonably permanent home in his body. The hair went from gray streaked with darker shades to white. The eyes sunk, pink flesh exposed under sagging skin. The skin became splotchy on his face, and the clothes began to hang more and more loosely on his frame. Those eyes betrayed the uncertainty of a mind that wandered on in constant quest of a wife who had already expired.

On the one hand, I felt a certain elation at the mere fact that he kept on living for three years. In their austere white lab coats, the doctors who told mom that her father should die confronted a contradiction: a man who rebounded in spite of their medical pronouncements. To increase the irony, my grandfather's position as the grand patriarch became much clearer as a result of his body's condition. My grandfather's weakened state activated long-submerged family dynamics.

From the perspective of my mother, the eldest child who framed my own view, all of the children became defined in relation to their providing for the widowed parent. Support took emotional and financial forms. For her part, my mother assumed the role of the dutiful daughter. In practice, this position required a monthly check, weekly visits (including one night on the town) and roughly bi-monthly sprints from work to the house to see if a particular fall, a certain drug, or a sudden heart attack had killed her beloved dad.

The stress of the dying man began to take its toll on his own body and those around him.

Nishikawa, Mifune, and Me

In Lane Nishikawa's *Mifune and Me,* issues of body, cultural transmission, and fantasies of home emerge center stage, through the explicitly marked Japanese/American performer and the screened images of Toshiro Mifune projected during the piece. Functioning explicitly as an elegy for the deceased actor, *Mifune and Me* associates transnational imagery with localized bodily gestures. The solo performance begins on a large screen with clips from *Throne of Blood* (1957) and some of Mifune's other well-known works projected before the audience. In fifteen vignettes, many of which commence with segments of a Mifune film, Nishikawa tells of the impact that Japan's arguably most famous actor had on his own development as a Japanese/American man and professional actor.

Co-sponsored by Theater Artaud and Theatre of Yugen, *Mifune and Me* played as part of the New Tsunami FusionFest in San Francisco.[13] Recent productions on both sides of the Pacific attest to an increasing hybridization of traditional Asian and western forms of drama. From Zhang Yimou's *Turandot* and Meng Jinghui's *Rhinoceros in Love* through Peter Sellars' *The Peony Pavilion*, the stage has become a regular site of cultural interaction. However, this play, back and forth between East

and West, has a long tradition in theater history. Brecht and Artaud both looked to Asian sources as inspiration for their theories of modern performance. Indeed, the debt these two figures owe to Asian stage forms indicates that western theatrical modernity locates its roots in certain orientalist cultural traffic. Examples of western plays that use Asian countries as thematic foils exist as far back as the founding of the modern nation state and the writings of Voltaire.

Nishikawa's work fits rather oddly in this trajectory. Trained in the US as an actor, Nishikawa's previous works (e.g., *I'm on a Mission from Buddha* and his collaboratively-developed and performed *The Gate of Heaven* [with Victor Talmadge]) do not meld Japanese stage techniques from Noh or Kabuki with western acting methodologies.[14] Yet, as *Mifune and Me* illustrates so vividly, Nishikawa's movement practice finds some of its vocabulary emerging through citation of transnational Asian stars, like Bruce Lee (vignette number six, "I remember Bruce") and Toshiro Mifune, and these figures' use of martial arts.

These actors and their actions have played a significant role in the US, and particularly in the Asian American imaginary. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times* during the late 1990s, James Romero noted that "there seems to be a genuine street-level enthusiasm for Asiana," especially for the latest Hong Kong action films and Japanese anime. Romero writes that "[b]ootleg copies of such classic kung fu films as 'The One-Armed Boxer' and 'the Five Deadly Venoms' are being sold for $10 apiece. And this time around, fans are studying the movements and philosophy of the flicks rather than the poor English dubbing."[15] In the same newspaper Rone Tempest observed that, for example, "[Jackie] Chan has had a long following among the Hollywood intelligentsia who admired him in Cantonese classics. . . . Quentin Tarantino is reportedly a fervent aficionado dating back to his days as a video store clerk."[16] Pointing to the importance of these screen heroes for Asian/American communities, the editors of *A. Magazine* (a now-defunct national periodical) have celebrated Mifune, Chan, and Lee as formative influences on US culture.[17]

Bruce Lee holds a unique position in this proliferation of discourses concerning Asian bodily disciplines and their representations. Meaghan Morris has written on "Lee's special role in US martial arts film culture. . . . Lee figures as both a great martial arts teacher who struggled against adversity to become a great film star, and an exemplary martial artist who used film as a pedagogical medium—on both scores, inspiring others to do likewise."[18] That Nishikawa specifically cites Robert Clouse's *Enter the Dragon* (1973) in the segment "I Remember Bruce" is evidence of Nishikawa's awareness and use of Lee's hybrid appeal.

Like the rest of *Mifune and Me*, this portion of the performance relies heavily on movie clips followed by Nishikawa's monologue.[19] In his characteristic black suit, shirt and shoes (I have seen him perform *I'm on a Mission from Buddha* in this garb twice), Lane first described the effect of seeing Lee in William Dozier's television series, *The Green Hornet* (1966–1967). Noting the dizzying speed with which Lee enters the frame, Nishikawa began to mimic Lee's entrance with his own body. After

ducking, Nishikawa executed a short jump to the side and then charged forward across the screen. Nishikawa continued the description with his hands, detailing how Lee darted about the room around and/or through the various obstacles that confronted him. Nishikawa exclaimed how Lee won the day for the Green Hornet in a triumph of Asian masculine prowess.

In the same vein, Nishikawa lovingly describes the careful control and release that characterize Lee's action sequences in *Enter the Dragon*. Miming Lee's signature move, Nishikawa stood in a ready position: legs shoulder-width apart and slightly bent with one foot slightly in front of the other and torso tilted just a bit forward; he then extended his arm, palm up and waved his fingers towards his own body. For Bruce Lee fans in particular, and martial arts aficionados in general, this motion preps many fight scenes in which Lee invites an opponent to attack. Nishikawa demonstrated the rapid parry-punch-punch maneuver that often follows such a solicitation in Lee's films. Of course, such movement remains incomplete without the accompanying exhalation of breath that also signifies Bruce Lee's fighting style. Call of the gong-fu fighter, this melisma of "whoo" completed the bodily re-presentation of Lee that Nishikawa had constructed in homage to an idol.

The pride that Nishikawa exhibits for Lee's physicality also marks the (primarily) male homosociality for which the martial arts genre has become so renowned.[20] Because Nishikawa's performance comments on stereotypes that circulate within the representational economy of the US, Nishikawa's citation of Lee not only functions to position Lee as a personal mentor for Lane, but it also attempts to counter once dominant images of Asian/American males as villainous and/or effeminate.[21] A "tough guy," Nishikawa positions himself within a fraternity of Asian/American heroes. Nishikawa also privileges his connection with the martial arts icon based on a sense of shared Asian-ness, in spite of the two men's different cultural ties to Japan and Hong Kong. This imagined continuity resulted from both the movement of Lee himself from Hong Kong to the US and back as well as from the transnational circulation of his image (through film but also through other, more tangible, forms of the martial arts such as schools that practice the wing-chun style of gong fu that Lee popularized). Lee functions as a pedagogical model for Nishikawa's Asian/American manhood.

The transnational cultural traffic I am sketching produces a corporeal culture of martial arts invested in constructing icons that have developed and excelled in the bodily skills of particular disciplines. In other words, Lee's fame owes a debt to his level of competence and performing the acts that an audience sees on the screen; his fans relish his "being able to do it."[22] This fan-atic interest in his dexterity aligns him with someone like Toshiro Mifune who also enjoyed a reputation based, in part, on his movement talent.[23] Nishikawa enacts a certain kind of cultural transmission through his physical citation of two now deceased bodies. What Nishikawa reveals for his audience, then, is a certain permeability in cultural and national boundaries

(Japanese, Chinese, and American) that he achieves through a focus on physicality represented through the cinematic screen.

As mentioned above, the interaction and influence of Lee and Mifune literally involve the transnational circulation of corporeality not only through the iconic image on the screen but also through the physical training of bodies. Ackbar Abbas explains that Kurosawa's samurai films (most of which starred Toshiro Mifune) generated eventual enthusiasm for better-quality martial arts films in the early seventies. This desire enabled the rise of Bruce Lee, introduced the "stuntman as hero," and thereby created a new level of authenticity in the martial arts genre.[24] As May Joseph has shown, this new Hong Kong cinema, for which Mifune paved the way, impacted local gestural vocabulary, particularly for Asians, from the US to Tanzania and beyond. For example, the "establishment of Black martial art schools in Los Angeles and elsewhere in California attest[ed] to" Lee's willingness to share his knowledge as well as "to the form's eclecticism, transnational malleability, and appeal to all frames and cultures."[25] Shortly afterward in the early 1980s (as a brief tour of Mifune-dedicated web pages points out), Mifune himself established an acting school, albeit short-lived, in Japan.

The teaching of these bodily disciplines, however, do not at all equate to some unmediated transference of a "pure" Japanese or Chinese cultural heritage. David Desser argues in his *The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa* that the sword-play genre, which popularized these kinds of physical training institutions, borrowed heavily from the film genre of the Western. Japan's cinematic industry appropriated this format in various ways. Desser elaborates, "[t]he language of the Japanese and their use of the aesthetic mode in virtually all their arts translates into a cinema in some ways equally as willing to forego naturalism and the naturalizing of conventional signs."[26] Thus, the popularity of Gong Fu, Karate and other martial arts forms around the world (following May Joseph's argument) rely on specific currents of cultural fusion that criss-cross the Pacific and that, eventually, become exported from Asia as "authentic" Asian martial arts. What articulates fusion in this latest performance piece, aside from the content of Nishikawa's work in which he speaks of his experience as a Japanese/American, are the screen and Nishikawa's own movement practice.

1999 (again): Watching Lane talking about his deceased mentor comforts me in my own thoughts of father-like figures now departed from my presence.

At the funeral the family had burned incense and paper money. We had left open a door at the house during our visit to the cemetery, and we had kowtowed before his portrait, three times each, in the kitchen, one after the other. Some people had even worn white. Certainly only one of the people present, my aunt, had been raised in an environment in which these practices passed from generation to generation . . . and she had married into the family.

Nevertheless, mourning my grandfather's death required that we perform some acknowledgment of his life and, more importantly, its effect on our own respective psyches. What precisely constituted his influence no one may have known, but what we ended up remembering is the fact that he had left a progeny of one dozen ABCs. I think the rituals that my aunt taught us that day had primarily to do with affirming that the sons, daughters and grandchildren actually had some link to their Chinese immigrant father. The physical practice provided an immediate kind of connection in spite of the fact that many of the children and almost all of the grandchildren had never really had a lengthy discussion with either the now-dead man or his wife. Most of the group assembled, after all, did not speak Cantonese—even if they understood it. And while my grandparents spoke fair English, communication focused on food and pleasantries.

At various intervals during the evening, Nishikawa reenacts some of the movement that the audience has just seen on the screen. These citations emerge in the context of the piece about a specific Japanese cultural lineage that Nishikawa claims to share with Mifune. In the absence of other referents, Mifune functions as a surrogate for Japanese-ness. The citation of action sets up Nishikawa himself as a kind of effigy. Joseph Roach defines this word, noting not only its use as "a sculpted or pictured likeness," but also its much rarer usage as a verb: "to evoke an absence, to body something forth, especially something from a distant past."[27] Nishikawa serves as an effigy by physically enacting a sequence of motions derived primarily from images of Mifune and also by the invocation of a tradition of *bushido* and swordsmanship that Mifune now signifies in a transnational economy.

While *bushido*, the way of the warrior, has a long history in transnational representation going back at least to the circulation of Japanese woodblock prints in the nineteenth century, this heritage now finds its most ready exportation in the moving image of film. As Japan's acting ambassador in Hollywood, Mifune became the emblem of both Japanese feudal (because of his samurai roles) and modern culture not only through the exportation of Japanese movies, but also through US constructions of Japanese culture. American productions like the television mini-series *Shogun* (Jerry London, 1980) and the filmic comedy *1941* (Steven Spielberg, 1979) provided instructive and problematic images with which US-based youth and adults could frame Japan.

At the same time that Mifune participated in this kind of ideological work, he also became a warrior icon for Asian/American youth. Young men like Lane Nishikawa had, from the time of Mifune, a means (through identification) to tap into the way of the warrior in order to deal with discrimination on the home front. In memorializing Mifune, Nishikawa thus inserts himself in a tradition of struggle regarding Asian representation in Hollywood. Arguing for the masculine heroism of Mifune, Nishikawa performs against the image of, for example, an effeminate Fu Manchu, whose power resides in his diabolical ability to compel scantily-clad henchmen to do whatever mischief he desires. Mifune's transmission of *bushido* enabled Nishikawa

both to gain access and to sustain an intervention in the US production of Asian/American images.

Clarifying what precisely constitutes this *bushido* tradition necessitates a specific analysis of Mifune's movement, particularly since his characters tend to be men of few words. As Nishikawa repeatedly observes throughout his performance in awed delight, Mifune had mastered the "one stroke," "one blow," one-touch-and-you're-dead technique of fencing. In other words, Mifune practiced a rigorous economy of motion. For example, the fight choreography in *The Hidden Fortress* (1958) depicts Mifune on horseback, charging a fleeing spy, whom he cuts down with a single slice (without even breaking his horse's gallop). His battle with the opposing general exemplifies an equal amount of precision, with long pauses between very calculated strikes. Nishikawa's performance aims to mimic this style; his movements throughout the evening are sparse, often a single gesture to the screen. The enactment of *bushido*, therefore, involves maximizing the efficiency of the body.

Perhaps Mifune's most famous one shot sequence occurs in *Sanjuro* (1962), the subject of Nishikawa's fifth vignette "21 Seconds." A tour-de-force, *Sanjuro's* final duel between Nakadai and Mifune demonstrates exactly what Nishikawa references when he says, "one stroke" (indeed, in the performance, Nishikawa showed this clip three times).

> They face each other. Both being fine swordsmen there is no bluffing offensive, no strategic retreat, no slashing. Swords still in scabbards they confront each other and there is a long wait—a very long one, fifteen whole seconds. . . . Then, in a single movement, both draw and (at the same time) strike. What follows is so grand . . . there is an explosion of blood (a vat of chocolate syrup and carbonated water under thirty pounds of pressure . . .) which gushes out like a geyser, accompanied by the most blood-curdling of sound-effects.[28]

The deft speed of Mifune does not, however, limit itself to his facility with the blade. In *Seven Samurai* (1954), the journey of the swordsmen to the village "is seen in a mosaic of tiny scenes" which serve to illustrate their pursuit "by Mifune who, taciturn . . . wants to join them."[29] Mifune appears from nowhere around the band of his latent comrades-in-arms. The film editing reinforces the rapid pace of Mifune's body in this sequence as well as in the very elaborate battle scenes throughout *Seven Samurai*. The actor himself stated that Kurosawa praised him, giving him the general note: "Mifune, do what you want, it's perfect."[30]

To specify further the analysis of Mifune in motion, I turn to another Kurosawa samurai film, *Yojimbo* (1961).[31] By the year of *Yojimbo's* release, Kurosawa's earlier films had already launched Mifune into international stardom. Moreover, as

the most western director among his new-wave contemporaries, Kurosawa had already set the stage for the film's reception in the international arena.[32] Further distinguishing itself from the more experimental works of other Japanese directors, *Yojimbo* functions in the mode of the samurai film and so bears all of that genre's transnational valences. The three fight scenes in the film do, in fact, register a transnational moment as its representation seems to depict the end of the Tokugawa period, as Japan opened up to foreign influences, including capital and technology, both of which become objects and thematics in the narrative.

The plot is conventional. Two gangs vie for control of a town. A masterless samurai wanders onto the scene and accepts payment to clean up the riffraff. The first battle occurs when Mifune asserts his physical prowess for a crowd of onlookers. After setting up his audience, Mifune strolls over to one of the boss's residences, while a rather upbeat score plays on the soundtrack. The hoodlums under Ushi-Tora's command boast of their evil exploits, but Mifune rebuffs them with a witty phrase. The battle begins. Unsheathing his blade in a deft motion, Mifune slashes down in an arc from left to right through the upper torso of the first victim's right side. Following his momentum and spinning to the right, Mifune swings his blade on a horizontal plane to lacerate the second victim's gut. Cut to a frontal shot of Mifune moving toward the camera. Slash! Slash! Scream! Cut: a bloody forearm, hand still clutching a sword lies, in the dirt. Cut to Mifune recovering from his attack—four swings, four seconds of screen time later. Mifune stretches as he walks away. Thus, the vocabulary consists of quick precise movements linked together in a syntax that allows the motion to flow and ameliorates the abruptness of the action.

In the second scene of death, Mifune again sets up the situation. His task is to rescue a woman whom Ushi-Tora's men have captured. Eight "dancers" work in this piece including Mifune and the woman (who serves as the audience). All of Mifune's six opponents will die after receiving two sword strokes. Shot-reverse shot editing establishes the scene but as a medium long shot. Music begins as Mifune sprints toward his first target. He pauses a moment and then, swing! Swing! He holds; he runs. Cut to the interior of the building where the damsel distresses helplessly. Swing! Swing! Spin and swing! Another man goes down. Perhaps this third victim fell too early, for Mifune hits him again as he lies on the floor, and, amazingly, the dying man actually rises to groan for the camera before dropping again. Up two stairs, the hero continues his charge. Swing! Swing! As bodies evacuate the frame, the woman appears at the door of her prison as a fourth man falls. All six of Ushi-Tora's men soon lie dead. Consistent with the first and last battles depicted in the film, this scene shows Mifune prepare and then execute his planned attack—quickly and accurately.

In fact, Mifune is so good that even eight men, including one with a pistol, fail to stop him. To rescue the inn-keeper who has shown him kindness, Mifune faces the remaining forces of Ushi-Tora and his gang. Youngest brother, always shown stroking his revolver underneath his obi, challenges the samurai first. Music starts, and the cooper and inn-keeper watch. Mifune feints twice, side-stepping two hops to each

side, before flinging a small dagger into the shooter's arm. After ten sword strokes, with each motion carrying him into his next adversary, eight more people lie dead. The samurai has vanquished the enemy.

Nishikawa's performance comments on the excerpts shown from films like *Yojimbo*. After replaying scenes, he talks about Mifune's mastery. For Nishikawa, Mifune is the best. While his failure to attempt to replicate Mifune's motion seems surprising, given both his take on Lee and his earlier citations of Mifune, such an elision also highlights the absence to which Lane draws attention in memorializing Mifune's passing. No one can "do it" like Mifune—not even his Japanese/American progeny.

For those of us in the audience who had worked with Nishikawa, however, Mifune's physical influence continued to register strongly in the stage performance. Nishikawa's own movement practice, on stage and in life, borrows from Mifune's aggressiveness and economy. At the 1994 New Arts Festival in Florida, for example, a Vietnam veteran accosted Nishikawa with a racist epithet. His response consisted of a sharp stance and a single gesture. Nishikawa stood ready to fight and, indeed, invited the man to do so. When I saw the citations of both Lee and Mifune in the performance, the lineage that formed this gestural vocabulary became quite clear. Even in the midst of *Mifune and Me* when the video technician failed to produce an anticipated clip, Nishikawa demonstrated this kind of deliberate and calculated movement. Straightening his body, Nishikawa raised one arm, bent at the elbow, with his index finger pointing toward the screen. Calling to the box in back of the audience, he addressed the technician directly. As Nishikawa directed the technician, palpable tension enveloped the performance space thanks to both Lane's posture and the slight acidity that he allowed to creep into his voice. Audience members shifted uncomfortably in their chairs as they watched the performer direct the very aggressive behavior he had heretofore described in words and brief physical enactments.

As I concentrate on Lane's performance, I recall his acting class. "Don't move so much," he always said. "Stronger," he encouraged. His own gesture has a rigorous economy, one that he teaches to his students. Everything from his stance to his voice to his eye contact suggests what he might call bushido—what I often thought of as machismo.

I wonder if I am the inheritor of a tradition that links Mifune and me, with Bruce and Lane serving as intermediaries. When I trained with Lane, I often questioned whether I could, as an avowedly effeminate man, convince an audience that I was a domineering heterosexual husband (the role for which Lane helped me to prepare).

More recently, I began to ponder whether or not I have some physical legacy from my grandfather, something that I may pass to future generations. I wonder if my own desire to embody my grandfather's Chineseness in some way necessarily reproduces heterosexual codes of conduct? Or can I reproduce differently?

How does Mifune's movement differ from those individuals doing similar, action-oriented films? Ackbar Abbas has traced Hong Kong cinema's development from the inspiration of Kurosawa to the realism of Bruce Lee to another point in martial arts film history: the kung fu comedy popularized by Jackie Chan. Abbas argues that this innovation in Hong Kong cinema results as part of a response to the relaxation of colonial tensions on the island during the late seventies. Chan's work certainly diverges from that of Mifune, whether in early films like *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (Yuen Woo-Ping, 1978) or later productions like *Supercop* (Stanley Tong, 1992). Chan displays a constant ingenuity in his technique that relies a great deal on improvisation, which contrasts with Mifune's well-controlled, economic body. A typical Jackie Chan sequence involves exchange: from one body to another, the energy transfers as a continual give (the punch, the kick) and take (the fall, the recovery).

Mifune's and Chan's movement styles vary markedly. "Whereas Bruce Lee kicked high, Jackie Chan kicks low. Lee broke through walls with a single punch; Chan hurts his hand when he strikes a wall."[33] In choosing one over another and further implementing that choice in the training of other bodies, Nishikawa creates a corporeal connection to a cultural legacy. The history that Nishikawa constructs moves through Toshiro Mifune and Bruce Lee to arrive at Nishikawa himself. Absent from this trajectory is the reigning gong fu superstar Jackie Chan. The reason for this omission, I would argue, is the fact that Chan represents "the smiling underdog instead of the earnest martial arts champion. . . . Chan absorbs punches, slips and falls, contorts his face and body in myriad ways. . . . [he] laughs at himself and moviegoers follow suit."[34] Nishikawa's performance, in contrast, favors planned confrontation that asserts an aggressive Japanese/American masculinity—swift, efficient and dangerous.

In setting himself up as this particular kind of effigy, Nishikawa's production and embodiment of Japaneseness become the signifiers through which the audience should read Japanese/American presence in the US. The investment in the body, however, allows us to defer the erosion of the corporeal by maintaining its affect in other bodies. The transmission of this affect reads as a certain kind of cultural continuity for a given audience. The dilemma is that this process is both painful and pleasurable. When Nishikawa moves, he embodies a particular cultural legacy that crosses over boundaries (American, Chinese and Japanese). By emphasizing corporeal circulations, the possibilities for asserting or critiquing cultural fantasies take center stage. The claiming and constructing of these cultural legacies also involves, as *Mifune and Me* illustrates, the assertion of particular aggressiveness.

Nishikawa turns to an arguably "Japanese" influence (Mifune) in order to deal with his own Asian/American status (e.g., difficulties with casting directors who desire a particular voice or comportment out of sync with Nishikawa's sense of masculinity). Given the increasing popularity of Asian imag-inations in the Hollywood

market at the moment, Asian/American corporeal citations have particular currency for discussing the transnational influences on movement practices as they become meaningful within specific national contexts. Understanding cultural inscriptions requires attention to the small ways in which not only signs but also actions pass from one person to another.

The Politics of Mobility

When I leave the performance, I think of my grandfather. What physical legacy do I have? A facial structure that resembles his, but lacks many of the other racial markers that constructed part of his Chineseness—I suppose I have that. Some knowledge of his traditions as well as "Chinese" rituals that never seemed to interest him, practiced through the body.

Insofar as I have trained my body to work like Lane's, I am also borrowing and constructing my Chineseness from a variety of other sources.

Joseph Roach's words might serve as a final coda for the two narratives I attempted to weave together in order to think through performances of mourning and Asian/American corporeal citations.

> Performances in general and funerals in particular are . . . rich in revealing contradictions: . . . they make publicly visible through symbolic action both the tangible existence of social boundaries and, at the same time, the contingency of those boundaries on fictions of identity, their shoddy construction out of inchoate otherness, and, consequently, their anxiety-inducing instability.[35]

Funerals highlight participants as social actors. They are processes that elicit both appropriate and uncomfortable gestures in recognition of the stillness of a specific body. Such movements have their own politics, shaped in part by convention and in part by the remembering of a particular person. As much as memory might condition a set of corporeal citations, movement itself might also set the conditions of possibility for memory. A politics of mobility recognizes this sort of interchange through which a single stance might instantly body forth a lineage of masculine icons that have crisscrossed the Pacific yet relegate other possibilities to obscurity.

Notes

[1] I use the slash here adapting the scholarship of David Palumbo-Liu and Laura Kang to indicate the instability among continental (Asian and American), cultural (diasporic), and racial-political (Asian American) formations. The specific phrasing I have used here is a

slight modification of Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 2. See also David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[2] I borrow these terms "meat" and "screen" from Sue-Ellen Case, whose work I elaborate on later in this essay. See *The Domain Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[3] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2.

[4] Ibid., 26.

[5] Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Roach, 2.

[8] Ibid., 39.

[9] As a scholar sympathetic to psychoanalysis, Phelan writes primarily of a bodily physicality that functions, in a Freudian and perhaps Lacanian paradigm, as a projection of the ego; it registers symptoms. However, within this dominant framework, Phelan allows the corporeal some agency. For example, in her chapter "Immobile Legs" in which she invents a dancer as a character enacting critical discourse, the motivating agent for the performer to discover psychoanalysis is the physical condition of her body, her "hip crack." While of course such an injury falls into the lexicon of identifiable symptoms, it remains outside of the arena of Freudian psychoanalytic narratives in which physical manifestations represent unconscious drives. Here, the corporeal motivates subjective decisions. Although such a suggestion of the body as agent finds itself quickly appropriated into a kind of "talking cure" (since the remainder of the dancer's story deals with cognitive processes—note taking, seminar discussions and the like—that compensate for her broken bones), Phelan's mention of a physical impetus maintains a play among body and mourning that I find useful.

[10] Case, 108.

[11] Ibid, 234.

[12] See Rachel Lee's work for a trenchant critique of this term: "Asian American Cultural Production in Asian-American Perspective." *boundary 2* 26.2 (1999): 231–254.

[13] Textual versions of this piece along with several other works by Nishikawa are available through the online Asian American drama database of Alexander Street Press: http://www.alexanderstreet2.com/aadrlive/.

[14] For background on Nishikawa's career and analyses of some of his other performances, see Emily Colburn, "Japanese Americans at Dachau: Intercultural Exchange in the US Tour of *The Gate of Heaven*." *Theatre Research International* 27.2 (2002): 201–212 and Esther Kim Lee, "Between the Personal and the Universal: Asian American Solo Performance from the 1970s to the 1990s." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6.3 (2003): 289–312.

[15] James D. Romero, "Asia Puts Some Pop Back into Culture," *Los Angeles Times,* June 15, 1997, E4.

[16] Rone Tempest, "Rolling with the Punches: After the US Success of 'Rush Hour,' Action Hero Jackie Chan is Still his Happy-Go-Lucky Self," *Los Angeles Times,* December 27, 1998, Calendar 38.

[17] See Jeff Yang, *Eastern Standard Time: A Guide to Asian Influence on American Culture: from Astro Boy to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997). Scholars have also helped map this terrain of cultural imbrication. Examples include Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001) and Susan Leigh Foster, *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), which includes a section on Asian influences on improvisation in twentieth-century American dance.

[18] Meaghan Morris, "Learning From Bruce Lee: Pedagogy and Political Correctness in Martial Arts Cinema." *Metro* 117 (1998): 10.

[19] The mise-en-scene is otherwise bare, save the large screen.

[20] Both popular and scholarly works on the genre demonstrate the emphasis on masculinity. See, for example, Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: BFI, 1997), *Great Martial Arts Movies: From Bruce Lee to Jackie Chan and More* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 2000), and Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003). However, "martial heroines" constitute an important subgenre as Zhang Zhen and others have noted. See Zhang Zhen, "Bodies in the Air: The Magic of Science and the Fate of the Early 'Martial Arts' Film in China," in *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics*, eds. Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2005). Also, see Dai Jinhua's comments on the disappearance of the "woman warrior" in the 1980s and 1990s in "Order/ Anti-Order: Representation of Identity in Hong Kong Action Movies," in *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, eds. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press and Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005).

[21] On this issue, see David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

[22] I thank Meaghan Morris for this observation.

[23] The Hong Kong film industry also establishes a precedent for the current wave of actor/ martial arts experts led by Jackie Chan. This issue receives attention later in this essay.

[24] Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 29.

[25] May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 66.

[26] David Desser, *The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 29.

[27] Roach, 36.

[28] Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 162.

[29] Ibid., 103–104.

[30] Hubert Niogret, "Entretien avec Toshiro Mifune." *Positif* 352 (1990): 21. I have translated this line from the original French.

[31] Because battle sequences in martial arts films use fight choreographers, I frame my analysis with work done in dance studies on movement. Susan Leigh Foster has elaborated a semiological structure for analyzing contemporary Western choreography that I find useful in this context. She evaluates a dance through five categories: "(1) the frame—the way the dance sets itself apart as a unique event; (2) the mode of representation—the way the dance refers to the world; (3) the style—the way the dance achieves an individual entity in the world and its genre; (4) the vocabulary—the basic units or 'moves' from which the dance is made; and (5) the syntax—the rules governing the selection and combination of moves." Susan Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 59.

[32] See David Desser's *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* for more information on Japanese filmmaking in the 1960s.

[33] Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover, *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema* (New York: Verso, 1999), 115. Chan's movement has been widely discussed. See, for example, Kwai-Cheung Lo, "Muscles and Subjectivity: A Short History of the Masculine Body in Hong Kong Popular Culture." *Camera Obscura* 39 (1996): 104–125 and Aaron Anderson, "Violent Dances in Martial Arts Films." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 44 (2001): http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc44.2001/index.html.

[34] Stokes and Hoover, 117.

[35] Roach, 39.