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Performativity of Abject Identity: Jonathon Hsu's Coming Out Asian American

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Performativity of Abject Identity: Jonathon Hsu's *Coming Out Asian American*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Global Studies from
The College of William and Mary

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Williamsburg, VA
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Abstract

In my one-person performance *Coming Out Asian American*, the racialized body is placed in deracinated space and time where identity is fluidly navigated as history moves and is exchanged. I contend that Asian American identity is ambiguous, schizophrenic, and complex, and the medium of staged performance allows for the exploration of the affective body as a site for cultural/historical memory, exchange, and re-imagination. In the play, *Coming Out Asian American*, theater and performance are used to create a counter-monument that challenges the dominant Western mainstream discourse. At the same time, I utilize performance to find agency and liberation in the telling of my transnational, and polycultural story on liminal abjection to add to the greater Asian American communal narrative.

Coming Out Asian American
A Solo Performance in Three Acts
By
Jonathon Hsu

Cast of Characters

(All played by one performer)

Xiao Jiangshi - A Chinese hopping vampire age 5-8

Younger/Older Jonathon - An Asian American man ranging from age 10-21

Teflon Jon - Superhero/Anti-hero in late teens

Mrs. Metcalf - Guidance Counselor in early 40s

Mrs. Hsu - Jonathon's Mother in mid 40s

Johnnyhsunami - Slam poet in early 20s

Schizophrenic Jon - Asian American man in mid 20s

Swimmer Jon - Athletic Asian American man in late 20s/ early 30s

Setting

(Performed in a Blackbox Theater)

Scene: Various locations around the Washington D.C. Metropolitan area.

Time: The present.

Act I

Scene 1

Prologue

Setting: Storytelling and performing for a college audience in a blackbox theater.

Comes in wearing a backpack and a few layers of clothing. Carefully survey (connect with) the audience before speaking.

“Okay, okay, okay, let’s get started...Coming Out Asian American”

Take off and put aside bag and remove the first layer of clothing. Begin.

I remember watching this TV series called *Xiao Jiangshi* when I was little. This show was recorded on VCR cassettes. The main character was called “Xiao Jiangshi”, which translates into “little (because he was a small child) hopping vampire”.

These vampires differed a bit from the Slavic bloodsucking spirits we know so well. They were reanimated corpses stuck in rigor mortis; hence the hopping with outstretched arms. Instead of feeding off the blood of living creatures, the little hopping vampire feeds off qi or life energy for survival. (*feed off the audience’s qi*) A lust for life.

This Xiao Jiangshi was a photogenic little guy; his face frozen in a permanent mischievous grin. He wore his hair in a braided queue, a symbol of Han submission under Qing or Manchu rule. A Taoist priest can put the vampire to rest by pasting a rectangular enchanted parchment on its forehead thereby controlling the jiangshi and leading him back home to lay to rest. This magical parchment contains the name and date of birth of the vampire and causes the vampire to lose its own consciousness: induced hypnosis. (*demonstrate the effect of parchment*)

And because jiangshi are essentially rotting, decomposing corpses, they are terrified of seeing their own reflection. As I have been. (*begin metamorphosis on block*)

Because of who I am, what I look like...I am uncomfortable with my own likeness. I feel like a jiangshi. I grew up with a note pasted to my forehead. Asian. (*fetal position*) Born in the 1990s. No consciousness; in a vegetative state.

The few representations I did see were twisted, grotesque miscreations which crafted my self-concept and identity. Cultural tropes devoid of humanity. (*beat*) Am I a monster? A sideshow freak? Here is my story. It is for all the fellow monsters out there looking for their likeness.

(3-5 second beat change)

(Fade Out) (Beads/jacket on board, hat on head)

(End of Scene)

Act I

Scene 2

A Chink with a chink in the Armor

Setting: Doctor's examination room for annual physical check up.

(Fade In)

When I was little, I dealt with my feelings by bottling them up. All the abuse and racial slurs that came my way, I just collected and placed them inside this black box locked deep inside me. (I threw away the key never wanting to re-open this box).

Don't get me wrong, I had to do something in the moment so I fought back. Fight or flight; I chose fight.

But I did little to change the situation. I reacted to the cause unconstructively. I was this simple reaction; this knee jerk reaction just like when the doctor taps your patellar ligament with a rubber mallet. *(demonstrate physical reaction)* Nerve impulses are instantaneously relayed to your quadriceps which jerks your leg up before your brain grows aware of the tap.

Tap. Tap. Tap. *(toss the mallet away)*

I retaliated each time I was verbally or physically assaulted. Some got off on the effect of these words on me. They saw how angry and uncontrollable I got. They knew my hot button and they pressed it knowingly. *(press imaginary button 2x)*

I hated that I was so easily aggravated; so vulnerable and sensitive over jokes, words, and phrases but I could not help it. I wanted to be stronger than this. To be above it. To be impervious to pain. Teflon Jon. *(stand on block)*

'Cause you know, I'm tough right (3x)? Oh yeah, okay. You really think that word will bother me? Words can't hurt me...

But they did.

I didn't want to become this enraged hideous hulking beast.

But I did. *(exit block)*

In the heat of the moment, I didn't consider the greater consequences of my actions. I just "did".

(2 second beat change)

(Blackout)

(End of Scene)

Act I

Scene 3

Phone Home

Setting: Various locations at Oak Hill Elementary and the Hsu family residence.

I remember being called into the school office after a brawl on the basketball court. A kid named Mark had called me “chink” (2x). (*beat*)

While sitting in the counselor’s room (*hat on block*), Mark and I were asked to (*roll eyes*) write and illustrate on a piece of paper what happened during our altercation. Obviously I drew the most awful, deformed stick figure of him possible. (*show audience the picture*)

Mark was seated beside me at the conference table. I took every opportunity to give him the side eye. (*side eye*) He told on me, he called me the “c” word. I’m tired of keeping my head down. (*childish tone*)

(*post picture on board*)

I should have talked to him about my feelings and how I was scarred by what he said.

Aside from exuding unveiled ill will, I was nervous and worried. I wasn’t so troubled about the administrative punishment of suspension or staying in for recess the next few days but rather what would happen when my parents found out. The gnawing anxiety caused my stomach to hurt.

Coming from what I would describe as a first generation immigrant household, I was well aware of what would happen to me. The wooden paddle was bearable but the belt...that childhood marker still sends shivers down my spine just thinking about it. “Hey!” “Do not pick up things on the ground that are not yours.” “But mom how come it’s okay if I pick up a rock from outside but if I find a limbless action figure (*monster or superhero?*) on the ground it’s the end of the world?” With the impending phone call on my mind, I didn’t want to go home that day. (*sit down*)

(*2 second beat change*) (*A: Mrs. Metcalf / B: Mrs. Hsu*)

A. Mrs. Hah-su? Is this the Huh-shoe residence?

B. Yes, hello. Who is this?

A. This is Melissa Metcalf from the Oak Hill Elementary guidance center, calling on behalf of your son Jonathon HAH-Tsuuu.

“And for the record, it’s Hsu. The H is silent. Pronounced like “sue”. Definitely not...Hah-tsu. Are you sneezing or attempting at butchering my last name on purpose? And even “sue” is this

dumbed down American pronunciation of my family name. Xue (*emphasize*) is the correct way of saying my last name in Mandarin. Does the mispronunciation bother me? Well it did for a while (beat); but eventually I reappropriated it for my rap pseudonym: “johnnyhsunami.”

B. Yes, what did he do this time?

A. He was involved in an altercation with another student today on the basketball court during recess.

B. Oh, I’m so sorry. So sorry. What happened?

A. Well based on both of their accounts; it seems like they were playing a game of basketball when they started disputing the score. One thing led to another and in the heat of the argument it seems the student called Jonathon a racial slur. And...

B. Um, sorry, I don’t understand?

A. The student called your son a disparaging remark about his race. (*impatient*)

B. He called my son what? He called him Chinese?

A. Uhm...yes he called your son a “chink”. (*hesitate*) A “ch-i-ink”

B. Ohh. (*silence*) Yes, I...

A. Yeah and your son ended up slamming the student into the fence. I just wanted to let you know to make sure your son refrains from resorting to violence like this... “blah blah blah you get it.” (*formalities*)

B. Okay, thank you.

A. Goodbye.

B. Bye bye. (*phone clicks*) (1-2 second beat)

At times I might have crossed the line from being bullied and becoming the bully. Being feared is better than being scared and pushed around right? Honestly even though I didn’t take shit from anyone; I was still a confused, self-conscious, impressionable kid deep inside. No one taught or told me what to do. I just acted out or repressed everything inside me. This secret, hidden pain ate me away.

Later that day (*grab bag*), I came home downcast and depressed. (*door sequence*) I knew I did something wrong and I was just counting the minutes until final judgment. My mom had a talk with me. (*drop bag*) But she didn’t discipline me like I fearfully imagined.

She told me she was proud of me.

I was like WHAAAT? I did something bad right?

She said: You are a real man now.

And that was it.

With my parents (*move bag*), silences mean so much more than words. Unspoken love, unspoken pride. It was one of those moments. Her tacit approval gave me hope...with the support I could rise up again.

But I wanted to hear more on what she had to say about race in America. I honestly didn't even understand what the word "ch-i-nk" (*write on board*) fully meant but I knew that it was an offensive term by the way Mark said it. A word that singles me out as different in a negative way. Affecting me, my sisters, my parents, grandparents, my cousins, aunts, uncles, my whole lineage. Somehow being Chinese, being Asian, and being me is wrong and repugnant.

(*discovery*) That word taught me hate. Hate for those ignorant bullies exploiting it to cut at me; to take my identity and crush it; to take a people and culture rich with history...all negated by a single brutal term. I cultivated hate towards myself.

I was this "chink" and I couldn't do anything about it. What could I do to change this term? Could I re-appropriate it? This one word produced underground reverberations that would continue to upset and distress my foundations for the rest of my life. That word created a chasm in my mind. (*gripping head*) Who am I? Am I truly Jonathon Hsu? Or am I just this simple "chink", this Asian kid in America? (*1-2 second beat*)

(*Blackout*)

(*End of Scene*)

Act I

Scene 4

Carbon Copies, Carbon Names

Setting: Watching TV in sparsely furnished living room.

The same goes for being called Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Confucius. Just because they happen to be Chinese and I happen to be of Chinese descent does not make us one and the same. And it's all fun and games until someone actually dies...from a hate crime: Vincent Chin was a Chinese American murdered; brutally beaten to death by two Caucasian men with a baseball bat a day before his wedding. They thought he was Japanese American. They were upset about the rise of the Japanese automobile industry in America. Since when did cars equate to people? Call me that instead, the names which have been forgotten.

(*2-3 second beat change*) (*grab Batman*)

I looked in books, tuned into radio stations, and scanned TV screens in hopes of finding answers. Maybe Batman was Asian? I really liked the *Batman Animated Series*. He had cool gadgets and engaged in hand to hand combat with some martial arts flair thrown in here and there. He drives fast cars. I mean have you seen the Batmobile? It's like the perfect *Fast and Furious* car; it spits out flames from the exhaust and has an insane matte black body kit...I wonder if it's a manual transmission? (*driving improv*)

Batman looked like a ninja combating evil villains in Gotham city, especially since he wore a black cowl over his face. I could totally envision an Asian American Batman. (*jump on block*) If that happened...then I would have found my superhero for life.

Why'd you have to take the cowl off Bruce? (*jump back down*) Why? Look even the name Bruce...you know Bruce Lee. (*grab and show photo*) I dressed up as Batman for Halloween for many years as a kid. Waiting...waiting for my Asian American superhero to someday emerge.

(*Juxtapose my Batman picture with Batman on board*) (2 second beat change)

(*Fade Out*)

Act I

Scene 5

Names, Names, Names

Setting: In a classroom, lecturing.

(*Fade In*)

What's it like having 2 names? An Americanized name because my parents wanted my sisters and I to have an easier time than they did fitting in to the US. They named me Jonathon Irvin Hsu. Stephanie Ivy Hsu. Evangelyn Iris Hsu. All our middle names started with the letter "i". Those "i's" remind us of who we are in a world which keeps seeking to (re)define and seize "i". (*pull back hand*)

My mom chose her name: Carolina. My father: Baron. Later on, my parents both legally changed their names back to their Chinese names. They never explained why. I always thought they outgrew their names.

My Chinese name is "xu han sheng". (*write out on whiteboard*) It means meliora, Latin for "ever better". What does Jonathon mean to me? (*ponder, plot out board*) Does having two names mean I'm a superhero?! I have my normal American white bread name to fit in and not stand out; and then I have this Chinese alias.

(2-3 second beat change)

(*End of Scene*)

Act I

Scene 6

Misrepresentation through Time

Setting: Outside a Chinese restaurant in Washington, D.C..

In school, I remember reading in the history books (*browse book*) about these internment camps for the Japanese during WWII. I always thought to myself, hey wouldn't that be nice? I mean the civics book really didn't go into much detail. I've never been around a significant Asian community growing up on the East Coast. All you've got to give up is your property (*give up the book*), dignity, and citizenship...

Finally finding a place where I belong; where being Asian isn't a bad thing. Where I can find a sense of community; of safety and security...and finally be able to craft a strong, proud identity. That was what I was searching for. (*arms swim upwards as you step onto the block*)

I finally saw for myself the wonders of these Asian enclaves segregated within a city when I visited Washington DC's Chinatown; run-down, dirty, smelly with terrible cuisine to boot. And this was "for their own good"...so they can peddle the fake name-brand consumer products which people ceaselessly mock yet purchase when touring the great ethnic-towns. Slum fashion.

Food they critique as having too much MSG when in reality...that bag of Doritos, that Chick-fill-A burger is dusted and dipped with MSG yet no one says a word about that. Everything made in China is of terrible quality; yet they can't seem to wrap their head around the fact that their capitalist desires spurring outsourced manufacturing was designed, developed, and built in the West. So what about a Chinaman made in America? Wouldn't that phenomenon suggest something of amazing quality and refinement? ...But it is nonetheless too hard to chew (*grab take out box*), difficult to stomach...so they reject it. Mapo Tofu too spicy; Braised pork belly too chewy, Scallion pancakes too smelly. Instead mix ketchup, rice vinegar, brown sugar, cornstarch, and soy sauce together to make your sweet 'n' sour chicken.

(*Hang up takeout box, eat fortune cookie, sip on water, read aloud, improv, and post on board*)
(2-3 second beat change)

(*Blackout*)

(*End of Scene*)

Act II

Scene 1

No Role Models

Setting: Casting audition for superhero character.

I grew up with little to no Asian American or Asian role models. And yes, I grew up immersed in American mainstream pop culture where I was repeatedly shown images of successful and famous Caucasians. In sports and the music industry I began to see more and more distinguished African Americans.

As for finding faces like mine. Well...even to this day, I still look around for that strong Asian American example that I can relate to and who can properly and fully represent me.

Bruce Lee was a close iteration (*grab and post picture*), he broke down many barriers but he was also typecast...put into a box by Hollywood. Just as he began to break out of his stereotypical role as a kung fu master he died from an allergic reaction to pain medication. Cerebral edema.

Lee debuted on these shores as Kato in the Green Hornet where he played this secondary, submissive side kick that does all the dirty work for his white partner. Fighting on command for... ah, yes... Van Williams. (*grab hat from bag*) Why am I always Short Round, when can I get to be Indiana Jones, Dr. Jones (*hum theme song and toss hat*)? I'm always playing second fiddle.

I deeply wished for an Asian American superhero my whole life. But hey if there's a void, why not fill it. So I've been brainstorming (*spacing*) the past few weeks on coming up with an Asian American superhero or superhero team which can patrol the streets of injustice and fight the evil words and bigoted individuals out there to help create a better world for us all. Aha!

I visualize a superhero who can show the humanity and depth of Asian Americans. A superhero for the monsters; to protect us from the "normal people". To bring the balance back.

This superhero isn't defined by amazing brain power, but rather through being amazingly well rounded. A polymath guardian who can defeat the greatest of enemies without even lifting a finger. My Asian American superhero can change sizes like Hanuman, like the Monkey King; who can carry the marginalized Asian people up on Himalayan sized shoulders. One who can speak to you telepathically; communicating through thoughts and ideas unhampered by hegemonic languages.

A true Captain Planet; rescuing our decayed globe from the colonizers who have pilfered and brutally waged war until nothing remained but earthen dust matted by the blood of the people and tears of the sky. A hero for the Asian Americans bullied in the schoolyard; instill within them a greater historical/cultural knowledge, teach self-love, self-confidence, and let them know things will be okay because they will be there every step of the way as we find and mold our identities out of clay from our ancestral land and our birth land...creating a homeland.

Most importantly he needs to be badass. Not just bad as in evil Dr. Fu Man Chu or an ass like ever subservient Mista Charlie Chan. Rather badass. If you mess with that Asian American kid in the bathroom again; (*pause*) a gargantuan gust of cyclonic wind will blow you away. (*spin to stage right*) Plus one to being Asian American. (*hi-five*) (*2 second beat change*)

(Blackout)

(End of Scene)

Act II

Scene 2

Side Effects...

Setting: All black room with inner demons/skeletons in closet.

(Fade In)

On being an individual and finding your place in the world. People with the disorder may hear voices others don't hear. I hear the voices of shame, hate, and disappointment. *(hear the voices)* Voices telling me to stop what I am doing, voices telling me I don't belong but amidst the sea of negativity there are a few bright, supportive, comforting sounds. *(hold onto the sounds)* Those are the ones we try so desperately to hold onto because we know those voices won't be there on our darkest days. We cope with the symptoms we experience as a result of living in a racialized world. We swallow the placebo pill *(choke)* of color blindness, political correctness, and post-racial utopia. But in reality, we still see double vision. We see people beaten down, humiliated, and broken words puked upon us so often that we observers even contract the disease of race. We ourselves begin to structure our thoughts and our worldview around that one thing.

We try to get over it, like washing our hands vigorously *(wash hands)* with soap, HCL, mercury, and hydroquinone in an attempt to erase our skin color. Erase the stigma of race; attempt to make life easier by aligning with the mainstream. Perfect solution: dissolution. Sometimes, you feel that other people around you can see your motives and read your mind; you feel that by trying to take agency you also lose agency. They want you to lose sight and lose hope of yourself. To become a nobody, a monster, a jiangshi. Indiscriminately using electroshock therapy/ lobotomies to ensure everyone continues the cycle and plays into the game. They win when you let yourself die. Perhaps, it's not my problem that I have this disorder. Perhaps that is not fair looking at my condition through such a negative, problematizing lens. Maybe I am schizophrenic on race; possessing a "heightened consciousness of memories and experiences" pertaining to this one thing. So insignificant to some... so crucially important to others. Maybe I am crazy? Maybe I am dead? *(2 second beat) (Wakes up)*

(End of Scene)

Act II

Scene 3

Asian (American Psycho)

Setting: Spoken word/slam poetry cafe, performing onstage.

Look into my psyche. (*get on block*)

See the true internal complexities of the wave of emotions and thoughts that sprint through my head. See the frustrated colonized.

Gain this perspective into the colonized mind. Look into the product of western imperialism. This coolie. This gook. This oriental. This chink. Dink. Let's be more creative?

Look at me. I am a display. I am a showcase, an exhibit.

Admire me and stare at me, exoticize me.

(*squinting*) A fine but inferior specimen, an insidiously invasive yellow species.

Illustrate my caricature. Dehumanize me. Look at the effeminate qualities and intrinsic weaknesses of me. Point out how I am flawed to begin with.

Uncle, tell me why I don't belong. Break me down, feed me lies, point out racial advancements, and token individuals of color within the system. Tom.

Uncle, tell me another statistic. Tell me how good things are because it's improved from before. Tell it to my face that these injustices are not that bad and thus I should be satisfied and content. Sam.

Tell me what language I should speak. Ching Chong. Tell me I can't speak that language. English.

America, tell me my place. Explain my culture to me; tell me what I can and can't do. Dream.

Depict the image I am supposed to conform to. Model. Tell me how you see me. Minority.

Kick me out of the country you imperialized. Sorry Charlie.

Treat me and call me your little Asian brother. Brother Jonathan.

Dangle the model minority carrot in front of me, incentivize me to assimilate and conform into the image you want me to be. Data.

Influence me to play this shallow foil of a character. Let me be the hardworking sidekick who never gets the credit or the spotlight. Stuck or star-struck?

Ignore me.

Erase me from history. Destroy my credibility. Devalue me. Cut out any representation of me. Take away my role models. Strip away my manhood. Castrate and humiliate me. Force me to think suicidal thoughts. Propagandize my mind, my mentality. Make me into you. But never ac-

cept me. Treat me as half a man, half an individual, half a spirit, half a human being... give me half your nationality.

You might as well take everything away.

Because half was never enough, half was never constitutional, half was never democratic, half was never just, half was never human.

So fuck the complacency, fuck the silence, fuck the repression, the systemic oppression, fuck the status quo, fuck giving me half. Fuck the word fuck. Fuck your constructs, fuck the hegemony. Fuck the apathy. Fuck the institutional ceiling. Fuck my enslaved mind. Because I've been fucked by this mentality, this discourse, my entire life. This is my voice. This is me Coming Out Asian American.

(pew) That felt good. (*get off block*)

Maybe I am an angry Asian man...but maybe I am more than just that. Maybe I don't like to be categorized.

Is coming out actually breaking out of the box or just going into another? This is me Coming In/Out Asian American. Instead of the dichotomy, there should just be infinite stages of "is" and/or states of being. (*pause*) This is me.

(*Fade Out*) (3-5 second beat change)

(*End of Scene*)

Act III

Scene 1

Your Mileage May Vary

Setting: Sitting in a car, driving aimlessly.

(*Fade In*)

(*push block towards the front of stage*)

I find comfort in driving. I am in my personal bubble; an insulated vessel with bank vault doors. An impregnable fortress; no inputs or outputs without my say. I'm in control.

With the doors locked, clutch in, the key in ignition...the voltage from the starter motor abruptly awakens the engine which spins, spins at faster and faster speeds. I turn the key 90 degrees. The galvanized steel pistons start slamming into the cylinder wall; drawing in air and fuel. I let go.

The perfect distribution of air and fuel in the cylinder is compressed and the spark plugs fire. With that...combustion begins and the engine roars to life.

I drive off. I drive away from people until they blur and recede into specks of nothingness. I take the scenic route with the rolling asphalt hills.

I leave that black box of pain, depression, and angst behind me. (*toss out window*) With this burden lifted off my chest; I can finally enjoy the sweet silences. With the past behind me, I venture forward...with each mile I am further removed. My rubber tires swallow up the road as I push my amnesic inclinations onto the gas pedal. I'm in the getaway car with one word on my mind: run. (*beat*)

And then I lose control. I collide (*gasp*) with a blacked out 2 door coupe. Red lights flash in front of me. Metal crunches, screeches as it is forced to wrap and crumple at the point of impact. (*lean sideways*) I spin sideways in this aluminum crate on wheels. My eyes trying to find a focal point, my mind/body cry out for order and feedback as I tightly grip the steering wheel. I lose contact... I drift.

Drifting is controlled chaos. Being in and out of control at the same time while speeding into a corner or turn. You adjust according to the inputs your vehicle gives you as you slide sideways. There's something beautiful and calming about the experience, time slows down as you focus on remaining in a state of oversteer. Following the crash, for a few fleeting moments I did feel alive, alert, and conscious (*stand up*) but I was out of control.

(*Fade Out*) (3-5 second beat change)

(*End of Scene*)

Act III

Scene 2

Swimming pools pt.2

Setting: Swimming pool, at a swim meet.

(*Fade In*) (*play recording*)

A: (Stretches with hands reaching up towards the ceiling, first to the right and then to the left. He shakes off the nerves, anxiety and loosens the sinews of his body. Staring at the world and just focusing on one thing. Time becomes relative and slows down to the mere seconds. There is no longer periphery but just a central narrow rectangle stretching in front of him.)

(He takes a step up onto a platform, takes three deep breaths and waits for what seems to be an eternity)

B: (Swimmers, on your mark, get set...ERRRRRRRRRR!)

A: (Dives into the sparkling emerald green waters. The shockingly ice cold water instantly wakes him up and his muscles tense. The noise and sounds around him just instantly become muted, there is this heavy silence permeated by the few splashes that break the surface.)

(He undulates his body vigorously through the water till the point where all the adrenaline kicks in and his body tells him he needs oxygen. He does not want to emerge yet, his kicks lose power and his lung scream at him to just open up and take in a gulp of the fresh air.)

(underwater kick)

(It is so attainable yet it is not... His lungs are exhausted....with no more stored air to be expended. His brain is constantly attacked by the one thought....breathe....live. And he finally acquiesces and pulls and flutter kicks his way up. Towards the shining light beyond the glassy surface of water. He pulls with all his might, every ounce of his body working in unison. And he bursts through the surface.)

(end of recording, bursts through)

“HEUGHHHHHHHHH...” *(begin butterfly stroke)*

This muted aaaahhhh hits your ears every time you take a breath. There are people, teammates, friends, family cheering for you as well as those rooting against you.

But you quickly dip back; face downwards and it all is drowned away.

It's just you and the water. What are you going to make out of this experience? Why are you doing this? What are your motivations?

Am I swimming for myself? Do I want to do this on the college level? Am I pushing myself hard enough? Have I truly found my limits? Do I do this for my team, my people? Am I here to prove myself to the world? Am I proving something to myself?

The final lap comes by. I am exhausted but I give it my all...knowing it will be over soon. All I am focused on is the one thought of finishing. Stroke, stroke, kick, flutter kick. Just a little bit further. Look at the swimmer on my left; he is an arm's length ahead. I need to catch up. I need to do better. My competitive streak kicks in and I sprint to the finish. I touch the finishing wall with my arms stretched out as far as I can. *(reach up towards ceiling)* My head bursts through the water one last time. My teammate flies over my head into the pool and continues the relay. One for the team. One for me. *(goggles come off)*

Swimming for me is meditative. Without it, I think I would go insane. It helps me forget about all the hassles of my daily life for those brief seconds spent in the water during races. During practice or when I swim by myself; I find myself able to dissect and break down issues in my life while floating through the motions. *(look toward the whiteboard)*

Water is like race; water is omnipresent and allows one buoyancy and also the ability to sink below. You can fight the water with all your strength but you will tire before it does. You can swim streamlined and smoothly following the weak currents on the surface or the bigger currents deep underneath. Going with the flow. You can fly through the water or meander slowly. The water gives you a false sense of control over it; you think you can handle yourself and that it's harmless until you do a belly flop in the water, until you are terrifyingly pulled away from shore by a rip tide. Water can kill us. It can take a variety of forms and states. It can seem insignificant; yet living organisms need this elixir of life. Every person is born out of it and is composed of water. Water is part of me as I am to water. I did not beat it, I am still treading water. We all are. Race is like water. We are survivors.

(goggles on, dive freeze) (Blackout)

(The end)

Performativity of Abject Identity: Jonathan Hsu's *Coming Out Asian American*

In my one-person performance *Coming Out Asian American*, the racialized body is placed in deracinated space and time where identity is fluidly navigated as history moves and is exchanged. I contend that Asian American identity is ambiguous, schizophrenic, and complex, and the medium of staged performance allows for the exploration of the affective body as a site for cultural/historical memory, exchange, and re-imagination. In the play, *Coming Out Asian American*, theater and performance are used to create a counter-monument that challenges the dominant Western mainstream discourse. At the same time, I utilize performance to find agency and liberation in the telling of my transnational, and polycultural story on liminal abjection to add to the greater Asian American communal narrative.

The performance took place on April 6th and 7th where an anonymous theatrical survey was conducted at the conclusion of each show. Please see appendix for the sample questionnaire.

The Asian American demographic is a marginalized subgroup in the United States subjected to colonial legacy, Western cultural hegemony, and cultural/political othering. The Asian American identity is shaped by the “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner” stereotype as well as discursive sexuality and nationalism (Wu, 18). The model minority construct touches on the idea of a desirable working and middle class immigrant community whose hard work ethic and humble ambition allow for upward socio-economic mobility and integration into Western society. This model minority myth is problematic as it grossly oversimplifies the diversity of the Asian American community. In addition, the myth allows for Asian Americans to be pit against

other minorities in the United States as the successful minority group. Asian Americans thereby become a racial buffer group where their experiences of racial discrimination are denied based upon their ‘success’ (Wu, 49). One respondent wrote in their post-show survey: “I heard a story from a black friend advocating for racial bias response to [William and Mary President Taylor] Reveley and he told them...“well you don’t normally think of Asians as being victims of racism””. The comment questions the validity and existence of racial discrimination which Asian Americans face on the William and Mary campus as well as in Western society as a whole. I address this myth and misconception in my performance.

The ambiguity implicit in the statement also reflects the “perpetual foreigner syndrome” whereas Asian Americans are inextricably tied to Asia and do not fit within the American racial paradigm (Wu, 87). One respondent wrote: “In the struggle to reconcile Asianness and Americanness...People see me for my race, but criticize me when I bring it up.” This response suggests that Asian Americans are stuck in a liminal space where if they strongly identify with their Asian heritage they are perceived as foreign. Even if they identify more strongly as ‘American’ they are still seen as outsiders and ostracized by society. If Asian Americans adopt a bicultural identity, they remain in this infinite state of flux of fitting in, standing out, and never belonging. This outsider syndrome justifies the denial of Asian American civil rights and posits the idea that Asian Americans cannot be loyal to the United States based solely on heritage and race. Cultural representations of Asian Americans in American pop culture has been (in)visible: either reifyin stereotyped constructs or opposing the dominant discourse for Asian Americans. *Coming Out Asian American*, deconstructs both “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner” myths while simulta-

neously critiquing the greater cultural underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Asian Americans in America.

In *Coming Out Asian American*, the term “Chinaman” among many other racial slurs is used to mark Asian Americans of many, different ethnicities as “fundamentally different from (and inferior to) a “norm,” as politically and biologically not-“American”” (Hsu, 9; Shimakawa, 2). Asian American is a “panethnic, self-identified political and social coalition/identity” that was created in response to “anti-Asian hostility” historically (Shimakawa, 2). The choosing of the term Asian American rather than the subcategory of Diasporic Tawainese-Chinese American was an intentional choice in the titling of my play to continue to reinvent and rekindle the political term in actively (re)creating and challenging this polycultural, liminal, and transnational “imagined community” (Anderson, 140).

Due to the political and cultural abjection of Asian Americans within America, the collective term, Asian American, operates as a counter-monument standing against the oppressive forces governing American society. In this sense, the construct, Asian American, can be seen as “a self-reflexive term rather than a normative one...positioned to critique the effects of the various configurations of power and knowledge through which the term comes to have meaning” (Nguyen, 5). In *Coming Out Asian American*, the lines: “instead of that dichotomy, there should just be infinite stages of “is” and/or states of being. This is me” challenge the fixity of constructs governing Asian America, names, stereotypes, etc. while bringing attention to the hegemonic powers creating and perpetuating these limiting dichotomies and definitions (Hsu,

13). Asian American abjection is necessary for the continuity of the normative, white American hegemonic discourse.

Karen Shimakawa uses Julie Kristeva's concept of abjection to argue that Asian Americans are the necessary other within the American national body, where the Asian American body as a visual construct in theater and performance is able to subversively undermine the "paradigm of abjection" (Shimakawa, 3). Abjection is described as the "movement between enacted by and on Asian Americans...that marks the boundaries of Asian American cultural (and sometimes legal) citizenship...occupying the seemingly contradictory, yet functionally essential, position of constituent element and radical other" (Shimakawa, 3). The discursive Asian American identity is politicized and performative through the manifested image of the racialized body onstage challenging the (in)visibility, (in/ex)clusion, and acceptance of the Asian American experience through deracinated time and space.

In *Coming Out Asian American*, my Asian American body is a site for continual cultural and historical exchange. The taking off of my clothes in the performance is not only structurally symbolic of the increasingly deeper sharing of my struggles and anxiety with the audience, but also a personal exploration of the most vulnerable, human, and secretive parts of myself. My half naked body acts as a subversive agent in challenging the cultural constructs, affective meanings, and expectations surrounding the bared skin of the Asian American male body. Affect is a "non-conscious experience of intensity...the body's way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience" (Shouse). The body of the Asian American male has a history of being "violently

marked, displaced, exploited, and managed” in the West (Park, 29). The transnational meanings and legacies attached to my abject body are displayed in my bridging of two geographic locations and cultures as a hyphenated, bicultural individual. The words of my script are animated in its manifestation through my physical body during performance; simultaneously deconstructing and destabilizing my liminal abjection.

Celine Parrenas Shimizu in *Straightjacket Sexualities* critically analyzes the “arrested representations” on screen of the sexual and “racialized straightjacket” of Asian American men (Shimizu, 1-2). The “inaccurate assessment of asexuality, effeminacy” as emasculation refers to the “straightjacket sexuality” ascribed to “historic and contemporary engagements of Asian American masculinity” in U.S. popular culture (Shimizu, 3). How does one construct “alternative racial, gender, and sexual identities that do not unwittingly reinforce whiteness and heteronormativity” (Suarez, 128)? How can Asian American male subjectivity reframe masculinity and sexuality through performance without reaffirming “sexual heteronormativity and gendered hierarchy” circumscribed to the dominant discourse on “male power and privilege” (Shimizu, 2)? How can I reclaim and reconstruct my own masculinity in my solo performance without reifying the existing and dominant structures of power, sexuality, and masculinity? Can *Coming Out Asian American* blur the discursive boundaries of gender and sexuality in demonstrating abject liminality?

In my play, *Coming Out Asian American*, I attempt to examine the racialized gender and sexuality of my Asian American body through the concept of “ethical manhood” governed by an awareness of “one’s position in a network of power relations” and exercising “responsibility in

wielding and enduring power” (Shimizu, 9). Through the character of ‘Teflon Jon’, I wanted to “remap what is valued in our society” concerning masculinity in acknowledging “the presence of vulnerability” through self-reflective and self-reflexive questioning (Shimizu, 9). The ‘Teflon Jon’ persona functions to mock the macho “hegemonic manhood” constructs as well as the phallic “naturalized propensity for violence and physical power” of Western masculinity (Shimizu, 5-6). When Teflon Jon states: “Cause you know, I’m tough right? Words can’t hurt me...but they did” he is critiquing the conflation of composure, toughness, and emotional control with the constructs of power, virility, masculinity (Hsu, 4). Shimizu mentions there needs to be “particular analysis of how privilege and power tensely intersect with subjugation and pain” within the revolving panoptic of “manhood, race, sexuality, and representation” (Shimizu, 8). I argue that Teflon Jon in his hyper-masculinity and subsequent disruption of said masculine, heteronormative discourses demonstrates how neo-ethical masculinity can be negotiated and reclaimed in a changing society by the liminal and abject Asian American male.

In *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen writes that “American Indian literature is never simply pure self-expression” but rather a constant exchange of knowledge and essence with one’s community through language (Allen, 55). “The ‘private soul at any public wall’ is a concept alien to American Indian thought” speaks to the idea that folklore and performance brings the individual into harmony with the greater community, humanity, and universe (Allen, 55). My play, *Coming Out Asian American* is the sharing of my “singular being with that of the community” through artistry and performance (Allen, 55). My story is one of many constituting the greater Asian American Pacific Islander community as a whole where “all parts of that whole are related to one another by virtue of their participation in the whole of being” (Allen, 60). I hope

that the telling of my narrative can “create community and shared agency” in inspiring audience participants to share their own stories thereby enriching the greater communal narrative (Miller, xxiii). The overwhelmingly positive, supportive, and constructive responses I received from my theatrical survey indicated that there exists a community with these shared experiences.

In the prologue of *Coming Out Asian American*, the character Xiao Jiangshi states: “my story is for the fellow monsters out there looking for their likeness” suggesting that the Asian American identity is discursively formed from both the singular and the collective, fluid and constant, national and transnational experiences of the community and its individual members (Hsu, 3). The telling of my story is liberating for me as well as my community because of the subversive act of adding to and critiquing the canons of Asian American and American popular culture. I hope that my performance will inspire other stories by expanding the greater the collective communal “consciousness” (Allen, 62). One respondent wrote: “As a white-American it made me more cognizant of how misunderstood and underrepresented Asian Americans are in American society, and how damaging and insidious these perceptions and images can be”. This realization is important in demonstrating that the marginalized/subalterned can be heard, acknowledged, and understood by the more privileged. Performative oral tradition is a process to gain individual agency by not only speaking for one of the subalterned but also addressing the marginalized community as a whole by recognizing the nuanced differences within said “imagined community” (Anderson, 140).

In *Coming Out Asian American*, the choice to write an autobiographical solo show was largely based on the evolving, changing state of Asian America and my own identity within said

larger construct/community. This performance was a challenge for me because this was my first endeavor independently writing, producing, and acting in a one person play. When I was onstage, I never felt alone because I treated “each individual performance’s audience as my creative partners” who would join me on my adventures both as observers and participants (Miller, xviii). The set of the show was minimalistic with the exception of the rehearsal cube, whiteboard, and backpack full of props largely due to my personal budget constraints because I had no outside funding. The props all had to fit into one swim bag; in designated pockets for ease of use and to allow for the performance to be mobile and easy to set up. I wanted the audience to use their imaginations to actively create the rest of the set where “we redesign more equitable social spaces for human beings to occupy” (Miller, xx). Instead of painting the picture of the Washington, D.C. Chinatown, I would rather the audience help in critically examining, re-imagining, and changing these ethnic enclaves and polycultural spaces. In the telling of episodic life experiences in my performances, I hope to potentially transform the realities of my own life.

The telling of my early encounters with bullying, racism, and violence is intended to illicit the recall of similar experiences by the audience. The intimacy of the “direct-to-the-audience first-person address” allows the space for audience members to relive their own narratives/memories (Miller, xxvi). In addition, this was the first time I told anyone about these traumatic and painful experiences. I am a fairly reticent individual and initially I was reluctant on exposing my vulnerabilities onstage for public consumption. However, I knew I had to face my inner demons or else they would end up killing me or driving me crazy from fear and anger. In Act II, Scene 2: Side Effect, the psychic damage of stereotypes and bullying is enacted on stage through a schizophrenic-like character. This character was inspired by Seung-Hui Cho as well as my own mental

anxieties, struggles, and psychic damage on being Asian American. I dealt with my fear and anger through writing. The finding of words to describe these repressed memories culminated into my play, *Coming Out Asian American*. Writing and rewriting the play allowed me to reflect more deeply on these formative events in my life allowing me to relive, rewrite, and tie together each ending. The power of writing this story allows me the potential to affect and predict the many possibilities in the ending of my narrative, enabling the regaining of agency and self.

Performing the play, *Coming Out Asian American*, was liberating in that I was able to express my emotions and let it all go onstage. I was able to reclaim my identity, my memories, and my body by throwing myself into the performance as a survival tactic/coping mechanism. The show consisted of my private and public intervention where I dealt with my insecurities, traumatic physical and metaphysical experiences, and conflicting emotions and thoughts through different personified characters. The characterization of my story enabled me to free myself on stage each night and heal myself in the process. Performing *Coming Out Asian American* saved my life. Augusto Boal writes in *The Theater of the Oppressed*, “that ‘all theater is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them’” implying that theater can be a vessel for liberation (Milling, 146). The theatrical device for my liberation is the first-person autobiographical solo performance which I used to explore ways in which my politicized, radicalized body and narrative can disrupt, enhance, and reshape the Asian American discursive identity.

The acting theory influential in my performance was the Stanislavski Method which favors realism and naturalism in the subconscious internalization and playing of a character.

Stanislavski writes in *An Actor Prepares*: “An actor is under the obligation to live his part inwardly, and then to give his experience an external embodiment” (Milling, 17). The actor is expected to imaginatively use and interpret the “‘given circumstances’ of the play” and meaning of words to craft a three dimensional character (Milling, 18). The role of a character within a play as well as the overarching storyline must be broken up into units with objectives logically driving the action of the piece. The objective should be derived from “finding a verb - an active motive” and subsequent “inner source of feeling” to drive the physical action and movement of the actor (Milling, 18). The creation of objectives and finding deep emotional memory allow for the realistic and naturalistic portrayal of characters in my play, *Coming Out Asian American*.

For example, in *Coming Out Asian American*, I play both the character of Ms. Metcalf (the guidance counselor) and my mother in the reenactment of a school phone call in Act I, Scene 3. In my portrayal of both characters, I had to find a “superobjective” for each character but also find smaller objectives to drive the action and create a sense of interaction within the scene (Milling, 20). Ms. Metcalf’s cheery professionalism manifested itself physically with the crossing of my legs and the tilting of my head to the right cradling the imaginary office phone. I adopted the animated demeanor of a telemarketer to creatively interpret the subtext of the scene and coax out “emotion memory” in adding complexity and nuance to Ms. Metcalf (Milling, 19). Through Stanislavski’s combination of physical, emotional, and textual memory and analysis I was able to create, re-imagine, and play the multifaceted characters in *Coming Out Asian American* in a realistic, truthful, and natural manner.

The staging of the performance at the College of William and Mary has significance in that this work of art privileges the Asian American/ ethnic gaze rather than the “white gaze” (Lee, 27). *Coming Out Asian American* employs presentational staging in directly addressing the audience to subvert the white gaze “even within the confines of realism’s fourth wall” (Lee, 44). The play questions the preconceptions of Asian Americans by the audience and draws “attention to the constructed nature of the onstage “reality”” (Lee, 44). The moments of discovery in my play make the audience continually realize and reassess their “exclusion from full knowledge and mastery” over the Asian American object, body, and narrative (Lee, 28). My play is unique in that it offers fluid and contemporary perspectives on race, ethnicity, and identity through the medium of theatrical performance. *Coming Out Asian American* cannot be representative of Asian America but rather seen as a performance of my lived narrative and consciousness “limited by [the] time, space, and scope” of my life (Lee, 218). The Asian American construct “like any other indicator of individual and collective identity, must constantly question its own prejudices, exclusions, hierarchies, and allow for change” (Lee, 218). *Coming Out Asian American* allows for the re-centering of Asian Americans as active participants and constructors of American popular culture and history.

In my play, *Coming Out Asian American*, the constructs and discourses governing the Asian American abjection and liminality are deconstructed and re-imagined through critical analysis of the affect, trauma, and memory in relation to historical/cultural exchange. The staged performative critique of stereotypes and the disruption of the fixity of the racialized and politicized body act to negotiate and reform Asian American identity. Western gender and sexuality constructs are challenged and blurred through performing the liminal abjection of the Asian

American identity. The ethnocentric gaze of the play directly challenges Western hegemonic ideology, time, and space. Solo performance and theater theory are utilized to illustrate how agency and liberation can be reclaimed both individually and potentially collectively through the sharing of a personal story on liminal abjection with the greater Asian American community at William and Mary.

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Appendix

Coming Out
Asian American

Written & Performed by
Jonathon Hsu

In Partial Fulfillment of the Honors in Asian American Studies

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Pre-show: coming into the show, list two words/phrases that describe Asian American (briefly explain)

Post-show: following the show, list two words/phrases that describe Asian American (briefly explain)

Comments on the Show
(Feel free to share some thoughts, ideas, suggestions about the performance)