

**"THE MOST AGILE ACTOR THIS LAND HAS EVER KNOWN":  
THE DIASPORIC PERFORMANCE/PERFORMATIVITY  
OF ASIAN AMERICAN MEN**

*"When you are someone like me, you will be many people all at once. You are a father, a dictator, a servant, the most agile actor this land has ever known. And all throughout you must be the favorite chaste love of the people."*

— John Kwang, *Native Speaker*

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**ABSTRACT**

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Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is a vital tool for discourse on the ethnic and gendered identities of Asian American men within the framework of the diasporic world. Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, Andrew Pham's *Catfish and Mandala*, and Frank Chin's *Donald Duk* each feature Asian American men who attempt to use performance and performativity as a way of responding to the conundrum of the diasporic identity in Asian American literature. *Native Speaker* unravels the multifaceted identity of John Kwang, a Korean-American politician. Despite his apparent virtue, the actions he takes during his campaign are driven by the performativity of the model minority, pushing Kwang to his edge until his multiplicity becomes his undoing. In *Catfish and Mandala*, Andrew Pham changes his surroundings by traveling back to his home country in search of pure Vietnamese nativity. Still, Pham's reliance on rigid historical scripts do not reflect his changed nation and his changed self, only proving the fundamental flaws of performativity. Finally, within *Donald Duk*, the concept of additive identity is what frees King Duk from the pitfalls of performativity and allows him to sustain a cultural, gendered, historical performance of his own steadfast will. King Duk's Cantonese opera performance ultimately resists the nation-state construct and as well as performativity by allowing Asian American immigrants to have strength in their cumulative historical hybridity and control over their performance of identity.

**INTRODUCTION**

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The strict construct of the native, a person who belongs to their country, abides by its distinct culture, and never steps outside of its lines, is simply unrealistic. According to Stuart Hall, "cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation" (Lowe 64). Even a state of pure nativity is just one point in a global continuum of nations, cultures, and identities that are continually shifting. However, despite the actual movement of communities and individuals, the reign of rigid nation-state constructs still prevail in dominant culture. Diasporic communities, strewn across the globe from their home country, must then try to accommodate to the strict nation-state identities of their home and host countries, however fictitious these boundaries may be.

Performance is a method of their survival. Though her work analyzes gender identity, Judith Butler provides an essential theory that helps to shed light on why that is. Her theory on gender performativity defines gender as "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 519). This system for identity, one that is constantly simulated through actions, abides by a fluidity that is just

as mobile as the “constant transformation” of diasporic communities that shift in and out of country lines. Butler’s approach provides a kind of flexibility that is absolutely necessary for diasporic communities. Cultural identity does not have to be bound by land, by racial inheritance, or racial appearance. Instead, an individual may be able govern their identity by the actions they choose to repeat.

For migrants who have broken the fundamental boundaries of the nation-state, performativity becomes a desperate heuristic for identity. Estranged from their home country and rejected from their host country, dispersed peoples must revise themselves, reconstruct their setting, and refashion their theories of identity. As a result, the native and their country thus becomes the actor and their stage.

While it is useful, performativity is not necessarily a *successful* method of reconciling diasporic rifts in identity. The successes and failures of these diasporic identities will mean the difference between *performance* and *performativity*. In her work, *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng uses Butler’s theory of gender performativity to discuss racial performances of gender. She describes performativity as “the reiteration of norms that precede, constrain, and exceed the performer,” (Cheng 57). More specifically, performativity is not just governed by action, but the repetition of “a scripted history” (Cheng 59). To that extent, performativity can be used to reiterate the racial scripts that obey the hegemony of the nation-state construct: stereotypical representations of Asian “natives” and their “countries.” Performance, on the other hand, is an “individual response” with “traditional assumptions of agency and will,” capable of a productive autonomy that is able to reach beyond the control of those racial scripts. Performance is clearly the most successful way for diasporic communities to rewrite themselves (Cheng 57, 59).

Cheng takes Butler’s work a step further and asks the question, “Can performance ever disturb performativity?” (Cheng 58). An analysis of the performative experiences of Asian American Men in literature will demonstrate that, yes, it can. Characters in *Native Speaker*, *Catfish and Mandala*, and *Donald Duk* act as fathers, sons, and leaders, as men, as Asians, and as Americans. John Kwang, Andrew Pham, and King Duk each enter the cultural stage, but only one succeeds in their identity formation. The stories of these Asian Americans prove the flaws of performativity, and the ways that performance *can* actually disturb it.

### **PERFORMING THE “VIRTUOUS” MAN**

In Chang-Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*, John Kwang’s ultimate downfall is the result of his performativity and the racialized circumstances that necessitated it. As mentioned before, performance is survival; And John Kwang, as a Korean-American man running for mayor of New York City, *must* perform in the public eye in order to win. During his campaign, Kwang is put under intense public scrutiny as he struggles to appease a multi-linguistic community mired in racial tensions. He tries desperately to come out on top as a virtuous man, “the favorite chaste love of the people,” but only ends up falling straight into the pit of the model minority stereotype (Lee 293).

Henry Park’s spying throughout the novel tracks the unraveling of Kwang’s many diasporic identities from rise to fall. When Henry first begins to profile him, he already sees Kwang as multi-layered. He says, “I believed I had a grasp of his identity, not only the many things he was to the public and to his family and to his staff and to me, but who he was to himself, the man he beheld in his most private mirror” (Lee 140). But Kwang becomes even more complex than this, wearing various masks, assuming multiple images. Later in the novel, this simple profile eventually becomes “scores and scores of his versions scattered about the room, myriad trunks of him, thistling branches, specied and catalogued, a thousand stills of him from every possible angle” (Lee 210). Because of the ever growing multiplicity of his identities, Kwang is not acting from one single performative script. Each mask that Kwang wears is, in fact, a script by itself. Performing the virtuous man, means managing many roles, racial and gendered. His masks are “reiterations of norms,” as Cheng says, a collection of compiled characters that hope to come off favorably, to achieve some kind of winning virtue, or rather, what is considered virtue by others (Cheng 57). Despite what honest intentions that Kwang may have underneath, the masks that he wears are generated from the political image of the Asian American he initially challenges, but inevitably succumbs to.

The image of John Kwang, the Korean American politician, is a relatively new idea to the New York public. Henry admits that he had never even imagined such a person to exist: “A Korean man, of his

age... Not just a respectable grocer or dry cleaner or doctor, but a larger public figure who was willing to speak and act outside the tight sphere of his family" (Lee 139). While the powerless Korean grocer is harmless, the idea of a Korean mayor is unfamiliar. John Kwang, in his mere existence, stretches the public imagination on what is possible, but also threatens the idea of the model minority that his community would rather hold on to. It is this that places him in such a precarious position, one that is ever so susceptible to the public's constant efforts to classify him on their terms.

One drunken night at a Korean Restaurant, Kwang opens up to Henry about what it is like to be in his position, a minority politician on the spotlight, trying to juggle the public sentiment. As racial tensions between Black and Korean communities grow more and more extreme, "Nothing John Kwang could say or do would win him praise. His sympathy for either side was a bias for one" (Lee 192-193). He might be seen as a pure Korean, disregarding all others in support of his Korean American allies. Otherwise, he might be a traitor, turning his back on his home country in favor of Black American needs. Either way, he is never just a politician, but is continually trapped under the category of minority. Even in a favorable light, in fact, *especially* in favorable circumstances, Kwang's image is still contorted to fit the model minority stereotype. Then, he might be considered dutiful but weak, faithful but foreign, no more powerful than the "respectable grocer or dry cleaner or doctor" that he supposedly rises above (Lee 139). Frankly, he explains the challenges that Asian Americans face, "When others construct and model you favorably, it's easy to let them keep at it, even if they start going off in ways that aren't immediately comfortable or right... How do you say no to what seems like a compliment?" (Lee 193). But his awareness isn't enough to overcome the prescriptive representations that his family, his followers, and the media demand from him. As he tries to control his public image, his image eventually starts to control him.

The struggles of this Asian American politician originate from the nature of racial imagery in America. In the first chapter of her book *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe discusses the reflective construction of the image of the Asian American. She writes that "the figure of the Asian immigrant has served as a 'screen,' a phantasmatic site, on which the nation projects a series of condensed, complicated anxieties regarding external and internal threats to the mutable coherence of the national body..." (Lowe 19). Rather than a solid representation of reality, this figure is more of a reflection, a mirror of America's anxieties. In Kwang's case, it is a mirror of the racialized anxieties of the New York community. He appears virtuous only when the community is in prosperity, and inevitably becomes more and more corrupted as racial violence begins to surge. Undoubtedly, Kwang tries to navigate these images, constantly revising the stereotypes that are projected onto him. Yet, he never stops being a "screen" of the American public, following a historical script that obeys national anxieties and changes faster than he can shift to accommodate it. Cheng writes, "The performative only appears original/natural to the extent that an *illusion* of agency may be maintained" (Cheng 58, emphasis added). Once that illusion is broken, one can clearly see that the reiteration of these performative scripts are stealing any agency Kwang may have had. Although he is trying to become elected as a leader, the public ends up governing his actions. And, in trying to appease the public, and win the election, he only perpetuates the racial power structures that authors the model minority.

Ultimately, Kwang never fails to perform. His downfall is the result of his dedication to the role, until his performativity corrupts the "final level that would not strip off. The last mask" (Lee 141). The real John Kwang. Many events lead to the novel's chaotic ending. After finding a spy in his ranks, Kwang's reactive orders end up killing two people, and destroying his offices. His patriarchal role in the community he organizes is ironically used to target illegal aliens for deportation. But, in Kwang's final scene, he finally crumbles completely underneath the weight of his many masks. Henry watches Kwang, "three bodies deep, barely protected by the plainclothes cops... People are grabbing his shoulders, his hair. His bandage is torn from his head. Everyone is shouting. A hundred mouths are shouting for him" (Lee 343). He is consumed, weighed down by the bulk of his scripts and torn apart by the very public he had tried so hard to please.

On that night in the Korean Restaurant, Kwang surmises an optimistic hope: "You should know, how there must be a way to speak truthfully and not be demonized or made a traitor" (Lee 197). In the

beginning, Kwang's masks do almost appear innocuous because of his genuine desire to be an honest and virtuous leader. However, the intention of the person beneath all of these faces is gradually degraded under the grating pressure of the roles he must play, and the "scripted history" he inevitably repeats.

### **CHANGING THE STAGE: THE ASIAN AMERICAN CHAMELEON**

While Kwang's story focuses on the calculated actions of the performer, Andrew Pham directs his attention to a component that is not anticipated by Cheng or Butler: the stage. In his memoir, *Catfish and Mandala*, Pham's goal throughout his journey of cycling to Vietnam is to reproduce his own cultural identity, searching for Vietnamese roots that he is sure will spring up once he returns to his birth place. Adhering to the construct of the "native" and their "country," Pham hopes to resurrect the Vietnamese native within him by transporting himself to the land it originated from. The stage thus becomes synonymous with landscape, food, and memory. However, the Vietnamese identity he once had is not a play that is reproducible.

Pham quits his job to pursue a nomadic lifestyle in his journey back to Vietnam and to his childhood roots. But the nature, and intention, of his journey is clearly performative in the ways that he relies on cultural scripts to simulate an artificial Vietnamese identity. When his plane arrives in Ho Chi Minh City, Pham is relieved to have finally reached his home country. He says, "I have biked 2,357 miles, sleeping in ditches along the road, cooking meager meals of steamed rice and boiled eggs over campfires, and bathing in creeks... Here's to you Saigon. I've come for my memories. Give me reconciliation" (Pham 62). The lifestyle he chooses to take on his journey comes with an expectation. He speaks as if living this difficult lifestyle will somehow make him worthy of the reconciliation he seeks. But his humility is contrived by his goal. Pham's mission is to collect a lost item, his native self; And, the lengths he goes to in order to achieve this end only end up proving this to be impossible. On the rest of his journey, Pham continues to steep himself in cultural experiences, talking and living with the locals, sleeping in Vietnam's most intimate crevices, eating all kinds of Vietnamese cuisine, even trying cobra-heart liquor. But surrounding himself with Vietnamese culture, repeating the historical scripts of the land, and recreating the stage of his childhood, doesn't change who Pham is in the present.

As Pham returns to the sites of his childhood, he travels with the false perception that cultural and historical scripts are constant, or at least have some semblance of permanence. He admits that he had expected "something spontaneous that would make everything all right and justify all the hardship I have gone through" (Pham 98). But when he visits Ly Thai To Boulevard, a place he used to live, he is shocked to find that nothing from his past remains. Instead, "Old houses have been felled, newer ones, dingier ones, have taken their place, and my old playground, the nooks, the corridors, the hidden alcoves have long been paved over" (Pham 100). As Pham asks Fourth Sister questions, he looks for the monuments of his childhood only to find her repeated answer to be "Gone. All gone." (Pham 101). Pham sees Vietnam as a stage he can return to, a stage that will return his original nativity back to him, because he sees this land as a fixed idea. But Vietnam has never been an item as stable as a crisp childhood memory. Arjun Appadurai's work on the instability of "landscapes" explains the factors that lead to Vietnam's inevitable change. Appadurai views lands as having "fluid, irregular shapes," and "deeply perspectival constructs, inflicted by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors" (Appadurai 33). Pham is not a single actor on the stage of Vietnam. Instead, Vietnam is a fluid landscape that is constituted out of many players: "nation-states, multinationals, diaspora communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements..." (Appadurai 33). In retrospect, Pham left Vietnam right after the Vietnam War, during a time of turbulent change; the country had been changing before and after Pham's time there and would not stop now. After seeing this, Pham laments, "I want to leave. This place is empty" (Pham 101). This may not be the Vietnam he came from, but, if anything, Pham's experiences prove that it is truly full of life, a different life. All this time, Pham has been trying to wrestle his past out of the land, rather than accepting the new Vietnam he encounters. His performativity is thus based on a historical script that is outdated, and can never offer him the nativity he so sorely seeks.

Rather than invoking his nativity, his return to Vietnam reveals the full extent of his own change since he last left the country as a child. After visiting his birth place, Phan Thiet, and realizing that it is not much different than Ly Thai To Boulevard, he recoils in disgrace. He confides that he's glad that no one is

here to “witne[ss] this unearthing of my roots.... In this Vietnamese muck, I am too American. Too refined, too removed from my *que*, my birth village. The sight of my roots repulses me. And this shames me deeply” (Pham 183). Cheng writes that the performative seems “original/natural” due to the “illusion of agency,” but it is also due to the illusion of constancy (Cheng 58). Over the course of his life, Pham has been “removed” from his birthplace, physically and culturally. Now, he is searching for a state of pure nativity that, as previously mentioned, is just one point in his own timeline. Like Hall reminds us, the historical scripts that Pham tries to repeat, and the historical land he returns to, “like everything which is historical... undergo constant transformation” (Lowe 64). Pham’s performativity fails because he is trying to perform a constant cultural identity within a land and within a body that is nothing like it once was. Pham is not a young Vietnamese boy anymore. He is a Vietnamese-American man. As he recognizes the changes of land and self, the non-essentialist resolutions he reaches at the end of his journey cope with the fact that Vietnam cannot give him the reconciliation he desires, no matter how low he bows.

Although performativity is certainly a method of survival, and a heuristic for identity, it cannot really offer an “original/natural” nativity, because it is based on a theory that is non-essentialist. Butler first uses the term in order to demonstrate that gender identity is not “a locus of agency from which various acts precede,” but rather, actions create the illusion of the cohesive identity (Butler 519). In the conclusion of his memoir, Pham’s compromise is quite similar, as he renames his cultural identity by instability, rather than against it. Pham declares, “I am a chameleon. And the best chameleon has no center, no truer sense of self than what he is in the instant” (Pham 339). Like Butler, Pham reconstitutes the self without “center,” without essence or inner identity. Rather than relying on historical scripts to bring him closer to a Vietnamese nativity, he abandons his search for a former self, a lost self, a native self, and surrenders to the inescapable change of land and identity.

The only issue with Pham’s conclusion is that the metaphor of the chameleon doesn’t offer him much agency over the creation of his own performance. He assimilates to his surroundings in a way that is flexible, but ultimately, not autonomous. In fact, he may then only fall into the same performative trap that Kwang does: allowing historical scripts to control him. Despite the metamorphic journey that he undergoes throughout his memoir, Pham is unable to escape the realm of the performative.

#### **ADDITIVE AGENCY: THE OPERA PERFORMANCE OF KING DUK**

Both Pham and Kwang try to gain some agency over their lives in their stories, but never break free from the constraints of performativity. Frank Chin’s *Donald Duk* demonstrates the ways in which *performance* offers the agency that these Asian American men seek. King Duk, and the diasporic and hybrid Cantonese opera community he is a part of, rewrite historical scripts with their own additive design and affirms this identity through their cultural performance.

King Duk adheres to a historical script that is not only flexible to a changing land, and a changing self, but, finally, autonomous. The Cantonese hybridity in the novel is produced by an agency over historical scripts in the midst of adversity. King Duk teaches his son the ways in which Cantonese people coped with their migration and dispersal around the world: “When China conquered the south, these people went further south, into Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand... Now they’re learning English. They still speak their Cantonese, their Chinese, their Viet or Lao or Cambodian, and French. Instead of giving anything up, they *add on*” (Chin 42, emphasis added). Even though King Duk was born in America, and describes these Cantonese as much stronger than him, he and the opera community all follow this additive doctrine. After being similarly displaced from the core of their identity, the opera people turned their allegiance inward and established a community defined by movement, a diasporic Cantonese culture that embraces change through the eclectic composition of their orchestra, with “Hawaiian twangy guitar, European violin and saxophone,” and flamenco guitar (Chin 53). King Duk becomes just as hybrid within his Chinatown restaurant, where he creates unique dishes by combining flavors from various cultures like “Fettuccine Alfredo with shark’s fin” (Chin 64). The additive nature of Cantonese hybridity represents a choice to change the Cantonese historical script and follow a script that leaves further room for constant revision.

Lowe concurs with hybridity's creative potential. She defines hybridity as "the formation of cultural objects and practices that are produced by the histories of uneven and unsynthetic power relations" (Lowe 67). Both King Duk and the opera people design cultural objects/practices that are quite different from their original cultural origins, as well as American perspectives of Asian-ness. Lowe clarifies that "Hybridity, in this sense, does not suggest the assimilation of Asian or immigrant practices to dominant forms" like Kwang's model minority scripts, or Pham's Vietnamese nation-state scripts (Lowe 67). Instead, it "marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination," and enables agency to individuals in the present (Lowe 67). Hybrid performance then becomes King Duk and the opera community's main method of survival in diasporic circumstances, one that finally affords agency.

King Duk's opera performance at the end of the novel is a pivotal moment in which his hybridity is affirmed by the reproduction of the powerful Chinese legend, Kwan Kung. The role itself is highly revered for its difficulty, and it's cultured, masculine power; it is "the greatest part of the greatest character in the opera" (Chin 67). Duk bluntly describes the seriousness of the role to his son, "No sex. No meat. No talk. No company. You do everything alone" (Chin 67). Although the opera itself is a community, King Duk's performance is a solitary "individual response," and one that abides by a strict historical script (Cheng 59). The role is a paragon of Chinese masculinity since "[r]eal men, real actors, real soldiers of the art don't lose control" (Chin 68). Duk warns that the consequences for playing the part wrong are dire; "If you don't get it right, the part gets you out there on the stage, and makes you pay, because Kwan Kung is always played right, or not at all" (Chin 68-9). In other words, if he fails to follow these rules, this historical script will control him, as it has controlled Pham and Kwang. King Duk's fortune, his masculinity, and his *agency* are all at stake during this performance.

However, King Duk's performance of Kwan Kung is not just an imitation of Chineseness. It is a test. Can this Chinese role be played "right" by a hybrid American-born Chinese man, a man who cooks multicultural food and has fathered a son that rejects his culture? Can Duk's individual performance disturb the performativity of the unmerciful script he follows? The ultimate result is a disturbance achievable through *addition*. King Duk is able to become Kwan Kung and experience the illusory reality of his script, without losing any part of himself in the process.

At the end of the book, King Duk passes this test, and while his actual final performance is not included, this is because Kwan Kung, or any Chinese script, is not the complete embodiment of King Duk's cultural identity (Chin 170). In contrast with his son, Donald, who wrestles with his Chineseness, King Duk knows who he is. He is a Chinese American man, who chose to travel to China at a young age, not in rejection of his American identity, or a search for nativity, but because of a choice to identity with the culture he found there: the Cantonese opera community (Chin 47). To play the role of Kwan Kung, and live to tell the tale, not only requires a regimen of isolation, but a strong sense of self that can withstand it. Flexible hybridity does not mean weakness, but assuming the *added* strength of many changed historical scripts. His ability to step in and out of such a difficult role is an affirmation of the success of King Duk's hybrid performance.

## **CONCLUSION**

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Cheng writes that "we [often] mistake performativity for performance" (Cheng 58). This confusion is played out in full through Pham and Kwang's stories, as they try to use performativity to gain an agency that is simply not possible by those means. King Duk's additive hybridity proves that truly being "the most agile actor this land has ever known" does not mean submitting to the historical script of performativity, but constructing an identity that is capable of withstanding it (Lee 293). Unlike the passive chameleon, King Duk chooses to take on this role of his own accord in spite of his American surroundings. While John Kwang's dedication to the racial script of the model minority leads to his downfall, Duk does not allow his scripts to overcome his own integrity. His commitment to the role is one out of personal identification, rather than the coercion of American or Asian scripts. King Duk's script does not stand on the false stability of the nation-state construct, the native and their country. Instead, he builds his script out of its shattered fragments.

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