ON SPEAK THEATER ARTS PRODUCTION OF "NWC":
A STATEMENT FROM THE ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAM OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

As a program that aims to provide students with the critical tools to examine racist and racialized everyday and spectacular images, situations and meanings, the Asian American Studies Program neither endorses a boycott of the Speak Theater Arts production of N*gger W*tb*ck Ch*nk nor tacitly approves of the performance. Instead, we strongly believe that the University of Illinois community should take this opportunity and the unfolding controversy and transform them both into teaching moments.

The controversy around the Speak Theater Arts production of NWC speaks to larger issues of representation in programming at the University. There are many artists-of-color working through a multitude of aesthetic and cultural practices whose works address the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in sophisticated ways, but without the kind of publicity and support given to this particular production by the University and the Krannert Center. The focus of attention should not be on Speak Theater Arts, but the ways in which both students-of-color and the performing arts are marginalized on campus. Important questions about the University's response to the campus climate of racialized tensions and conflicts cannot be addressed, let alone alleviated, by its support for this particular production.

Furthermore, it is the position of the Asian American Studies Program that boycotting the Speak Theater Arts production of NWC without having seen the production disallows a critical engagement with the context of its content. Works by theater scholars and professionals, notably Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns and New World Theater's former manager Roberta Uno's co-edited anthology The Color of Theater: Race, Culture and Contemporary Performance, theater scholar Meiling Cheng's In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art, and David Roman's Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts provide the theatrical context in which the politics and aesthetics of Speak Theater Arts' production of N*gger W*tb*ck Ch*nk emerge. Speak Theater Arts joins the growing body of performance art by artists-of-color whose work speaks to issues of race, ethnicity, and identity through ironic re-appropriations of racial stereotypes. NWC follows a long tradition of artists using ethnic humor to subvert stereotypes and political correctness in irreverent and controversial ways. NWC is also in dialogue with productions Culture Clash and 18 Mighty Mountain Warriors and works by artists such as John Leguizamo and Michael Zia whose works stage stereotypes of Latino and Asian American masculinity in order to acknowledge and confront the pain caused by racial stereotypes, while also proposing new ways of re-staging and empowering Latino and Asian American bodies with agency.

The Asian American Studies Program acknowledges that these works often reproduce problematic discourses about masculinity or liberal multiculturalism, or otherwise fail to incorporate a critical lens with regard to gender or sexuality; these issues have been and continue to be part of ongoing debates about cultural politics in which we seek to intervene as scholars, artists, and activists. That said, Speak Theater Arts adds another dimension to the alternative theater scene whose works both explore, and provide opportunities to further discuss, the
possibilities and limits of dialogue between Asian American, Latino, and African American subjects.

As such the Asian American Studies Program encourages not a boycott of the NWC performance, but instead a concerted and collective effort to grapple with both the campus climate of racial tensions as well as the multifaceted nature of contemporary cultural production by artists-of-color. This position does not preclude either critical responses to or criticisms of the performance or of the context for its production at the University of Illinois. Again, we strongly believe that the UIUC community should regard this controversial performance as an opportunity to discuss both the institutional politics of curatorial decision-making and also the possibilities for creating a truly progressive cultural politics.