STAGING "THE ETHNIC FAMIILY" IN AUGUST WILSON'S *FENCES* (1983) AND PHILIP KAN GOTANDA'S *THE WASH* (1985)

Ayman Ibrahim

Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to study the concept of "ethnic family" in both August Wilson's *Fences* (1983) and Philip Kan Gotanda's *The Wash* (1985). The idea of the family has a deep and complex association with ethnic identity. In this paper, two plays by August Wilson and Philip Kan Gotanda serve as the focal points for re-thinking the family in ethnic drama. Both plays date from the mid-80s, a period which highlights debates about family values in contemporary society. The use of family themes in these plays is complex. On the one hand, both plays feature an emphasis on the ethnic family as a unit of cultural identity. At the same time, though, both Wilson and Gotanda use themes of the family to "cross over" from ethnic-specific audiences to more mainstream venues. For the two playwrights discussed in this paper, the family serves as a political tool and not just an arena for their "realism." As the themes and production of *Fences* and *The Wash* suggest, the ideology of the family serves a complex double function: on the one hand, the family serves as an extremely powerful way of mobilizing ethnic solidarity, while it also addresses a broad audience through the idea that as human beings we are all part of the same family. The family, then, manages to deflect issues of race and gender, even as it is deeply imbedded in them. The two playwrights discussed suggest how family dramas articulate a double-edged process: on the one hand domesticating issues of racial conflict, and on the other hand transforming ethnic-specific discourses into national or "American" ones.

التقديم المسرحي "للأسرة العرقية" في مسرحية أسوار لأوجست ولسون ومسرحية الغسيل لفيليب كان جواتندا

أيمن إبراهيم الحلفاوي

الملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة مفهوم"الأسرة العرقية" في مسرحية أسوار (١٩٨٣) للكاتب أوجست ولسون ومسرحية الغسيل (١٩٨٥) للكاتب فيليب كان جوتندا، اللذان ينتميان إلى المسرح العرقي في أمريكا: إذ ينتمي أوجست ولسون إلى السلالة الأفروأمريكية، بينما ينتمي فيليب كان جوتندا إلى سلالة اليابانيين الأمريكيين. وتلعب فكرة الأسرة العرقية دورًا رئيسًا في الأدب العرقي لارتباطها بالهوية العرقية. وتعد هاتان المسرحيتان من أعظم ما كتب ولسون وجوتندا إذ إنهما ظهرا في منتصف الثمانينيات، تلك الفترة التي شهدت جدلا بخصوص أهمية دور الأسرة في المجتمع الحديث. لذا ظهرت أمثلة لمسرحيات عرقية تولى اهتمامًا شديدًا لدور الأسرة ومنها مسرحية أسوار لأوجست ولسون ومسرحية الغسيل لفيليب كان جوتندا مما أدى إلى انتقال كلا الكاتبين من إطار المسارح العرقية إلى المسارح العامة. وتلعب أيديولوجية الأسرة في مسرح الكاتبين دورًا كبيرًا لأنها تُعد أداة قوية لإثبات التضامن العرقي بالإضافة إلى فكرة الترابط الإنساني لأننا جميعا جزء من الكيان البشرى، وبهذه الطريقة فهي تلغي فكرة الصراع العنصري.

The main aim of this paper is to study the concept of "ethnic family" in both August Wilson's *Fences* (1983) and Philip Kan Goanda's *The Wash* (1985) in a way that reveals the comparative elements between the two plays. Historically, ethnic theatre existed from the late eighteenth century in the United Stats. David Krasner mentions that for the first groups of settlers in the United States, such as French in Louisiana, the Italians in San Francisco and the Chinese in San Francisco, these theatres served two purposes at that time; it created a social center and it evoked remembrances of homeland (18). Therefore, ethnic theatre can be seen as: "theatre by and for minority communities, whose cultural heritages distinguish them from the Anglo-American mainstream" (Banham 327). Johnnella Butler mentions that ethnic theatre tends to seek, identify, and assert the cultural realities of these groups (xx).

Ethnic theatre reached the peak in the early twentieth century due to a huge wave of immigration to America at the turn of the century. Maxine Schwarts Seller points out that the development of ethnic theatre was closely connected with immigration as a social and cultural process (4).So, it focused on the immigrants' social situations and on their conflicts and struggles as well as provided education to fulfill the immigrants' intellectual needs. For these reasons, the major ethnic theatres that were created established primarily by ethnic groups in America. This paper attempts to study the concept of family in two ethnic groups. The first is the Afro-Americans as represented in one of the most important writers in this group, namely August Wilson (1945-2005). The second ethnic group is the Asian-Americans as represented in the theatre of Philip Kan Gotanda (1951-).

The idea of the family has a deep and complex association with ethnic identity. It is not mere coincidence, for instance, that Bonnie TuSmith gives the title of *All My Relatives* to her discussion of ethnic American literatures, and that Deborah McDowell says that she is "reading family matters" by analyzing the politics of gender in African American cultural criticism. The idea of the family, in short, tends to arise whenever feelings of national belonging are at stake. As Paul Gilroy argues, "family has come to stand for community, for race, and for nation. It is a short-cut to solidarity" (*Small Acts* 203).

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In this paper, two plays by August Wilson and Philip Kan Gotanda serve as the focal points for re-thinking the family in ethnic drama. Both Wilson's *Fences* (1983) and Gotanda's *The Wash* (1985) date from the mid-80s, a period which highlights debates about family values in contemporary society. The use of family themes in these plays is complex. On the one hand, both plays feature an emphasis on the ethnic family as a unit of cultural identity. At the same time, both Wilson and Gotanda use themes of the family to "cross over" from ethnic-specific audiences to more mainstream venues.

Although humans continue to live by profoundly family-based values, recent scholarship has critiqued the view of the family as a "natural" or fundamental unit of society. Feminist scholars in particular have taken issue with the ideology of the family for the way that it perpetuates traditional gender roles and institutionalizes the oppression of women. Despite these critiques, however, the idea of the family continues to shape and define racial and ethnic discourse to a marked degree. This focus on the family as the site of ethnic identity raises the vexing problem of cultural essentialism in the service of an oppositional discourse. Indeed, Paul Gilroy wonders if "the growing centrality of the family trope within black political and academic discourse points to the emergence of a distinctive and emphatically post-national variety of racial essentialism" (*Black Atlantic* 99). Gilroy suggests that we think of this family preoccupation in terms of a "flexible essentialism"- a concept that is useful for examining the ways in which minority playwrights have parlayed the theme of the family into a language that speaks to both "mainstream" and "culturally specific" audiences.

The emphasis on the ethnic family in contemporary discourse can be traced in the history of contemporary theater. Family relationships figure centrally in a great number of plays by minority writers, including the following: canonical works like Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, the seminal plays of Frank Chin that helped galvanize the Asian American studies movement, and the series of August Wilson plays that explore African American experiences at various moments in history. In all these works, representations of the family function as a microcosm of a particular

culture or ethnicity. The family, in other words, signifies a group identity- one with obvious associations with the larger group constructs of ethnicity and race. It is not, for example, just a coincidence of language that terms such as "brother" and "sister" are used to designate membership in particular racial and ethnic groups. Indeed, these family metaphors are central to the interpellation of the ethnic subject, both because of the "biological" ties implied and because of the more general bond of a presumed shared experience. Commercial blockbusters like *M. Butterfly* and *for colored girls* are unusual works not only because of their box office returns, but also in their subject matter; unlike these plays, the vast majority of ethnic dramas center on domestic situations.

This preoccupation with the family is of course not unique to ethnic theater; it rather has been a defining trait of American theater since the emergence of "legitimate" drama with the work of Eugene O'Neill in the ' teens and twenties. Indeed, the history of canonical American drama could be traced as a history of domestic realism, beginning with O'Neill and encompassing the work of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and even postmodern writers like Sam Shepard.

If the family has been central to the staging of "American-ness," it has been all the more important to those in marginalized positions whose cultural legitimacy is in question. Indeed, the issue of family intensifies for

those subjects who are trying to define a distinct place in American culture-- both similar to, and different from, other "families". The family is a site that marks cultural differences- language or dialect spoken, food eaten- yet it is also a marker of cultural similarities, a set of shared relationships that function as a basic unit of society. Thus the family, a fundamental organizing principle of identity, mediates between private and public spheres, and between constructs of self and community. As such, it can be deployed in the service of any number of group identities, both those in positions of cultural dominance, and those who pose a challenge to that power. The idea of the family, then, is just as important to ethnic-specific concerns and agendas of political resistance as it is to hegemonic or "universal" ones.

For playwrights of color, for whom the family functions as a primary site of identity awareness and construction, the genre of domestic realism is very much a viable means of staging acts of self-definition. Though this emphasis on the family is not surprising, the prevalence of realistic formal structures—on various versions of the "well-made play"—deserves closer examination. Realism has frequently come under attack, particularly by feminist theorists, for being a politically retrograde genre. Jill Dolan, for instance, claims that the realist genre is "a conservative force that reproduces and reinforces dominant culture relationships" (108). However, one tends to believe that playwrights of color frequently use the genre of domestic realism precisely to re-think and interrogate dominant culture relationships. This is not to say that all such dramas are radical in their politics, or even that they put forth an explicit agenda for social change. Often, it is conservative middle class norms that are advocated, or there is a perpetuation of stereotypical gender roles. Nonetheless, the staging of the minority family itself represents a challenge to dominant culture norms, insofar as the image of the "family" can no longer be construed as implicitly white and middle class. The American theater historically has excluded realistic representations of minority families, often relegating people of color to less "legitimate" genres . The theme of the family, then, is riddled with contradictions as a form of oppositional discourse.

August Wilson's work is useful for thinking about issues of the family in contemporary theater. Through a series of plays dating from the mid '80s to the mid '90s, Wilson has established himself as a major playwright in both ethnic-specific and mainstream contexts. Among his many critical accolades are two Pulitzer Prizes, one for *Fences (*1987) and the other for *The Piano Lesson* (1990). Wilson has achieved commercial success as well on Broadway. With all of this acclaim, Wilson's work has clear links to the marketing of ethnicity. Without denying this commercial success, however, one argues for a consideration of Wilson as a playwright who speaks particularly well of the issues of regionalism and family politics that are the focus of this paper.

Just as Wilson works the boundary between regional theater and Broadway, all of his plays register a concern with both "local" and "national"; communities. With his use of black vernacular and his predominantly African American characters, Wilson might be perceived as addressing an ethnic-specific audience. At the same time, however, Wilson's dramas always gesture towards a national historical context. Wilson's ongoing concern is to write a cycle of plays depicting black life in the twentieth century, set in an American city modeled after Pittsburgh. He writes carefully composed prefaces to all his plays that ground his characters in specific periods and places. Though critics have debated whether Wilson is employing the methods of dramatic realism or deploying a black style of

"blues poetics," the point remains that all of Wilson's plays foreground an active process of history telling and re-making. Wilson is not composing a "new" African American history that can be cordoned off from mainstream historical narratives; rather, it is his explicit intention to revise American history in light of the African American experience.

Nowhere is the national scope of Wilson's work more apparent than in his being honored with two Pulitzer Prizes. Since 1964, the Pulitzer in drama has been awarded according to the following criteria: "For a distinguished play by an American author, preferably original in its source and dealing with American life" (Adler xi). The Pulitzer, then, suggests criteria both of art and social relevance; as such, it is arguably the highest form of cultural sanction that a playwright can receive. Wilson, having received two of these awards in four years, clearly holds a position of mainstream prominence, even while he addresses the specific concerns of black audiences. Wilson is not the first African American playwright to receive the Pulitzer: Charles Gordone won in 1970 for *No Place to Be Somebody* and Charles Fuller won in 1982 for *A Soldier's Play*. Thomas Adler suggests that both these plays employ a similar strategy: they "rely on conventional, easily recognizable forms—the gangster movie in the first, the courtroom melodrama in the second-used in unconventional ways to dramatize the dilemma blacks face in a white society" (83). Wilson, through his

manipulation of "kitchen sink realism," both continues this strategy of representation and takes it to a new level. His work is often praised for making the ethnic-specific experience "universal" and it is my purpose to examine this cultural transformation in more depth. The specifics of Wilson's themes and dramatic methods - in particular his focus on the family—have worked strategically to mediate between different audiences and lend him this status of "universality."

Wilson's 1987 drama, *Fences*, is an ideal vehicle for thinking about boundaries of many kinds- between audiences, races, genders, and generations. Like *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson's later Pulitzer-winning drama, *Fences* focuses on the life of an African American family. The action unfolds during the late 1950s and centers on the figure of Troy Maxson: a husband, father, garbage collector, and former baseball player who was "before his time" in terms of the racial integration of professional athletics. His wife Rose, his war-ravaged brother Gabriel, his friend Bono, and his sons Lyons and Cory make up the core group of characters who serve as foils for Troy. With its naturalistic style and its focus on problems of fatherhood and masculinity, *Fences* has drawn numerous comparisons to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and has been praised for its sensitive portrayal of black family life. The play's central metaphor, the fence or division, is emblematic of the differences between people, yet Wilson's popularity with diverse audiences suggests the ability to use the fence as a bridge as well as a dividing line. The setting of the play emphasizes this idea: the entire play takes place not inside the Maxson house but in the small dirt yard that fronts it. This physical border zone between inner and outer worlds is the site upon which various conflicts within the family are played out.

Wilson carefully deploys the fence metaphor to mark spaces both of exclusion and inclusion. On the one hand, the play dramatizes the losses and suffering that occur as a result of various "fences" that divide people from one another. We see, for example, the fence of institutional racism and Troy's bitterness over his failed baseball career, and we see the fence of gender roles in Rose's frustration over years spent in a self-sacrificing marriage. Perhaps

most significantly we see the pain inflicted when fences reproduce themselves, as when Troy forbids his son Cory to accept a football scholarship because he thinks racism will block Cory's success just as he thinks it blocked his own. As Michael Awkward has argued, Wilson's play is deeply "infused with a poetics of . . . boundary breaking" in its poignant portrayal of characters whose lives are circumscribed by various social, economic, and inter-personal barriers (223). At the same time, though, Wilson's play intimates that there are some fences worth keeping; much of the play's dramatic energy emerges in the tension between knowing when to break free of fences and knowing when to hold on to them.

The most visible fence is the literal one that Troy, at Rose's urging, is building to mark off their property. The fence represents the integrity of the
Maxson family, an integrity which functions as the locus of identification for the characters in the play. Although Wilson introduces a number of traumas that threaten to break apart the Maxson family, he always allows these conflicts to be managed or transcended in a way that allows the perpetuation of the family line. Troy's affair with Alberta Taylor is perhaps the most potentially devastating example of such a threat, but the affair results neither in a divorce where Troy's "original" family is replaced by a "new" one, nor in a situation of multiple families where Troy shuttles back and forth between two lives. Instead, Wilson swiftly removes Alberta from the dramatic action by having her die in the process of giving birth, despite the fact that she is twice described as being "big and healthy." Even more importantly, Rose ends up taking in the baby which Troy has fathered as a member of her own family, albeit telling Troy: "From right now. . . this child got a mother. But you a womanless man" (79).With this statement, Rose asserts a boundary between herself and Troy, but she does not threaten a dissolution of the family unit.

It is difficult to over-emphasize Wilson's rhetoric of family unity. In a play filled with lengthy and carefully crafted speeches, one of the most powerful is Troy's lecture to Cory on the ethics of fatherhood. After Troy forbids Cory from accepting a football scholarship, Cory expresses his frustration by asking his father, "How come you ain't never liked me?" (37). Troy responds with a lengthy speech:

> Like you? I go out of here every morning.. . bust my butt . . .
> putting up with them crackers every day . . . cause I like you?
> You about the biggest fool I ever saw.
> (Pause.)
> It's my job. It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house. . . sleep you behind on my bedclothes. . . fill you belly up with my food. cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you! Let's get this straight right here. . . before it go along any further. . . I ain't got to like you. Mr. Rand don't give me my money come payday cause he likes me. He gives me cause he owe me. . . . Don't you try and go through life worrying about if somebody like you or not. You best be making sure they doing right by you. You understand what I'm saying boy? (*Fences* 38)

In this scene, Troy's rigid refusal to let Cory play ball suggests, among other things, that he still suffers from his own sense of frustrated desire. In other words, the speech reveals more about Troy than it does about Cory. His impassioned speech on parental responsibility, however, engenders audience sympathy more than it invites analysis. Indeed, Troy's larger-than-life presence looms over the play and drives its action, encouraging the audience to have compassion for him even as he reveals his deepest flaws. Reviewing the Broadway production for the New York Times, Frank Rich calls attention to the power of Troy as played by James Earl Jones: "Such is the long shadow Mr. Jones's father casts in '*Fences'* that theatergoers from all kinds of families may find him impossible to escape" (Rich). In the 1980s, such an emphasis on family ties - especially on the notion of obligatory responsibility- resonates with the mainstream political rhetoric of "family values" and media attention to the erosion of the black family.

The importance of family is underscored in almost black mythic proportions by the play's final scene, in which the various family members- including the estranged Cory- come together on the occasion of Troy's funeral. In this scene, Wilson again introduces the possibility of breaking family links, only to confirm them. The scene centers on the next generation of Maxsons: Cory, who has just come home from the Marines, and Raynell, the daughter of Troy and Alberta. Cory threatens to boycott his father's funeral because he finally wants to "say no to him" (92), yet a powerful speech from Rose and an encounter with Raynell lead him to change his mind. Rose's impassioned plea- which does not ignore Troy's flaws- vehemently defends Troy's good faith efforts to "do right" by his son. She emphasizes her similar feeling of obligation to raise Raynell properly: " I'm gonna do her just like your daddy did you. . . I'm gonna give her the best of what's in me" (98). Then, when Cory and Raynell join together to sing the blues song Troy used to sing, it is as though Troy's voice has been resurrected through his children.

Indeed, the play ends on a note of spiritual transcendence as Gabriel calls for St. Peter to open the gates of heaven for Troy, and then does a "slow, strange dance, eerie and life-giving" (*Fences* 101). By the end of the play, Wilson has left the material world of back-porch storytelling and evoked the world of myth. It is as though the physical, material world can no longer contain all the resonances of "homeland" that Wilson wants to evoke. Gabriel's dance, which is described by Wilson as "a dance of atavistic signature and ritual," is typical of Wilson's attempt to evoke "Africa" in the midst of a Western-styled naturalism. With this gesture, Wilson calls attention to the temporal, geographical, and spiritual displacements that haunt his characters, for it is in reaction to such dislocations that the Maxson family feels compelled to fence in their world. More particularly, however, the transcendent ending of the play aptly illustrates what Paul Gilroy calls "the mystic reconstruction of an ideal heterosexual family" in contemporary black cultural discourse (*Small Acts* 205).

Wilson's focus on the family allows him to mediate the biggest barrier of all- the fence of race. If Wilson's copious awards are any indication, the play manages not to alienate a mainstream audience, but to fence them in with the Maxson family. Indeed, the subtitle in the advertisement for the Broadway production reads "The Legacy of an American Family"- a phrasing which pitches the play towards a mainstream audience by its non-ethnic specific terms. Although race is a central issue in *Fences*, it is also the issue that the play carefully negotiates in its concentration on domestic conflicts. Within the bounds of the Maxson family, racial difference is not an issue. Wilson makes clear, however, that his characters live in a race-based society, and he seems conscious of crossing racial lines himself with the presentation of his play to theater audiences. In terms of dramatic structure, the play is framed by competing discourses of racial representation. The final scene, with the singing of Troy's blues and Gabriel's dance, has been interpreted by many critics as an example of Wilson's Afro-centered performance mode. In contrast, the play's opening scene evokes the racial stereotypes of the dominant culture and suggests the complex discourse around race that Wilson puts into play.

The opening scene has Troy and his friend Bono discussing one of their co-workers at the garbage collection company:

> BONO: Troy, you ought to stop that lying!
> TROY: I ain't lying! The nigger had a watermelon this big. (He indicates with his hands.) Talking about. . . "What watermelon,
> Mr. Rand?" I liked to fell out! "What watermelon, Mr. Rand?". . And it sitting there big as life.
> BONO: What did Mr. Rand say?
> TROY: Ain't said nothing. Figure if the nigger too dumb to know he carrying a watermelon, he wasn't gonna get much sense out of him. Trying to hide that great big old watermelon under his coat. Afraid to let the white man see him carry it home.
> BONO: I'm like you. . . I ain't got no time for them kind of People. (*Fences* 1-2)

Clearly this scene is quite disturbing in its use of stereotypical imagery, yet

Wilson's use of this racist "folk" caricature is not uncritical. Bono's abrupt remark-"I ain't got no time for them kind of people"- acts a dismissal of the watermelon-eating shuffler, and the conversation then shifts abruptly to other matters.

Michael Awkward has argued that this scene recalls the forms and gestures of minstrelsy only to repudiate them. The scene, he says,

> ... attempts to bracket or set containing boundaries around traditional notions of black theatrical representation, thereby insisting that what follows will not conform to the nonsense syllables and actions characteristic of black participation in the theater of America historically. (216)

One questions whether Wilson can effectively repudiate minstrelsy within the naturalistic framework of this scene; indeed, by placing such stereotypical imagery at the very opening of his drama, Wilson risks re-inscribing the very structures of oppression that contain the lives of his characters. At the same time, however, it is also clear that Wilson presents a complex portrait of "blackness" by juxtaposing different discourses. After dismissing the watermelon incident, Troy and Bono discuss the issue of racial inequities at the workplace- in direct contrast to the shuffling Uncle Tom image just evoked. Troy tells Bono how he asked Mr. Rand, "How come you got all whites driving and the colored lifting?" (217).With this question- and his subsequent victory when he is promoted to the position of driver- Wilson demonstrates that racial re-presentation is a central concern of the play.

Wilson's great strength as a dramatist, however, lies not in his power of direct social critique but in his sensitive recordings of intra-racial relationships. Throughout the play we hear about racism and racial conflict in a way that frames the Maxson family but ultimately does not define it. Troy, the play's chief talker, gives voice to problems of racial difference when he speaks of unequal treatment at work or the racial barriers in professional sports. Although these racialized situations work themselves into the spoken world of the

play, however, the dramatic focus remains on the Maxson family and their internal conflicts. For example, Troy's treatment at work seems secondary to his father-son battles with Cory, his conflicts with Rose, and the responsibility he feels towards his brother Gabriel. Clearly these private relationships are haunted by racially-driven experiences and histories, yet Wilson traces these effects indirectly rather than stage open racial confrontations.

Throughout the play, Wilson seems torn between portraying African American experiences from an "insider's" perspective and offering an analysis of how such subjects lack access to means of representation. By keeping African Americans in the center of his theatrical spotlight, Wilson is perhaps struggling to allow the idea of black self-representation to be realized more fully. Indeed, the play's treatment of race can perhaps be summed up by the contrasting images of the opening and closing scenes: race is both a set of social and political constructs imposed by the majority culture, and it is also that which can be re-defined to suit a different agenda. Thus Wilson's much-discussed "realism" is engaged not simply in documenting a world but in reproducing it to new ends.

It may seem as though Wilson's family drama and his discourse on racism operate on different levels of representation or at times even compete with one another for attention. His family politics and racial politics converge, however, with the idea of cultural ownership. Cultural ownership foregrounds the socio-economic dimensions of race-based hierarchies. For African Americans, whose history in U.S. culture is inseparable from the system of slavery, the idea of cultural ownership is particularly significant. In writing a cycle of plays about the experiences of African Americans in the twentieth century, Wilson is trying to remember the emotional and psychological legacy of slavery- the effects of losing one's homeland, cultural practices, and sense of identity. In interviews, Wilson has stressed the importance of remembering the "blues" of slavery: "Blacks in America want to forget about slavery -- the stigma, the shame. That's the wrong move" (Freedman 40). Wilson's *Fences*, which centers on the process of defining the Maxson property, is on one level a form of re-claiming what slavery has taken away, and throughout the play Wilson reinforces the significance of ownership and the socio-economic legacy of slavery.

One of *Fences*' primary themes is the issue of ownership and profits, whether the arena be baseball, garbage collection, or even grocery stores. In this play, no sector of the economy can be separated from the (re)production of racial hierarchies, and in particular it is the question of the "service" economy that interests Wilson. Wilson has been a vocal critic of the sports and entertainment industries for exploiting African Americans: "I think it's interesting that the two roads open to blacks for 'full participation' are entertainment and sports. . . . I don't think that they're the correct roads. . . . I can say that the athletic scholarship was actually a way of exploiting. Now you've got two million kids who think that they're going to play in the NBA" (Savran 300). *Fences* is a play that explores and critiques the power of consumer culture in entertainment, sports, and other arenas.

The first act of the play is saturated with references to consumerism-- the television Cory begs his father to buy, the popularity of major league baseball, and the A & P where Cory works after school. Wilson presents the constant struggle to try to control the means of production in a white-owned society, and lets this theme reverberate through various details of everyday life. When Troy and Rose debate the advantages of shopping at the neighborhood grocery store versus the A&P, it is not simply a question of dollars and cents that the conversation raises:

> TROY: The A&P ain't never done nothing for me. I spends my money where I'm treated right. I go down to Bella, say, "I need a loaf of bread, I'll pay you Friday." She give it to me. What sense that make when I got money to go and spend it somewhere else and ignore the person who done right by me? That ain't in the Bible.
>
> ROSE: We ain't talking about what's in the Bible. What sense it make to shop there when she overcharge?
>
> TROY: You shop where you want to. I'll do my shopping where the people been good to me. (*Fences* 7)

This conversation about money thus evolves into an exchange about culture and community; of course the major chain store can offer lower prices than the small independent venue, and once again Wilson shows the black-owned venture in danger of disappearing.

The relationship of race to problems of economics is a thread that runs through Wilson's work as a whole. The play which brought him to national attention, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, is set in the 1920s and pivots on the problem of the recording industry's appropriation and exploitation of black blues artists. In this story of cultural appropriation, it is telling that one of the band members uses a metaphor of consumption to express how black Americans have been written out of history: "The colored man is the leftovers. . . . The white man knows you just a leftover. 'Cause he the one who done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don't know that we been took and made history out of" (444). One of Wilson's other celebrated works revisits this theme of consumption. *The Piano Lesson*, set in the Depression, dramatizes the struggle over a century-old family heirloom and its connection to the days of slavery. This family is directly haunted by questions of cultural ownership, for the piano's history marks the era when blacks were relegated to the status of property: in antebellum America the family's great-grandmother and grandfather were traded for the

piano, and the family's father had died to retrieve it. Meanwhile, Boy Willie and his sister Berniece are at odds over whether to sell the piano to buy the land that their slave ancestors once worked. These are only a few examples of Wilson's interest in broad concerns of economics; indeed, his body of work is striking for its ability to integrate detailed portraits of African American private life with a critique of the public forces that shape that life. In particular, Wilson sets up a conflict where acts of buying and selling threaten to erode the integrity of African American history, culture, and community values, and yet this same arena of consumer culture is the only available means for his characters to achieve self-empowerment.

Given Wilson's sustained critique of consumer culture, his own status as a commercially successful playwright deserves examination. A number of controversies have erupted around the production of Wilson's plays. Robert Burstein, for example, has been a vocal critic of director Richards and the marketing of Wilson's work. Criticizing the blurring of nonprofit and commercial theater, Brustein laments what he calls "'McTheater'—the use of sequential non-profit institutions as launching pads and tryout franchises for the development of Broadway products and the enrichment of artistic personnel" (28). Thus Brustein rejects the notion that Wilson and Richards

are doing regional theater any kind of service and points to commercialism as being the goal of their efforts. One tends to query, however, what exactly is at stake here. Wilson and Richards are not the first or only ones to blur the boundary between regional theater and Broadway; the gap has been closing for quite some time. Furthermore, the commercial success of Wilson's plays on Broadway has only increased their longevity on the regional circuit, and has thereby provided such venues with increased audience attendance and community interest. Without getting into the details of what is clearly a personal feud between Brustein and Richards (Richards succeeded the former as director of the Yale Rep and Dean of the Yale School of Drama), it is striking that Brustein's comments point to one of Wilson's central concerns— not the family, not history, but the idea of ownership over the act of cultural production. In embracing the commercial market as well as the nonprofit one, Wilson and Richards have built a formidable theatrical dynasty, one in which they have assumed an enviable control over the marketing of their own productions.

The controversy over the proposed film version of *Fences* once again engages the issue of cultural ownership. Echoing some of the debates over

Stephen Spielberg's adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the struggle around *Fences* reinscribes the economic and cultural questions that are central to the play's themes. In his essay, "I Want a Black Director," Wilson describes his frustration with Paramount Pictures' refusal to hire a black director, and defends the

reasons why he feels that only a black director could fully understand the play and its adaptation to film. Claiming a distinct history and culture for African Americans, Wilson rejects the notion that a white director could do the project justice. In Wilson's words, "the job requires someone who shares the specifics of the culture of black Americans," a culture which he describes as being "honed out of the black experience and fired in the kiln of slavery and survival." It is once again this history of dispossession that seems to make the issue of ownership so important for Wilson. Thus he asserts: "Therein lies the crux of the matter as it relates to Paramount Pictures and the film *Fences*—whether we as blacks are going to have control over our own culture and its products." Michael Awkward has critiqued Wilson's rather monolithic views of both "black" and "white" cultures and has explored the ironies of Wilson's protectionist stance when *Fences* itself asks us to question the validity of boundaries and separate spheres. One attempts to show, however, that the idea of cultural ownership is an ongoing concern of Wilson's which started long before his encounter with the film industry.

Not only do all of Wilson's plays express a concern with black self- possession, but his working relationship with Richards functions as the practical expression of cultural ownership. Interestingly, Richards is a director who first came to national attention for directing the original Broadway production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959,
which was the first dramatic portrait of the African American family to gain a mainstream audience. In a sense, Richards has built his career around the production of the African American family; both he and Wilson perceive their relationship in racially-specific terms. Wilson has repeatedly claimed that Richards's presence on the set frees him from anxieties about the misinterpretation of his works; this trust stems not only from admiration of Richards' artistic sensibilities, but also from a perception of racial, cultural, and gendered affiliation. Richards describes his first rehearsals with Wilson and Wilson's subsequent comment that "it wasn't necessary for him to sit in the room and check me because we were both coming from the same place" (Shannon 126). Wilson has spoken of

Richards as being a special kind of mentor: "He is a kind of surrogate parent. . . he was a man from the same generation of men I was writing about. I think that's why we took root so immediately" (Freedman). By using a family metaphor to describe his relationship with Richards, Wilson once again shows how racial solidarity frequently expresses itself in domestic terms. The ideology of the family suggests not only biological and cultural ties, but also the idea of property or ownership that is so central to Wilson's work.

August Wilson's work suggests how a minority artist can work the lines of ethnic solidarity to gain control over the means of production. The paper

turns now to the status of ethnic-specific theater companies, an important subset of the regional venue, for these organizations are founded upon the idea of cultural ownership and community service. Established in response to the difficulty many minority artists face in working professionally, such companies serve the interests of a particular ethnic audience, enable minority writers to have their work produced, and feature the work of minority actors, directors, and technicians. Given the historical time frame of this project, from the 1970s to the present, one would like to focus on the rise of Asian American theater during this period; it offers a useful counterpoint to the work of August Wilson, who is working in the much more established area of African American theater.

The Asian Americans can be looked upon as one of the major ethnic groups in U.S. that had a strong presence in the cultural, social and political mainstream values. Sau Wong indicates that since its inception in the late 1960s, as a part of the ethnic studies agenda, Asian American literary studies have gained increasing institutional recognition across the United States(3). Elaine Kim sees that one of the serious problems facing them and other racial minority writers in America has been that many readers insist on viewing their writing as sociological or anthropological statements about the group (xv).

Josephine Lee sees that the circumstances which forced the Asians to flee to the United States have been completely different from those immigrant groups (*Between Immigration* 49). Nevertheless, both African Americans and Asian Americans have been historically excluded from the full status of being American by

using some racial actions such as the barring of citizenship and voting rights, unequal access to education, laws prohibiting land ownership and miscegenation, as well as by anti-immigration restrictions and oppressive labor practices. So, Ronald Takaki mentions that from the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act until after WWII, anti-immigration laws and other forms of institutionalized discrimination severely limited the numbers of Asian immigrants, changed the nature of their respective communities, and marked their status as Americans (90).

In particular one will discuss the partial "crossover" status of Japanese American playwright Philip Kan Gotanda, who is Wilson's contemporary and a writer who deploys similar themes of family and community in his work. From the beginning of his career, Gotand's works have been successfully presented and produced at both Asian American theatres and mainstream venues across the United States. His longtime friend and fellow David Henry Hwang comments:

> If August Wilson is deemed to be the voice of African American, then undoubtedly Philip Kan Gotanda is the chronicler of the Japanese American experience…, if you look at the body of Philip's work, you find an extraordinary range of subjects, mediums and aesthetic approaches. (qtd. in Hong, *The Philip Kan Gotanda Chronicles* 1-2)

Though Gotanda has gained some national recognition for his work through his experience in mainstream regional venues, he established his reputation along regional and ethnic lines through his work in Asian American theaters in California. Speaking of his work with these theaters in the early 1980s, Gotanda says, "For the first time we were in charge, and we set the rules . . .. At times it was rough, at times it was raw, but at least it was ours" (Berson 32).

Asian American theater companies - and Asian American drama itself -are relatively recent phenomena. Possibly the first Asian American play was *The Submission of Rosie Moy*, written by Gladys Li in 1928 (Houston 21); Asian American theater on a larger scale,

however, did not develop until the 1960s and '70s, when ethnic-specific companies were created to nurture Asian American productions. The oldest of these companies, East West Players, was founded in Los Angeles in 1965. Other theaters soon followed: Kumu Kahua in Honolulu, the Northwest Asian American Theatre Company in Seattle, the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco, and the Pan Asian Repertory Theater in New York. Some of the more recently founded companies, such as the Angel Island Theatre Company in Chicago and Theater Mu in Minneapolis, reflect the shifting demographics of Asian American settlement and frustrate assumptions of Asian American theater being strictly a regional phenomenon limited to California or New York City. Although some, including playwright David Henry Hwang, have questioned the ultimate longetivity of such ethnic-specific theaters, the growth of the movement would seem to indicate that we are far from being at a place where the need for such venues has vanished. Despite the occasional "breakthrough" phenomenon of a performer such as Margaret Cho, the need for Asian American self-representation and self-production is still pressing.

As in mainstream regional theater, the theme of the family has been a hallmark of ethnic specific theater. In Asian American drama, the idea of cultural ownership and community solidarity is frequently expressed through the vehicle of domestic realism; indeed, many of the seminal works of Asian American theater feature an emphasis on family relationships. Such family dramas may explore conflicts between parents and children, as with Frank Chin's *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), or the emphasis might be on teasing out the complexities of gender roles, as in Velina Hasu Houston's *Tea* (1983, premiered 1987). As with the work of August Wilson, these family dramas tend to use domestic relationships to evoke larger themes of community identity and group solidarity. Many of these works have circulated throughout the various Asian American venues, and have thus participated in the construction of a pan-regional Asian American community.

At this point , one turns to a different aspect of the overlap between ethnic-specific and mainstream regional theater, by looking at how a playwright "crosses over" from an Asian American to a mainstream audience. If family-centered ethnic plays have the potential to speak in detail to particular ethnic/regional communities. Like August Wilson, Philip Kan Gotanda's work negotiates the boundaries between different theatrical venues through portrayals of family life, though in Gotanda's case he is crossing over from ethnic specific companies to mainstream repertory. Gotanda is often associated with David Henry Hwang, in part because of their history as friends and co-directors of San Francisco's Asian American Theater Company. Gotanda's work, however, remains less known amongst mainstream Americans than Hwang's; not surprisingly, Gotanda's plays have as a whole stayed more directly centered on Asian American issues, in keeping with his higher visibility in the Asian American circuit.

The Wash is arguably Gotanda's "breakthrough" play. Although his earlier work, *Song for a Nisei Fisherman*, received some mainstream exposure through the Mark Taper Forum theater in Los Angeles, it is *The Wash* that has broadened Gotanda's audience. The play's production history marks a turning point in Gotanda's career, from an artist working strictly in Asian American venues, to a larger reception on the west coast and then other regional contexts. In labeling Gotanda a "crossover" writer, I don't wish to imply that he has simply traded one audience for another. Rather, he has broadened his audience to include multiple groups—and this building of a multicultural audience is reflected in the content of *The Wash* itself—a play which revises traditional family roles in its portrayal of inter-racial marriages and its depiction of sexuality amongst the elderly.

The play centers on an older couple's marriage that is in the process of disintegrating; secondary emphases include estrangements between the parents and their children. In this drama the importance of the family is paramount but the boundaries are undergoing a process of re-definition. Like Wilson's *Fences,* Gotanda's play uses a central metaphor to give shape to the dramatic action. The "wash" thus functions both as a naturalistic piece of stage business, and as a

symbolic device with multiple thematic associations. On a literal level, the wash is simply the laundry that Masi routinely washes for her estranged husband Nobu. On another level, the wash symbolizes women's labor and Masi's symbolic entrapment in a marriage which has become increasingly oppressive. On still another, more abstract level, the wash signifies the power of change to "wash over" various aspects of these characters' lives, for the boundaries governing life in this play are very much in flux. In particular, Gotanda seems interested in the fluidity of racial and ethnic boundaries with the portrayal of Nobu and Masi's daughter and her marriage to a black American. Gotanda has indicated that he wrote *The Wash* in part as a commentary on the increasing inter-marriage rate amongst Japanese Americans: "In *The Wash* I've tried to promote the idea of being inclusive, of accepting and including biracial children as part of the next generation of Asian Americans, and simply as Americans" (Berson 33).

The Wash can be safely regarded as an example of the traditional Japanese theatre because it has many features that constitute this type of theater. Many researchers, such as Galda and Cullinan in their book *Literature and the Child* and Jenkins and Austin in their book *Literature for Children about Asian and Asian American*, have classified certain criteria that should be traced for any literary work to be described as ethnic. These points will be summarized as follows: the work must (1) contain language that provides insight into the culture of the group (2) avoid racial and cultural negative stereotypes, (3) present cultural details accurately such as food, dialects, customs and clothing, (4) expose cultural authenticity and the experiences honestly (Galda and Cullinan 285), (5) attempt to amend historical errors or omissions, (6) contain illustrations that are true reflection of the way of life and (7) depict women in transition from traditional to contemporary(Jenkins and Austin 20).

Clearly, these criteria can be traced to great extent in *The Wash*. Firstly, the play is peppered with a lot of Asian objects and Japanese words. Secondly, the play provides an authentic portray of a Nisei family conflicts. Thirdly, it exposes Masi (Nobu's wife) in a transformation status. Fourthly, it explains the true way of life and

thinking of Japanese families with their traditions and habits. So, Gotanda exposes some typical conflicts in this play with an attempt to push the limits of ethnic box by discussing other untouched subjects in the Asian American literature.

To start with, the text is full of Japanese American references and Japanese words and phrases that remain untranslated on the stage; this gives the dialogue authenticity but it also makes parts of the play less accessible to non-Japanese American audiences. Instead of pandering to the majority, Gotanda forces them to understand his culture on its own terms.

For example, Nobu uses chopsticks and drink green tea. The characters eat tempura and nukemono. In addition, most of the characters talk in Japanese words and phrases such as: (Kitanai means dirty, shoyu means soy sauce, oshiri means backside, Dozo means please, Dozo yoroshiku means How do you do?, etc) , their meanings not always readily understood from the context. Furthermore, the names of the characters refer to their ethnic identity such as Nobu Matsumoto, Masi Matsumoto, Sadao Nakasato, Kiyoko Hasegawa, Curley Sakata and Chiyo.

Secondly, the play depicts constraints affecting Japanese Americans through the problematic relationship of an older couple. Gotanda makes no effort to explain what may seem unfamiliar motivations for his characters, leaving audiences to work them out for themselves (Abbotson 41). Thematically, Gotanda's play deals with some issues often found in Asian American literature. The first is the break-up of the marriage between an elderly Nisei couple. The second conflict in the play between "the old assimilationist versus traditionalist". On the other hand, Gotanda exposes some unfamiliar topics for his ethnic community like the older characters' sexuality and interminority racism.

Although Gotanda knows that presenting these topics cannot elicit more enthusiasm from the Asian Americans, he believes that the Asian Americans in general and particularly the Japanese Americans have changed and matured over the past twenty years, and are now able to accept and entertain more critical perspectives on their experience and life. He comments: "The community can now appreciate works which don't paint such a pretty picture. They don't need plays which are merely self-congratulatory. (*Fish Head Soup and Other Plays* xxii)

The Wash is considered the third part of Gotanda's family trilogy alongside with *A Song for a Nisei Fisherman* and *Fish Head Soup.* This series represents his sincere attempt to discover and truly depict the Japanese American family, as well as to delve deeper and deeper into it. Omi mentions that the idea of the play is mainly driven from two real-life stories. The first is about a friend whose elderly Nisei mother has left her father and begins a new relationship, but this story didn't spread in the Japanese American community. The second is about a writer whose ex-husband still comes to cut her garden even after the divorce (xix).Both stories represent the old traditions in this community, which Gotanda himself tries to expose and criticize at the same time.

The play is a touching, bittersweet love story about disintegrating forty two year marriage of a Japanese American couple (Ruth 1). It details the relationships with a Nisei family, and how the separation of the parents Nobu Matsumoto and Masi Matsumoto deeply affects all the family members. Gotanda wants to convey a message that oppression- from the side of husband or even the whole society- can easily shake traditions and customs that are settled long years ago. Tradition collides with the ever-changing landscape of the contemporary American culture when a Japanese American marriage dissolves, and a wife torn between her Japanese upbringing demands and the happiness her American sense of self-fulfillment urges her to pursue.

In other words, Susan Abboston elucidates that in the Japanese culture as depicted in the play, a woman is expected to live for her husband and children and not give a thought to her own needs and desires (42). Living in America, with its cultural ideal of self-reliance and one of the highest divorce rates in the world, we can expect the clash with such beliefs. Masi's Japanese background asks her to stand by her family, so she has withstood years of unhappy marriage before going against her upbringing and leaving her husband. The fact that she continues to care for him by doing his laundry (or the wash- the title of the play) and preparing his food- even while living in a separate apartment, testifies to the difficulty in making a clean break.

With a highly qualified treatment of the death of a marriage Gotanda creates a special place for himself as the creator of realistic characterizations of Japanese Americans and their lives. According to Gish Jen the characters in the play are presented more captured than constructed, more like flesh-and- blood than cartoon (7). Craver comments on this point saying: "…Gotanda's extremely simple and sensitive play captures most of the ludicrous aspects and bitter failures two people feel at the dissolution of a marriage…" (163).

After a long time of marriage, the wife does the unthinkable and decides to get her independence and leave her home. After their separation, both the husband and the wife undertake new relationships (Gussow 2). Masi-sixty- seven years old – strives to carve out a new life for herself and begins to enjoy a new love and Sadao, a sixty-five years old, retired pharmacist, widower and completely different from her ex-husband, Nobu. At the same time, Nobu- sixty-eight years old and retired worker- becomes involved with the owner of his favourite neighborhood restaurant, Kiyoko, who is in he mid-fifties and widow.

Apparently, Gotanda describes a failure of traditional marriage revealing the reasons behind that decision on one hand. On the other hand, he conveys a picture of the traditions that rule all the relations in this ethnic group. We find that although Masi and Nobu are separated; she continues to visit her husband's house each week to pick up and do his laundry, just because the culture-bound habits and customs are hard to break. Gotanda comments: "We're working as hard as we can with everyone to capture a Japanese American essence" (qtd. in Brown and Swisher 2).

The second conflict in this play is between those who are able and willing to adapt to new circumstances and those are inflexible and resist any kind of change. Dunbar describes this situation by saying that it is a conflict between "the old assimilationist versus traditionalist" (6). Gotanda provides examples of the two models of the characters to show the difference between them. For example, early in the play Nobu is confused by Masi's new answering machine:

> Masi? You got any…Masi?
> (Masi's phone machine kicks in; Nobu doesn't know how to deal with it.
> I am Nobu Matsumoto. My telephone number is 751…damn, (Checks the number) 751-8263. (Not sure if he has said his name) I am Nobu Matsumoto. (Act 1 168)

From the previous exchange, we can elicit Nobu's hesitation in using the new answering machine. At the same time, we find that Masi tries to master using her new fishing equipment, a gift from Sadao. Between Nobu's confusion and self-doubt and Masi's smoothness and confidence, we can extract the difference between them.

While Masi is prepared to move on with her life, Nobu lives in the past. He is trapped by his culture, history and his own personality, and cannot liberate himself from the internment's psychological walls. He hates change; when he eats at Kiyoko's restaurant, he always sits in the same seat and eats the same meal. Nobu is nostalgic for the way life used to be- as indicated in his the old lullaby song he sings- but other people's lives move on and Nobu is left behind. His kite is a symbol of a freedom he is unable to grasp- the possibilities of America he feels are unavailable to him because of his Japanese heritage.

At the end of act 1, scene 9, Nobu imagines that his kite flies high, showing his longing for the greater freedom he felt as a child, but the weight of his own life and the traditions he feels he must live by to keep him and his kite on the ground(Abbotson 43). Another example of his inflexibility is clear in his refusal to tolerate racial differences or speak well about "Kurochan" (blacks) and Mexican neighbors. Nobu's racial attitude comes obviously when he refuses to recognize his younger girl's marriage to an African American, or even to see his only grandchild, he says:

> Japanese marry other Japanese, their kids are Yonsei [fourth generation Japanese American] – not these damned ainoko [biracial people]. (Act 2 182)

He is unable to believe that his wife has permanently left him- this is just partly why he never asks Masi to return. It is not only his ego that causes him to think so, but his culture encourages him to disbelieve that a wife can behave independently. He accepts her visits to bring him food and do laundry as natural, because he still sees it as her duty. It is clear that Nobu is withdrawn, emotionally inaccessible and narrow traditionalist- from insisting on the way of building his kite to his refusal of his daughter and the child because she married an African American. He loves his wife and children, but his pride prevents him from expressing that love, and he cannot accept their behaving independently of him.

Despite Nobu's self-centered behavior, Gotanda ensures that we still feel sympathy for him because he is a victim of his culture rather than a real tyrant. We are shown his tender side when he is with Kiyoko and when he sings his lullaby. Even Masi has to admit that he has always been very caring and good with the children, and we witness this when he finally meets his grandson. Unfortunately, Nobu sadly ends up alone, and it seems to be a fate he cannot avoid; given his cultural background and is inability to adapt to changing circumstances.

At the end of the play, there is a long speech in which Nobu himself reveals the reasons why he has closed himself off from the changing world. He refers to the effects of his internment experience during World War II, and the difficulties he faced in dealing with White Americans in the following years. But Fei argues that this revelation is not part of the dramatic action; it helps the audience and the reader understand the stubborn old man better (175). At the time we think that Gotanda wants to present Nobu as a victim of his cultural upbringing and of his war time experiences as a west coast Japanese American internee, he returns to present Nobu's daughter Marsha in dialogue with his father comparing him with Sadao and reveals the reasons behind ruining this house;

> Marsha: He's a nice man…He treats her like a very special person…
>
> He takes her fishing…H teaches her how to bait the hook and cast it out…
>
> They even dig up worms in his garden at his house. I saw

> them. Side by side…
> I MEAN DID YOU EVER DO THAT FOR MOM! Did you? You're so… so stupid…you didn't even have to say, "I'm sorry."
> You ruined everything. It's all too late! YOU WRECKED EVERYTHING! (Act 2 192)

Gotanda artfully and cleverly swings between the two couples and their overlapping lives. The crafted exchanges between Masi and Nobu not only reveal aspects of their relationship, but explain a crucial dimension of the Japanese American dialogue as well. Gotanda notes: "What's not said is as important; if not more important than what is said" (qtd. in Omi xx). Masi is a Japanese stereotype; devoted and self-sacrificing wife. She devotes herself to serve her husband, even after she leaves him. She feels compelled to continue doing his laundry and shopping. Jun Xing sees that Masi is presented as a complex woman full of tender emotion and compassion (133).

Masi has been totally subservient in marriage and remains dutiful during their separation. In his article *Wife is Dutiful Though Separated*, the critic Mel Guessow mentions: "…the laundry becomes the central symbol of a wife's self-subjugation and the hesitancy with which she assumes a life of independence"(1). We see Masi as a victim of verbal abuse, at least according to the American culture. She is ultimately left to choose between allowing Nobu to abuse her and salvaging what is left of her life. Unlike many Nisei women who sacrificed themselves in the name of husband and their families, Masi chooses to save herself and declares that she has "the right to be happy" (qtd. in James 2).

Masi realizes that she is in need to renew her life and try the sense of equal give and take relationship. She meets a widower; Sadao, who treats her as an equal partner. At this time she does not have any more sympathy to Nobu, even when he later considers his impassive and intolerant attitude with her and his two daughters. She wants to face him with the truth when she asks him: "Well, move then. Move to the north side like me. I kept saying that all along. For kids-better schools, better neighborhood…you don't like black people, you don't like Mexicans…so what do you like?" (Act 2

178). Masi's transition from the endured, dutiful and sacrificed wife to unsympathetic, aware and dependent woman is driven by Nonu's stupid, selfish and stubborn treatment. Here, one can mention that the modified behavior of Masi achieves the third criterion of ethnic Japanese theatre. It also contradicts the end of his play *Yohen*. Gotanda comments on the relation between the two plays saying:

> *Yohen was* actually written as a companion play to *The Wash*. In *The Wash*, the story's ending turn on the woman's decision to leave the man. I wanted to write a play which had an arc ending with the opposite happening…That is, the man deciding to leave the woman. (qtd. in Hong, *The Gift of Yohen* 3).

Another important character in the conflict between "assimilationist versus traditionalist" is Sadao. He is an enlightened Japanese American male who can cry in public and feel no shame, contribute to the household chores, compliment his woman, include her in all aspects of life, and allow her far greater freedom- all impossibilities for Nobu, who has a very traditional attitude toward women. Sadao is the man who helps Masi takes the decision of leaving her husband and begins new life. Sadao is the man who helps Masi take the decision of leaving her husband and begins a new life. Sadao opens her eyes to what a loving husband can do for a wife. He plans their outgoings, makes picnic lunches, and takes her to a movie. Most importantly, he listens to Masi and responds enthusiastically. John Simon notes that Sadao and Nobu are of the same generation, and Sadao is an ex-internee, but their outlook and approach to life are completely different (116). With Sadao, Masi feels she is still desirable, unlike with Nobu who has ruined her life.

In addition to the main characters, there are Nobu and Masi's children. They are third-generation Japanese Americans (sansei), and we see in them a clear dilution of Japanese ways and a stronger embrace of mainstream American culture; their names, Marsha and Judy, reflect this. Both are concerned with their parents, but do not exhibit the traditional Japanese sense of duty (Abbotson 43). Judy, the younger and rebellious daughter, is completely different from her father. She married an African American and has a baby. At one point, she complains about her father, "You're gonna die out, you

know that. You're gonna be extinct and nobody's gonna give a goddamn…"(Act 2 182). In contrast, Marsha is more traditional and she is trying to get her parents back together without realizing what she is doing (Xing 133-34).

In this attitude towards Nobu and the other characters in *The Wash*, Gotanda is both sensitive and fair-minded. His purpose is not to apportion blame but to clarify all aspects of Japanese American life and, thus, to lead the audience to better understanding. Guessow sees the result is a play that is small in scale but has a broader relevance and reflection for families, especially Asian-American (1), and this point reflects the fourth feature that can make this play a traditional ethnic drama.

In *The Wash* Gotanda proves his ability to understand both the external symptoms of racial oppression and the internal impacts of racism, and how it deeply affects each member of the family. Furthermore, he criticizes the Asian Americans for their roles in deepening the impacts of racism by enduring it without any resistance. He says:

> Internalized racism is a fact of life. If you live in America, you have been infected by it. By internal I mean how we buy into racism, how we participate in it, and how we engage in a kind of dance of allowing ourselves to be victimized. (*Fish Head Soup and Other Play, Intro* xxiii)

The other issue in which he persists to move beyond the box of ethnicity is speaking openly about older character's sexuality. It is an eye-opening and moving to explore the allegedly "stoic" Japanese Americans (Xing 134). Gotanda's treatment particularly focuses on the Nisei characters. Kaplan sees that the portrait of sexual behaviour in older characters isn't satirized as ugly at worst or inappropriate at best in American popular culture, which typically reserves depictions of erotic desire for the young accompanying with their physical beauty (77). Nobu Mccarthy – the actress who performed the role of Masi in this play and later in *The Wash* film- comments on this point saying:

> Japanese Americans have a stereotyped image that we don't touch each other…so we're looked at as asexual, particularly older people…But we do have feelings…, and Gotanda really wove it in such a beautiful way. (qtd. in Cooper 2)

Gotanda's sensitivity to deal with this topic is driven from his understanding of the contradictions in the personality of the Nisei older men. Earlier in the play Nobu expresses the loss of his sexual interest in his wife, but Masi finds sexual magazines that reflect his desire and interest in women. Furthermore, he shows Nobu's desire in her ex-wife is one of the most expressive moments in the play, where Masi massages Nobu's back.

Throughout these traditional family themes, Gotanda's skills and experiences produce a piece of pottery that becomes a mixture of human tragedy that transcends the details of ethnicity (Berger, *Family laundry* 1). Meanwhile, Omi thinks that these ethnic details show Gotanda's credit in presenting the world along with other intriguing aspects of the Asian American historical experience and sensibility (xvii).

Gotanda himself is aware of choosing these certain subjects and never denies his conscious intention behind writing particularly about the experiences of the Japanese Americans. He says:" Almost all my work is driven by a Japanese American psychology. I grew up in a Japanese American community" (qtd. in Weinraub 1).

Although *The Wash* is one of the most seemingly Asian American of Gotanda's works, the play, as Gordon Davidson argues, "speaks of the experience of everyman and woman whatever age and ethnicity…" (qtd. in Fei 175). So, *The Wash* is considered a step away from the narrow borders of ethnic drama.

Actually, the writer discusses the experience of the Asian Americans, but in the way that can help the audience understand and interact with the pains and happiness of those marginalized people. Dewight T. Martin comments; 'We can relate to the ethnicity but also we can relate to the underlying universality" (qtd. in Berger, *MVT broadens* 1). This makes his themes appropriate for both ethnic people and mainstream audiences, and later his plays become desirable in the mainstream theatre as well as ethnic theatres. One can say at the end that *The Wash* represents an important stage in the development of Gotanda's career from the hyphenated playwright to one is more aware of his ethnic group issues and conflicts.

The Wash is a play that poignantly portrays an ethnic-specific family, but it also explores the changes to which the ethnic family is subject. At the play's close, the dissolution of the marriage has arguably brought the various family members closer together, but at great cost to Nobu. Gotanda thus illustrates the extent to which family themes evoke ideas of ethnic belonging, even when the boundaries of both the family unit and ethnic group are presented as constantly shifting sets of relationships. Indeed, the unstable boundaries around the family in *The Wash* register Gotanda's transition from Asian American theaters to more mainstream venues. It is interesting, then, that Gotanda's next major work after *The Wash* should have distanced itself from explicit evocations of the domestic sphere. *Yankee Dawg You Die*! , a satire of media portrayals of Asians, marks Gotanda's foray into a more mainstream theater market. The play registers this transition in its mix of genres and styles; it might best be described as a blend between domestic realism and media satire.

In conclusion, for the two playwrights discussed in this paper, the family serves as a political tool and not just an arena for their "realism." As the themes and production of *Fences* and *The Wash* suggest, the ideology of the family serves a complex double function: on the one hand, the family serves as an extremely powerful way of mobilizing ethnic solidarity, while it also addresses a broad audience through the idea that as human beings we are all part of the same family. The family, then, manages to deflect issues of race and gender, even as it is deeply imbedded in them. The two playwrights discussed suggest how family dramas articulate a double-edged process: on the one hand domesticating issues of racial conflict, and on the other hand transforming ethnic-specific discourses into national or "American" ones.

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