Onstage Transformation and Identity Politics in Contemporary Asian American Theater

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ABSTRACT

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Onstage Transformation and Identity Politics in Contemporary Asian American Theater

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This dissertation is an in-depth investigation of the aesthetic and ideological function of onstage transformations (by means of costume and makeup change) as employed in contemporary theater performance written by Asian American artists. I explore the questions of how the device of transformation functions to embody ethnic and cultural identities that are implicated with gender and sexuality, and how such performances of identities intervene into the discourse of racialization and identity politics.

To address these questions, I conduct textual analysis through the lens of semiotics of theater (to examine transformations as visual and corporeal signifiers), Bertolt Brecht’s theory of *Verfremdungseffekt* and critical theories on the formation and representation of identities. My analysis focuses on four objects in detail: David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* (1988), Naomi Iizuka’s *36 Views* (2001), Julia Cho’s *BFE* (2005) and D’Lo’s solo performance *Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show* (2007).

My examination reveals that onstage transformations serve to present the multiplicity, hybridity and transformability of one’s identities, and therefore contest any essentialist or stereotypical notion of identity formation. Hence, in addition to intervening into the discourse of Asian American identities, these performances also complicate the issue of identity and problematize the ideology of identity politics in general. The
hybridity and heterogeneity embodied in onstage transformations imply the porousness of identity categories of ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality.
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This project arises out of my own struggles with identity and belonging as a Chinese student in the United States. I arrived in Athens, Ohio, in August, 2010, to begin my doctoral studies at Ohio University, and have been living in the US for seven years. Upon my everyday contact with American life and culture, I became more self-conscious of my ethnic and racial identity and my status as an ethnic minority in this white-dominant society. Being a minority and a foreigner, I became concerned with how others may see me as a representative of the collective of Chinese people and therefore how I talk and act may affect their perception of Chinese. Because of this concern, I grew more aware of popular stereotypes of Chinese and Asians. Although I am aware of and constantly critiquing how inaccurate and generalizing these stereotypes are, it turns out that the awareness of these tropes makes me double-think how I should represent myself so as to not meet these stereotypical impressions. For instance, bearing in mind the stereotype of Asians being shy and taciturn, I make efforts to speak up more in classroom and in public. When I reflect on such efforts to counteract the stereotypes, I understand how social stereotypes leave an impact on one’s identity and self-representation.

In Asian American theater performances, I find articulations of such struggles with identification and representation that resonate deeply with me. In a graduate seminar on Asian American performances, Professor Angela Ahlgren introduced me to a variety of plays and solo performances written by Asian American artists. I was amazed by the sensitivity and profundity with which these works articulate the experiences of being an ethnic minority of Asian descent in the white-dominant American society. Among them
David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* makes a particularly strong impression on me, especially when Song Liling undertakes a costume and makeup transformation onstage to reveal her/his identity. The thrill I felt when reading this scene is incomparable to my excitement when seeing how it is performed in a recording of the 1988 Broadway production. This visceral response I experienced as a spectator at the transformation of an Asian actor’s body onstage sparked my interest in transformations in Asian American theater and thus inspired this project.
INTRODUCTION

The thesis of this dissertation is that onstage transformation in Asian American performances functions to disrupt the realist convention of constituting identity, and thus intervenes into the discourse of identity dominant in contemporary American society. This innovative technique enables theater performance to present identities as multifaceted, hybrid and fluid, contesting any essentialist or stereotypical view of subjectivity construction.

My investigation begins with a close look at the meaning of “Asian American.” The term “Asian American” emerged from a political movement to contend with disparaging interpellations and racist representations. Historian Yuji Ichioka, an advocate of the Asian American movement, coined the term “Asian American” to replace the racist interpellation “Oriental” in the second half of the 1960s (E. Lee 7). Hence, the concept of “Asian American” is one of self-empowerment, serving the purpose of forming a political coalition against racism and discrimination.

The discourse of Orientalism and racism places racial, sexual and gender implications on the body of Asian Americans, and constructs an image and identity that has nothing to do with their actual experiences. In the 1960s, Asian Americans were not only underrepresented in mainstream media, but were almost always represented as racial stereotypes of emasculated males and submissive females such as “Lotus Blossom” or “Butterfly.” Actors of Asian heritage commiserated about losing roles to Caucasian actors, and being typecast into playing stereotypical Oriental roles. To create more creative freedom and acting opportunities for Asian American actors, in 1965 two
Hollywood actors James Hong and Beulah Quo set out to found the East West Players, the first Asian American theater company (E. Lee 1). Echoing with the anti-racist contention of the Asian American Movement, the East West Players set as one of its primary goals to amend the debasing Hollywood image of Oriental actors (E. Lee 45).

In the following decades, more Asian American theater companies were founded nationwide and a number of Asian American playwrights emerged with works that concerned with demystifying stereotypes and truthfully representing Asian American identities. In A History of Asian American Theatre, Esther Kim Lee provides the first detailed historiography of Asian American theater, and points out that there have been three waves in the development of Asian American theater. While the first two waves of Asian American playwrights took on the responsibility to represent the entire group of Asian Americans through their works, in the 1990s a new generation of Asian American playwrights emerged with different goals and identity politics. This “third wave of Asian American playwrights” saw identities as fluid and social categories as porous. While the previous generations endeavored to reconstruct the collective image of Asian Americans, the third wave of playwrights saw the notion of immutable, collective cultural identity as a myth, and “began to tell their individual stories, in which the Asian American identity is only a part of their complex experiences” (E. Lee 204).

In other words, the third wave of Asian American theater embodies the identity politics that Stuart Hall insightfully observes in his examination of Caribbean diasporic identity. In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall contends with two false preconceptions of identities: one assumes identities to be “an already accomplished fact,” (222) i.e.
immutable and fixed; the other sees identities as an essence shared by all the individuals of the group, i.e. as a collective “one true self” (223). By observing the Caribbean diaspora, Hall contests these misconceptions and argues that cultural identities are constantly shifting, transforming, and are constituted not only by shared cultural codes and historical experiences but also through individually different personal histories. Hall asserts, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past,” which is a process of negotiation between the first position, i.e. the socially constructed one, and the second position, i.e. the self-identified one. This negotiation is what Hall calls the “politics of identity,” or “politics of position,” because of which cultural identities are not an essence but a process of positioning (226).

The performances that I choose to focus on in this dissertation are illustrative of contemporary Asian American playwrights’ shared concern with this “politics of identity.” In *M. Butterfly* (1988), David Henry Hwang presents cross-cultural power relations and individuals’ cultural, gender identities as fluid and ambiguous. Naomi Iizuka’s *36 Views* (1999) tackles the issue of authenticity and essentialism regarding cultural identities, and presents the multiplicity and changeability of one’s self-presentations and identifications. Julia Cho’s *BFE* (2001) deals with the issues of plastic surgery and the discourse of beauty, and especially how they affect one’s gendered and racial identities. These plays present characters whose identities are not fixed or two-dimensional, but rather changeable, in development, and multi-faceted. In comparison with these more traditional plays, a solo performance is the focus of my last chapter. In
Ramble-Ations: One D’Lo Show (2007), D’Lo enacts six characters and transforms between different gender, ethnic, sexual identifications, embodying the fluidity and hybridity of one’s identifications.

To perform this updated politics of identity, Asian American playwrights ventured to explore updated theatrical techniques and employ a variety of Brechtian Verfremdung techniques to highlight the constructedness of the performance. Among these techniques, one dramatic form that these performances feature prominently is onstage bodily transformation, i.e. to have the actors remove or change their costume and makeup onstage. In M. Butterfly, Hwang makes heavy use of onstage transformations throughout the play, and three critical scenes of plot reversal and discovery are undertaken through the main characters’ transformations. Similarly, in 36 Views three main characters undergo transformations before the audience’s eyes to reveal hidden identities and thus serve as critical moments of plot development. Julia Cho’s BFE features two scenes of transformations that allow the audience to witness the main character’s cosmetic and plastic transformations and the consequential change of her subjectivity. As a solo performance, the audiences of D’Lo’s Ramble-Ations are aware that it is D’Lo who metamorphoses into six characters. This innate transformational nature of a solo show makes it a productive theatrical form for D’Lo to perform his hybrid identities.

In addition to these performances, there are other works by Asian American artists that I initially included in this project. These works also utilize the technique of transformation to perform identities, including David Henry Hwang’s Bondage (1992)
and Denise Uyehara’s solo performance *Hello (Sex) Kitty: Mad Asian Bitch on Wheels* (1995. As my vision for the project clarified during the research process, I decided to leave these objects out of my discussion for the following reasons. Firstly, I chose to focus on performances in which the artists make use of transformation to serve more multi-faceted and significant functions. For instance, compared to the heavy use of transformation in *M. Butterfly*, Hwang’s *Bondage* includes one onstage transformation at its climactic scene of discovery. This transformation also serves similar dramatic and political function as one of the transformations in *M. Butterfly*. In this respect, a discussion of *M. Butterfly* would be more illuminating for my project. Secondly, to investigate the variety of functions of onstage transformation, I chose to discuss performances that differs from one another in their focus and tackles varied aspects of Asian American identity. Therefore, between two works that are similar in their theatrical form and political contention, such as D’Lo’s and Uyehara’s solo performance, I decided to focus on the former which employs transformation more prominently.

It is of significance that so many contemporary Asian American playwrights make use of onstage transformation in their works. These playwrights use the technique of transformation to not only serve theatrical functions (such as to transition between scenes, or to push the plot forward), but more importantly to serve ideological and political functions. The multi-faceted significance of this technique is what I am exploring in this project. Through this dissertation I investigate in depth how onstage transformations function theatrically and politically in contemporary Asian American theater performances.
Despite the significance of the employment of this device, in previous literature only a few short articles have examined the use of onstage transformations in individual plays. There has not been a sufficient or systematic exploration of the use and function of this device in Asian American performances. The link between contemporary Asian American theater’s identity politics and the technique of transformations are neither fully acknowledged nor adequately studied. Through this project, in addition to analyzing the use of transformations in each performance, I observe the commonality and difference in these playwrights’ employment of this stage device. This perspective sheds light on the significance of onstage transformations to theatrically embody Asian American politics of identity, thereby illuminating a deeper understanding of the aesthetics and politics of contemporary Asian American theater.

Chapter One of this dissertation is an introduction to the theoretical lens for my textual analysis and the scholarly context for my investigation. This dissertation investigates the use of onstage transformation in contemporary Asian American theater. My inquiry focuses on how Asian American playwrights and performers employ onstage transformation as a device to produce dramatic and political effect. The methodology of this project includes interviews of the artists in addition to critical analysis of the scripts and the recordings of the performance through an interdisciplinary theoretical lens.

In Chapter Two, my analysis focuses on the employment of costume and makeup transformations in *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang. Drawing upon Bertolt Brecht’s theory on Epic Theater, I argue that Hwang employs onstage transformation as a Brechtian *Verfremdung* technique to reveal the artificiality of the performance, and thus
the constructedness of the presentation of identities. The characters’ transformations between personas epitomize the play’s attack on the discourse of Orientalism and specifically the essentialist stereotypes of Asian femininity, and thus present individuals’ identities as alterable and fluid rather than fixed.

Chapter Three focuses on Naomi Iizuka’s play 36 Views, in which three characters’ transformations signify transgressions of boundaries between ethnic, cultural, gender and sexual identity categories. In light of Iizuka’s stated attempt to question the notion of cultural authenticity, my analysis reveals that each transformation visualizes the disparity between the character’s hybrid cultural identifications and others’ two-dimensional perception of his/her identity as filtered through the notion of racial and cultural purity. To draw on Stuart Hall’s discussion on cultural identity, I argue that the staged process of transformations present identities as an ongoing process of production within representation, and therefore functions to “re-site” the boundaries between identity categories and demystify the notion of racial or cultural isolationism (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 228).

Julia Cho’s BFE is the focus of examination in Chapter Four. The play explores the impact of the racialized discourse of body aesthetics held by white-dominant American society on an Asian American teenage girl’s self-identity. To draw critical sources from both sociological investigations of the global phenomenon of plastic surgery and theories on beauty and beautification, I observe that the transformations in BFE visualize a process of subjugation of an individual’s body and psyche to the disciplining power of dominant discourse. Therefore, this play illustrates individuals’
negotiation or struggle with the interpellation of ideology. Grappling with the issues of individuals’ identities at the intersection of the discourse of racialization and beautification, *BFE* offers an in-depth reflection of the stakes of being an Asian American woman in the age of consumable plastic transformation.

Chapter Five deals with D’Lo’s solo performance *Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show*. Through the theoretical lens of “Disidentification” from Jose Munoz, I argue that D’Lo’s transformations between six personas embody the gender, sexual and cultural acts that he disidentifies with, i.e. that he “works on and against,” which is “a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within” (12). The costume and makeup transformations signify the disidenficatory reworking of identity boundaries, especially the working on and against the contradictions in his “Gay Hindu Hip Hop” identifications.

Chapter Six is a conclusion of how onstage transformations function theatrically and politically in contemporary Asian American performances. This chapter offers an overview of the performances regarding common themes and identity politics, and distinction in their theater forms and use of onstage transformations. Through this summarizing overview, I argue that onstage transformation is an innovative tool that Asian American playwrights use to theatrically embody their identity politics and make interventions into the discourse of identity. Furthermore, I discuss what ideological interventions that the playwrights intend to make, through these transformational performances, to the discourse of racialization and identity politics.
CHAPTER 1: METHODOLOGY AND PRIOR STUDIES

This dissertation employs semiotic analysis and Brecht’s lens of *Verfremdung* as its primary methodology. I focus on four objects, including the scripts and video, audio recordings of the plays, reviews of the production and interviews of the artists. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the plays/performances that I focus on include David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* (1988), Naomi Iizuka’s *36 Views* (2001), Julia Cho’s *BFE* (2005) and D’Lo’s solo performance *Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show* (2007). To conduct an analysis of each performance in depth, I adopt a theoretical framework that links the fields of theater studies, race studies, gender studies and queer studies, in addition to cultural studies on the formation and presentation of identities.

The Semiotics of Theater

My textual analysis focuses on the actors’ onstage makeup and costume transformations and their significations. In other words, my examination revolves around how the actors’ appearances function as signs, and what it means to have the actors change their appearances in front of the audience. Hence, the basis of my methodology is a semiotic approach of studying theater.

The semiotics of theater sees theater performance as a cultural system that communicates meanings. In *The Semiotics of Theater*, Erika Fischer-Lichte describes theater as a cultural system that generates “something that can be perceived with the senses as sounds, actions, objects to which a particular meaning is attached in the context of the culture in which they are produced” (1-2). In other words, theater as a cultural
system does not generate meanings, but creates signs that are associated with certain meanings in a cultural context. Because of these designated associations, the receivers of these signs can interpret and grasp meanings from the signs. For example, when a character appears onstage wearing a crown, the audience would probably identify the character’s status as a king because they recognize the symbolic meaning of the crown. This successful communication of meaning depends on the shared knowledge of the codes, i.e. the crown being a symbol of kingship, between the sender (theater maker) and receiver (audience).

This example illustrates Charles Morris’ argument that the communication of a sign consists of three factors: “that which acts as a sign, that which the sign refers to, and the effect on some interpreter in virtue of which the thing in question is a sign to that interpreter” (71). Therefore, to study the cultural system of theater through a semiotic approach requires critical investigation of these three aspects. As Keir Elam points out, the objects of semiotic study include “the different sign-systems and codes at work in society” as well as “the actual messages and texts produced thereby” (1). In this respect, to observe how the signs function in theater, we should not only examine the signs produced in performance and the meanings that the audience interprets from the signs, but also the cultural/social context that designates certain associations between the signifiers and the signified.

Drawing upon this observation of the three factors, in my analysis I contextualize the performances within the political and cultural atmosphere of contemporary American society and Asian American community where the signs are created and perceived. Asian
minority’s contention with the values of the white-dominant society of America foregrounds my investigation of the identity politics and aesthetics in Asian American performances. Through this investigation I also hope to observe how Asian American theater artists employ cultural and theatrical codes to not only communicate meanings but further make interventions into the sign-system.

To account for “the actual messages and texts produced,” I survey the reviews of these performances from the press, the critics and theater scholars in addition to the interviews of the artists. I also personally interviewed two of the playwrights to inquire about their intended messages behind their employment of certain signs, especially their purpose of incorporating onstage transformations. These surveys and interviews, combined with a view to the cultural context, are the basis on which I analyze the chosen performances and observe how onstage transformations function as theatrical signs to communicate meanings.

The Actor’s External Appearance as a Signifier of Identity

According to the semioticians’ account of the repertoire of theatrical codes, onstage transformation involves a set of codes embodied by the actor. In “The Sign in the Theater,” Polish semiotician Tadeusz Kowzan classified the theatrical sign-systems into thirteen systems (73) (see fig. 1). As seen from this classification, the actor’s onstage transformations primarily concern visual signs including the actor’s external appearance (makeup, hairstyle and costume) and expression of the body (movement of removing or putting on makeup, wig and costume). Thus, my analysis of transformations includes
examining these codes individually and moreover how they function in their combination. Additionally, another aspect of the actor’s appearance is accounted for in my examination: the actor’s body that almost always appears with racial and gender markers. In these Asian American performances that focus on the issues of racial, gender, and cultural identities, the actor’s racial and gendered body functions as a signifier and communicates significant meanings.

![Figure 1. Tadeusz Kowzan’s classification of the sign-systems of theater; Kowzan, Tadeusz. “The Sign in the Theater.” Diogenes, vol. 61, 1968, pp. 52-80.](image)

In theater, the actor’s visual signs are directly linked to the constitution of a character’s identity. Fischer-Lichte points out that the actor’s external appearance functions as a sign, “the meaning of which could be described as identity” (67). The
actor’s appearance, including her/his body (skin color, figure etc.), face, hair, and costume, is meticulously arranged to indicate a character’s membership in a certain caste, class, stratum, or social group. Furthermore, these visual signs are also indicative of a character’s values and thus her/his “attitude toward the hierarchy of values prevailing in this culture” (72). In other words, a character’s external appearance not only signifies her/his position in society, but also how s/he identifies in relation to the dominant values of society. This revealed link between a character’s appearance and identity becomes the foundation for my observation of the political function of onstage transformation. In light of this revelation, a change of appearance through onstage transformations may function as a theatrical gesture that signifies a change of how the character thinks of her/himself or how s/he is (or wishes to be) seen by others.

Additionally, since the external appearance is often the first sign that the audience receives about a character, it is based on this sign that the audience form their initial opinions and expectations on this character. As Fischer-Lichte indicates, the appearance not only signifies and suggests to the audience a person’s past and present (values, mood, attitude etc.), but also “conveys anticipations of future action” (67). To a certain extent, “the character’s identity is sufficiently secured and validated for us by this appearance—at least in the beginning and, so to speak, for our initial hypotheses about this figure” (68). In this respect, the actor’s external appearance functions as a sign, implying to the audience what to expect regarding how a character may act and behave.

In light of this signification of the actor’s appearance, an onstage transformation potentially serves to surprise the audience and upset their expectations of a character and
how the plot would develop. This perspective sheds light on my analysis of how onstage transformation functions aesthetically to serve for characterization and plot development.

Also, such a perspective illuminates my investigation of how onstage transformation functions ideologically to problematize the assumption that one’s appearance embodies the totality of one’s identity. As Peggy Phelan notes in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, the incongruity between the actor’s appearance and identity poses a question about “the inability to secure the relation between body and subjectivity” (150). When the external appearance undergoes a highly visible and drastic transformation before the audience’s eyes, this changeability serves to destabilize the established view of the character’s identity. This destabilization of the actor’s appearance and identity may serve to problematize the unquestioned association between one’s identity and one’s self-presentation.

**Onstage Transformation as a Brechtian Technique**

To investigate theater’s potential of making interventions into the discourse of identity, it is important to draw on Bertolt Brecht’s theorization of the Epic Theater and *Verfremdungseffekt*.

According to Brecht’s “Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny,*” epic theater is a reaction against the culinary kind of theater that produces hypnosis and intoxication of the audience (66). Based on a Marxist critique of capitalist ideology, Brecht criticizes his contemporary bourgeois theater for providing false representations of social life that is stripped of actual social structures (“Short Organon”)
Because of its status as an establishment by the bourgeois class, the bourgeois theater offers an illusionistic presentation of social relations, and thus numbs the audience’s critical awareness and hypnotizes them to immerse into this illusionism of reality. Hence, this kind of theater offers an aesthetic pleasure that is similar to narcotics, which coaxes the audience into a spellbound state. Brecht sees this pleasure as a weak (simple) pleasure, a “tasteless culinarity of vapid feasts for the eye or soul,” and thus is not suitable for the modern age (“Short Organon” 229-231).

Critiquing the “lamentable state” of the aesthetics of bourgeois theater, Brecht explores a new theater style that he calls Epic Theater, which is characterized by renewed theater aesthetics Verfremdung. Often translated into English as alienation, estrangement, defamiliarization, distancing or disillusion, Verfremdung is “a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labeling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, that is not to be taken for granted, not just natural” (“The Street Scene” 181). In other words, a representation producing Verfremdung is one that makes “the ordinary,” “the familiar” into “something unusual,” “unexpected” and thus calls for investigation and explanation (“Short Description” 192-193). It is a means to bring the audiences to be critical of the ordinary, i.e. what they usually take for granted, and facilitate their reflection on “the laws of cause and effect” and furthermore the larger social structures (“Theatre for Pleasure” 111). By awakening and appealing to the audience’s critical thinking, Brecht’s Verfremdung replaces the “weak (simple) pleasure” of bourgeois theater with “strong (composite) pleasures,” i.e. pleasures that are
“more intricate, more richly mediated, more contradictory and more momentous (“Short
Organon” 230-231).

These effects that Brecht attempts to achieve through *Verfremdung*, are called
*Verfremdungseffekt*, also abbreviated as “the V-effekt.” To achieve the *V-effekt*, Brecht
proposes some innovative theatrical techniques, one of which is onstage costume and
makeup transformation. By revealing the characters’ metamorphosis in front of the
audience, onstage transformation functions to expose the constructedness of the
characters’ identities, and underlines, rather than conceals, the artificiality of the
performance. To apply this framework in my analysis, I note that Asian American
performances, in their wrestling with the issue of identity, employ onstage
transformations to highlight the constructedness of an individual’s identity in theater and
in reality.

Onstage transformation is also tied to Epic Theater’s characterization, which
notes that the characters are “changeable” and human nature is a “process,” in contrast to
the fixed, unalterable characterization of what Brecht calls Dramatic Theater (“Notes on
the Opera” 65). This alterability denotes Brecht’s emphasis on the fluidity of character
development, and implies a vision of individual’s identity as changeable. Instead of
presenting the characters as “simply doers of their own particular deeds,” Brecht believes
that the audience should see them as “human beings: shifting raw material, not fully
formed and not fully defined, capable of surprising us” (“Intoxication” 45). This view of
individuals’ identities is especially illuminating for my investigation of the
characterization in Asian American performances and how onstage transformation functions to serve this strategy of characterization.

Brecht’s most exemplary use of onstage transformation is in *The Good Person of Szechwan*. During the interlude between scene four and scene five, the main female character Shen Teh puts on a mask and costume to transform into Shui Ta, who appears in a previous scene as Shen Teh’s tough and acumen cousin and her protector (Brecht, *The Good Person* 48-49). This transformation reveals that Shen Teh, whose kindness and generosity has been taken advantage of by the townspeople, has to adopt the persona of a ruthless man to protect her livelihood and self-interest. Brecht employs onstage transformation to signify the character’s moral dilemma and her struggles with the dominant ideology of her society, where the majority of people value money and self-interest over friendship and love. This split of Shen Teh’s identities exemplifies the Brechtian emphasis on creating characters that are changeable and presenting human nature as a process (“Notes on the Opera” 65). Furthermore, this transformation functions to surprise the audience and underline the unusualness of the character’s identifications, thereby affecting the audience to think about the social rules governing not only the characters’ but also their own actions in real life.

Brecht’s theorization of the theatrical and political functions of onstage transformation and his employment of this technique provides a foundation for me to explore the use of this technique in theatrical contention with dominant discourse of identity. As briefly discussed above, the fluid, ambiguous characterization in Asian American theater aided by stage transformation may destabilize the link between one’s
body and identity, and thus problematize some widely held assumptions regarding self-representation and identity. Moreover, Brecht’s repertoire of \textit{V-effekt} techniques allows me to compare conventional plays with solo performance and assess the aesthetic and political productivity of these forms of theater.

Identity and Identity Formation

To investigate the embodiment of identity politics in theater performance, it is necessary to explore the complex issues of identity formation.

Michel Foucault’s critical perspective illuminates a deeper understanding of the impact of dominant ideology on one’s body and subjectivity. In \textit{Discipline and Punish}, Foucault points out that the “power-knowledge relations” subjugate human bodies by means of the “body politic” (175). The discourse operates to discipline the subject’s body into the “docile body,” which is both subjugated and functional. The discipline of the body goes hand in hand with the construction of subjectivity. By means of disciplining and subjugating the subjects’ body, societal power relations and dominant discourse operates to construct individuals’ subjectivity to be docile, subordinate and economically, socially functional. This critical examination of subjectivity formation in relation to power offers a useful critical lens for this dissertation, especially for my analysis of Julia Cho’s play \textit{BFE} where the racialized discourse of beauty affects an Asian American teenage girl to permanently alter her body.

The struggle between one’s disposition and her/his designated position in society is a theme shared by all of the four performances analyzed in this project. In Jose Esteban
Munoz’s *Disidentifications*, he considers subjects who “must negotiate between a fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects,” i.e. subjects that are at the center of the Asian American performances of my analysis (6). To observe these subjects, Munoz develops the theoretical frame of “disidentification,” which is constructive for me to study the embodied negotiation of identities in my objects.

Munoz’s framework is based on Michael Pecheux’s observation of three modes in which a subject is constructed by ideological practices: identification, counteridentification and disidentification. Identification is where a “Good Subject” chooses the path of identification with discursive and ideological forms. To counteridentify is to “turn against the symbolic system” where “Bad Subjects” resist the images and identificatory sites offered by dominant ideology and proceed to rebel. Munoz believes that to identify and to counteridentify are often mixed in the process of subject formation, that “identifying with an object, person, lifestyle, history, political ideology, religious orientation, and so on, means also simultaneously and partially counteridentifying, as well as only partially identifying, with different aspects of the social and psychic world” (8). Hence, he proposes that the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, i.e. to disidentify, is more useful in observing the complex issue of subject construction. Munoz defines disidentification as follows:

Disidentification…neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology
(identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance. (11-12)

Seeing the limitation of a binary view of how one constructs one’s identity in relation to the dominant values, Munoz proposes to observe identity as a fluid, shifting process of negotiation between identification and counteridentification, between them and us. This mode replaces an either/or frame of mind with a logic of both/and that embraces ambiguity and hybridity.

In this respect, disidentification is a critical lens especially useful in observing multicultural communities, such as Asian American communities, and their contention with cultural identifications and belongings. In my analysis, I draw on Munoz’s framework to discuss the embodiment of disidentification through onstage transformation, especially in Chapter Five when I examine D’Lo’s transformation between six characters in his solo performance.

A discussion of Asian American performances and their embodiment of hybrid cultural identities also calls for theoretical tools that deal with postcolonial and diasporic identities. The theories that I utilize heavily in my analysis are Edward Said’s Orientalism and Stuart Hall’s observation on Caribbean identity.

As the previous chapter mentions, the term “Asian American” emerged in the 1960s for the purpose of replacing the disparaging, racist interpellation “Oriental.” Many
Asian American plays and performances are concerned with Orientalist stereotypes. The four performances discussed in this dissertation all, explicitly or implicitly, wrestle with the impact of stereotypes on Asian American’s construction of their identities, illustrating the relevance of Orientalist discourse in today’s society.

Edward Said defines Orientalism as a body of knowledge that is constructed for “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). It is a discourse based upon a distinction made between “the Orient” and “the Occident,” (2) specifically the notion of Western superiority over Oriental backwardness (7). The “Orient” is a made-up cultural entity. Correspondingly, the representation of the Orient is “a representation” that is not based on the historical reality of the Orient, but on “a sovereign Western consciousness” that selects and filters reality “according to a detailed logic governed…by battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections” (8). A significant characteristic of Orientalism is that it is a dogmatic view of “the Oriental” and it “approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint” (333).

Said’s observation of Orientalism is instrumental in my analysis in Chapter Two and Chapter Three. In M. Butterfly, David Henry Hwang intends to deconstruct the opera Madame Butterfly, which is a canonic Orientalist text and is responsible for creating the Butterfly stereotype of Asian femininity. Both this play and Naomi Iizuka’s 36 Views revolve around an incident of one’s misidentification of another’s identity because of an Orientalist, essentialist frame of mind. Said’s critical examination of Orientalist
discourse deepens my readings of these plays and sheds light on how onstage transformation functions to reenact or subvert stereotypes.

Echoing with Said’s criticism of essentialist, dogmatic view of identity, Stuart Hall points out the misleading assumptions that identity is fixed, and an essence shared by all the members of the group. In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall emphasizes that identity is not an essence but an ongoing process of positioning. Regarding the myth of the collective “one true self,” Hall notes that in the case of the Caribbean diaspora “our actual history” is shifting and divided, without the common historical experiences or shared cultural codes “which provide us…with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (223). This anti-essentialist view of identity and community resonates with Naomi Iizuka’s criticism of the notion of “cultural authenticity” in 36 Views and thus illuminates my examination of this play’s identity politics.

Prior Studies

Other scholars have previously contextualized the construction of the term “Asian American” and theorized its implication. Clarifying the implication of the term is significant for foregrounding my investigation.

In Timothy Yu’s book Race and the Avant-Garde, he reveals that the category “Asian American” is a historical and social construct that emerged in the 1960s in order to form a political coalition against anti-Asian racialization and replace the debasing term “Oriental” (7). In Karen Shimakawa’s book National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage, she draws on Julia Kristeva’s concept “abjection” in her examination of
the history of American immigration policy, and makes an observation that a tension between anti-Asian racialization and political coalition building is inherent in the term “Asian American” (2). She argues that “Asian Americanness functions as abject in relation to Americanness” in the sense that it occupies “the seemingly contradictory, yet functionally essential, position of constituent element and radical other” to U.S. Americanness (3). Yu and Shimakawa applied such a revelation in their analysis of Asian American art. They suggest that the tension between racialization and political coalition, between the interpellation (Louis Althusser uses this concept to describe the process by which ideology constitutes individuals’ identities through the discourse of hailing the subjects in social interactions) of “Oriental” and “Asian American,” underlies Asian American art and has to be accounted for. Informed by this approach, my examination of Asian American theater will focus on the dramatic presentation and negotiation of the tension inherent in Asian American identity.

On the other hand, the investigation of the term “Asian American” exposes the fact that it is composite in nature. The term is inherently multiethnic and heterogeneous in its implication. As Yu points out, the category “Asian American” is a historical and social construct “to tie together disparate ethnic groups under a single political and cultural umbrella” (7). What follows is that the category of “Asian American culture” is also a composite, which “attempts to include vastly different historical experiences” but can claim no organic continuity with any particular ethnic culture (7). The playwrights that I choose to focus on in this dissertation are from different ethnicities and cultural communities, including Chinese, Japanese/Latino, Korean and Sri Lankan Tamil.
Americans. Therefore, instead of representing a monolithic image of the collective Asian American, each performance focuses on individual experiences. This revelation refutes the assumption that there exists an essential entity of Asian American culture, and proves false the account that Asian American art is an expression of Asian American experience and identity.

As the term “Asian American” was constructed to replace the debasing interpellation “Oriental,” Asian Americans’ self-representation in theater is intended as an amendment to the Oriental stereotypes, and thus functions as a discourse of Asian American identity politics and representation politics. Esther Kim Lee’s investigation of the history of Asian American theater reveals that an important aim of Asian American theater is to protest Orientalist stereotypes that were perpetuated by Hollywood and other mass media (45).

The stereotypical and disparaging representations of Asian Americans were historically, legally constructed. Following the importation of labor from Asia, a series of exclusion laws and anti-miscegenation laws were passed after the 1850s, which prevented the immigration of Chinese women, and thus closed off options for marriages and created large bachelor communities of Chinese and Filipino immigrants. This social castration resulted in the construction of the stereotypical image of the feminine, asexual Asian man in mainstream media. The two most well-known Asian characters in early twentieth century popular culture, Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, exemplified this gendering of Asian males and presented a complex blend of “feminine” and “masculine” attributes (E. Lee 11).
This stereotype of Asian American male is followed by the stereotyping of Asian female as an object of white masculine desire. Female stereotypes were constructed and popularized by Orientalist romantic melodramas, such as *Madame Butterfly* (1900) by David Belasco and *The Yellow Jacket* (1912) by J. Harry Benrimo and George C. Hazelton. In these plays, the portrayal of Asian female split into two opposite but both highly sexualized stereotypes: submissive, self-sacrificing lotus blossom, or evil and powerful dragon lady. This discourse of Orientalism and racism places racial, sexual and gender implications on the body of Asian Americans, and constructs an image and identity that has nothing to do with their actual experiences.

An investigation of these stereotypes and the context in which they emerged and gained popularity is significant to foreground my examination of contemporary Asian American performances. In the performance texts that I focus on in this dissertation, Asian American playwrights and performers attempt to deconstruct the stereotypes and de-essentialize the image of Asians and Asian Americans. David Henry Hwang problematizes the stereotype of submissive, self-sacrificing Asian female in *M. Butterfly*, and challenges the image of Asian man as being emasculate. Iizuka’s *36 Views* upsets the exoticized and hyperheterosexualized image of Asian women. D’Lo’s solo show questions the domesticity of South Asian woman, and presents an alternative image of Asian female’s gender, sexual and cultural identifications. These performance texts are highly productive in not only exorcising the phantom of Orientalist stereotypes, but also problematizing the categories of race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender. As Dorinne Kondo contends in *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater*, Asian American
theater has the potential for intervening into the hegemony of Orientalism (5), and rewriting Asian American’s faces, i.e. to deconstruct the misrepresentation and reconstruct an image that is truthful (25).

The research on Asian American theater that is most illuminating for this dissertation comes from Josephine Lee’s book *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage*. Lee focuses on specificity of the medium of theater in her examination of the political productivity of Asian American performance texts, as a result of which her argument offers some revealing discovery about the strength of theater in activating the struggle of identity politics. Lee argues that theater is more productive in contesting Asian American identity because of the presence of the actual body, which not only problematizes the one-dimensional representation of Asian Americans, but also “complicates any abstraction of social categories” such as race and ethnicity (7). Lee’s assessment of power of the actual body in live theater performance sheds light on my examination of the effect of bodily transformation onstage. I would argue that while the presence of Asian American body problematizes stereotyping and abstracting Asian American identity, onstage transformation maximizes the visceral response from the spectators, and takes a further step in challenging their preconception of Asian American ethnic, cultural, and sexual identities.

Theater is a significant venue for questioning identity and representation politics for Asian Americans, because of the presence of the actual body in front of the audience and its revelation of the performativity of all human roles. As Lee points out, in theater performance, the presence of the actual body with its racial and gender marks elicits an
immediate, visceral response from the audience. To compare with literature and cinema, “the embodiedness of theater is experienced or felt, as well as seen and heard,” and “the physical response of the spectator to the body of the actor complicates any abstraction of social categories” (J. Lee 7). To expand Lee’s observation on the impact of embodiment in theater to examine bodily transformation, I probe into these questions in this dissertation: what is the effect on the spectators to see the body of the actor transforming and being transformable in theater? If the presence of the actor’s body complicates social categories, then how does the presence of a transformable body intervene into the discourse of identity?
CHAPTER 2: PERFORMING IDENTITIES IN TRANSFORMATIONS: ON DAVID HENRY HWANG’S *M. BUTTERFLY*

In David Henry Hwang’s Tony-Award winning play *M. Butterfly*, masquerade and role-playing serve critical functions for the aesthetic and political productivity of the play. Hwang employs metatheatrical devices such as play-within-the-play and role-playing-within-the-role to construct a performance of cultural identities that is self-conscious of its own constructedness. This self-awareness gains full force through costume and makeup transformations that take place onstage. The two main characters’ transformations constitute the critical moments for the narrative as well as function significantly to embody the ideological interventions of the play. Hwang states that he is interested in using onstage transformations to “move the plot forward” (Hwang, personal interview) and to explore the theme of “the fluidity of identity” (Hwang, “Interview with David Henry Hwang” 214). This chapter will examine the theatrical and ideological functions of the onstage transformations as a means to decipher the playwright’s aesthetic and critical interventions in *M. Butterfly*.

The play addresses the issues of racial, gender, sexual and cultural identities in a complex and ambiguous manner, and therefore draws a considerable amount of scholarly attention. A majority of scholarship focuses on the play’s exploration of the issue of identity and its implied identity politics through the lens of psychoanalysis, postcolonialism and/or performance studies. My examination of the play, however, shifts the focus to one of the theatrical means that Hwang employs to embody identities. In this chapter, my analysis of *M. Butterfly*’s first Broadway production looks at its theatrical
representation of body and corporeal signification of identity. I intend to explore the
relation between theater performance and identities, specifically the questions of how
identities are embodied and corporeally represented in the live performance, and whether
performances of identities have the capability to make interventions into the discourse of
identity politics. To tackle these questions, I draw on theories on body and identity from
various disciplines such as gender, ethnic and cultural studies, theater and performance
studies.

Emerging as a playwright in the 1980s, the playwright David Henry Hwang’s
success is partially due to the Reagan administration’s endorsement of the idea of a
“color-blind” society and multiculturalism (E. Lee 127-128). To gain more funding for
multicultural art, many mainstream regional theaters commissioned Asian American
plays, offering more opportunities for Asian American theater artists (128). The
beginning of Hwang’s career was the premiere of his first play FOB at the Public Theater
in 1980. Having his first play produced at a mainstream regional theater paved the way
for Hwang’s success outside Asian American communities. Today Hwang has become a
major writer of mainstream theater and has been acknowledged for breaking the racial
barrier in American theater (E. Lee 136). Among his body of works, M. Butterfly is the
most widely known and has been recognized as a canon in contemporary American
dramas.

Hwang’s M. Butterfly, directed by the British director John Dexter, premiered at
the National Theater in Washington D. C. on February 10, 1988. From there, it moved to
Eugene O’Neill Theatre on Broadway in March (Hwang, M. Butterfly 5). As soon as the
production opened, it received glowing reviews from the press and became an immediate success. It ran for 777 performances before closing in January, 1990 (“M. Butterfly—Broadway Play—Original”). Following its success with the audience and the critics, *M. Butterfly* won the Tony Award for best play for the year of 1988. ¹

As the first play by an Asian American writer to get produced on Broadway and receive mainstream success, Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* has evoked critical debate on its political implications. Many critics and scholars celebrated its intellectual depth and ideological interventions in crossing the boundaries of cultures, gender and sexual orientations. ² Less celebratory views, as represented by James Moy, argue that despite the playwright’s attempt to present a truer vision of what it means to be Asian, *M. Butterfly* reinforces the racial and sexual stereotypes of Asian men and “affirms a nefarious complicity with Anglo-American desire in its representation of otherness” (54). Angela Pao’s article “The Critic and the Butterfly” details and investigates the mixed reception in relation to the sociocultural contexts of the play’s production.

The conception of *M. Butterfly* started with a true story that Hwang read in *The New York Times* in 1986. A French foreign service officer, Bernard Bouriscot, was convicted of espionage for his twenty-year affair with a Beijing Opera actress Shi Peipu, who turned out to be not only a spy but also a man in drag. As soon as Hwang read the

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¹ After the play’s success at Broadway, Stuart Ostrow reconstituted a new cast for two national tours between 1990 and 1992 (Churnin). After the turn of the century, *M. Butterfly* received some revivals by a couple of regional theaters, including a 2004 production by Arena Stage at Washington, D.C., a 2006 production by TheatreWorks in California, a 2007 production by Philadelphia Theatre Company, a 2008 revival by Capital Repertory Theater in Albany, NY, a 2010 revival by Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, a production by The Gough Street Playhouse in San Francisco in 2011, a revival at the Shadowbox Theatre in New Orleans in December, 2012, and currently a revival on Broadway that runs from October, 2017 to February, 2018.

² To name a few: Frank Rich, Dorinne Kondo, Karen Shimakawa, Chong-Suk Han, and David Eng etc.
story, he began to conceive of a dramatized version of the story focused on one question: how could Bouriscot not know that his lover for twenty years was a man?

According to the story covered by Richard Bernstein in *The New York Times*, the diplomat explained his sexual misidentification as such: “He was very shy. I thought it was a Chinese custom” (qtd. in Bernstein). Taking cues from this statement, Hwang recognized an association of Bouriscot’s mentality with “a certain stereotyped view of Asians as bowing, blushing flowers” (“Author’s Notes” 94). Hwang also expanded on this image of Asians being shy and modest as constitutive of the trope of Butterfly, an essentialist perception of women with Asian heritage as being submissive and hyperfeminine. In the afterword to *M. Butterfly*, Hwang states that the play aims to deconstruct the “cultural stereotype” of Butterfly: “speaking of an Asian woman, we could sometimes say, ‘She’s pulling a Butterfly,’ which meant playing the submissive Oriental number” (95). In other words, this stereotype was widely circulated in the discourse and even consciously performed by women of Asian heritage in the contemporary society in the 1980s. In order to deconstruct the trope of Butterfly, Hwang traced back to the prototype of this image as his foil: Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Madame Butterfly*.

*Madame Butterfly* and Orientalism

Before unpacking Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, it is important to examine the opera that Hwang intended to deconstruct, i.e. Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*. The opera’s legacy has
established the Butterfly image as a cultural myth, which still haunts our imagination today.

The archetypal image of Madame Butterfly gained its popularity in Europe and America around the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. With Japan lowering her barriers to the West in the 1860s after two and a half centuries of seclusion, the growing interaction of the West with Japan resulted in a period of general fascination with Japanese themes in literature and art (Honey and Cole 3). As Honey and Cole point out, the story of Butterfly almost became a genre at the end of the nineteenth century (3), which culminated in Puccini’s opera *Madame Butterfly*.

This opera was inspired by two short stories and a dramatic adaptation. The first story that set up the narrative was “Madame Chrysantheme,” written in 1887 by Pierre Loti, the pseudonym of a naval officer Louis-Marie-Julien Viaud (E. Lee 61). In 1898, a short story titled “Madame Butterfly” by John Luther Long was published in *Century Magazine*. Long, a lawyer in Philadelphia based the story on Loti’s novel and a true story that his sister heard about during the time she lived in Japan. Long’s story caught the attention of David Belasco, an American playwright and impresario, who adapted it for the stage in 1900. Produced as a one-act play, *Madame Butterfly* became one of Belasco’s greatest successes. When the performance toured Britain later that year, Giacomo Puccini was among the audience. He was moved by the performance and inspired to compose *Madame Butterfly*, which turned out to be his most well-known opera (Honey and Cole 4).
The plot and characterization of the protagonist in Puccini’s operatic version of *Madame Butterfly* combines Loti and Long’s stories and Belasco’s theater adaptation. In the opera, U.S. Navy Lieutenant B. F. Pinkerton makes an arrangement to marry a fifteen-year-old geisha girl, Cio-Cio-San, who is also called Butterfly by her friends. While Pinkerton intends the marriage to be a fling before taking a “real” American wife, Cio-Cio-San devotes all her possessions to him, willing to abandon her religion and convert to Christianity for him. After Pinkerton leaves, Cio-Cio-San gives birth to his child and waits for his return. When Pinkerton returns with his American wife, they ask Cio-Cio-San to give up her child. Out of despair, she kills herself.

This ending was based on the changes that Belasco made to Long’s story. In Long’s text, Cio-Cio-San attempts to kill herself, but finally decides to live, taking her son and leaving the house. Belasco changed the ending to her suicide, which serves to further dramatize the story, elevate the tragedy and add to the emotional impact on the audience. Belasco’s change of the ending was also significant in the portrayal of the protagonist, by characterizing Cio-Cio-San as a dependent woman who has no purpose in life other than for a man who is unworthy of her love. Belasco also chose to bring Pinkerton to the scene of Cio-Cio-San’s death and depict his remorse, whereas in Long’s story Pinkerton never returns to the house or sees her again. Belasco’s changes increase the dramatic effects of the ending, and further romanticize the story and idealize the portrayal of the protagonist as a virtuous, self-sacrificial woman who has the courage to suffer and die for love.
The appeal of Madame Butterfly’s story to Puccini had something to do with his interest in the subjects of lower-class characters, which characterized the style of operatic naturalism in Italian operas in the late nineteenth century. Known as “verismo,” the style of operatic naturalism was influenced by Emile Zola’s call for an abandonment of mythical, historical subject matters in favor of turning to subjects from ordinary life and people from lower class (Carner 9). In an interview with a reporter, Puccini explained his fascination with the character Butterfly:

What tragedies or historical dramas? What heroes, what great memorable figures? I’m not cut out for that sort of thing. I am not a composer of great things; I feel the little things and don’t like to set anything other than little things...I loved Butterfly because she is a dear little woman who knew how to love so much that she was willing to die for it, and although she knew how to die like a “great historical figure,” is still a dear little woman, fragile and beloved like a Japanese doll, without pretensions. (qtd. in Wilson 105)

Puccini’s description of Cio-Cio-San as “a dear little woman” and fragile as “a Japanese doll” implies his perception of her as a hyperfeminine, innocent and almost child-like character. His fascination with the character denotes an Orientalist and imperialist view of Japanese people, especially Japanese women.

In the opera, the heroism of Cio-Cio-San’s character lies in her complete submission to Pinkerton’s domination to a point of sacrificial self-destruction. This power imbalance between Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San is an epitome of the Orientalist view that assumes the superiority of the West over the East. According to Edward Said,
Orientalism is a discourse based upon a distinction made between “the Orient” and “the Occident,” (2) specifically the notion of Western superiority over Oriental backwardness (7). Drawing inspiration from Michel Foucault’s notion of power and knowledge, Said contends that Orientalism is a body of knowledge that is constructed for “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). Relying on this positional superiority, Orientalism “puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (7).

In light of Said’s critique, the probability of Butterfly’s suicide at the end of the narrative and its emotional impact on its target audience, i.e. Western audience, is largely dependent on the economic, political, ideological dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized. In other words, it was the historical circumstance of the colonial encounter that made Butterfly’s self-sacrifice seem “natural” and tragically “beautiful” to Puccini and the Western audience. Maria Degabriele, in “From Madame Butterfly to Miss Saigon: One Hundred Years of Popular Orientalism,” argues that in Puccini’s operatic adaptation of “Madame Chrysanthême” and “Madame Butterfly,” the narrative was depoliticized and the protagonist was “re-constructed so as to fulfill a sado-masochistic fantasy of dying for love” (112). From this perspective, Madame Butterfly exemplifies what Said considers to be Orientalist texts, in which the representation of the Orient is “a re-presence” that is taken out of the historical reality and context, and therefore far from being “natural” depictions or “truth” (22). The intelligibility of this representation depends more on the West than the Orient, and is constructed for Western perception and consumption. As Said indicates, “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made cultural entities:
“as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West” (5).

The depoliticized narrative of Butterfly, according to Degabriele, has proliferated and evolved since Puccini’s opera and obtained its contemporary status as a cultural myth (117). As Said indicates, Orientalism proliferates into the general culture and becomes “a system of knowledge about the Orient” through generations of continued material investment (6). The myth of Butterfly gained popularity through Hollywood films such as The Barbarian and The Geisha (1958), and several film versions of Puccini’s opera (Carmine Gallone, 1954, Ken Russell, 1988 etc.). In 1989, the story was reworked by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg into a musical, Miss Saigon, reactivating the Butterfly myth through the historical events of the Vietnam War. The romance between an American naval lieutenant and Japanese geisha girl is replaced with one between an American soldier and a Vietnamese bar girl. The repetition and recycling of the myth consolidates the Butterfly imagery into a trope that is constitutive of the discourse of Orientalism, which “approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint” and holds onto a fundamentalist view of culture (Said 333). Miss Saigon’s premiere occurred around the same time as the Broadway run of M. Butterfly in 1989, which demonstrates how much the Butterfly myth still played into the popular imagination of East-West relations and Asian female identity.
“A Deconstructivist Madama Butterfly”

Hwang’s deconstruction of _Madame Butterfly_ is based on his recognition of both the ideological implication of this myth and its impact on the general culture. On one hand, his attempt to write a “deconstructivist _Madama Butterfly_” is based on an awareness of the intersection between racism and sexism in the Orientalist myth ( _M. Butterfly_ 86). In an interview with Matthew Amendt, Hwang elaborated on the critical interventions of _M. Butterfly_:

The West has, at least for the past few centuries...considered itself more powerful than the East, the west is masculine, the east is feminine, and therefore all those kinds of sexist stereotypes and race stereotypes lined up with one another. … I think that is one of the things that the play was trying to get at. (Hwang, “David Henry Hwang talks”)

In the play, Hwang casts doubt on the “naturalness” of the power hierarchy between Pinkerton and Butterfly, which symbolizes the relation between the West and the East, man and woman. At their first encounter, when Gallimard, the French diplomat, compliments the beauty of Madame Butterfly’s sacrifice, Song Liling, the actress who plays Butterfly, contends that the “beauty” of the story is informed by an imperialist point of view:

It’s one of your favorite fantasies, isn’t it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man. ...Consider it this way: what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture
and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it’s an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner—ah!—you find it beautiful. (Hwang, *M. Butterfly* 18)

By reversing the narrative, Song reveals the ideology that makes the Butterfly narrative appear probable and even natural, and thus “beautiful.” The opposite scenario makes the familiar narrative suddenly sound strange and absurd. Song’s satirical parody of *Madame Butterfly* serves to provoke the listeners, i.e. Gallimard and the audience, to see through the artificiality of the myth and question the deeper structure that makes one story beautiful and the other absurd. As Degabriele argues, the deconstruction of *Madame Butterfly*, which gains its power by means of depoliticization, begins with the “repoliticization” of it (114). This deconstructive satire of the Butterfly narrative reveals its historical, political and aesthetic contingency and recasts the myth in light of the political context that enables its production and proliferation.

In addition, the play is based on Hwang’s recognition of the ideological power of the essentialist trope of Butterfly to affect the mutual perceptions between individuals from different cultures and ethnicities. As mentioned previously, the conception of the plot began with him asking the question of what makes the sexual misidentification possible. Hwang’s answer was that “the diplomat must have fallen in love, not with a person, but with a fantasy stereotype” (“Author’s Notes” 85). In this sense, Hwang does not see the incident as an individual occurrence but places it within the larger structure of society and regards it as an epitome of the discourse of racialization. The question that he
explores in *M. Butterfly* concerns the larger structure of society that gives rise to and thus is reflected in this misidentification.

This attempt echoes what Bertolt Brecht regards as one function of theater, which is to “historicize” the everyday events, i.e. to inquire them in light of the larger structure of society ("*Verfremdung Effects*” 157) to reveal the “startling” in what is “natural” and “the laws of cause and effect” (“Theatre for Pleasure” 111). In light of Brecht’s notion of “historicizing theater,” one could see that *M. Butterfly* is Hwang’s attempt to inquire into the deeper cause of the sexual misidentification. This reflection leads to a conclusion that what mobilizes the incident is a fantasy stereotype of the “Oriental,” represented by Madame Butterfly. In this respect, *M. Butterfly* articulates a concern with the debilitating effect of the constructed, fossilized tropes of cultures, including the Orient and the Occident, on the intercultural and interracial contact between individuals.

In this sense, Hwang’s critique of the myth of Butterfly concerns not only its misrepresentation of Asian culture and people, but also the hegemonic status of this essentialist imagery in mass culture. Therefore, in *M. Butterfly*, Hwang attempts to deconstruct the myth by exposing the constructedness of the stereotype and thus questioning the notion of the power hierarchy that operates behind the construction of such a myth.

In order to dramatize the intellectual critique of the Butterfly myth, Hwang adopts some techniques of Brecht’s Epic Theater to highlight the constructedness of the performance. According to Brecht’s “Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*,” epic theater is a reaction against the culinary kind of theater that produces
hypnosis and intoxication on the audience (63). The epic theater explores

Verfremdungseffekt to dislodge the audience from emotional involvement with the events onstage and provoke them to critically reflect on the stage situation and make decisions (“On Experimental Theatre” 143-144). In other words, the epic theater emphasizes the theater’s function to be instructive and even to change society. In order to achieve this function, Brecht advances some theatrical techniques to create V-effekt to remind the audience of the artificiality of the performance.

One of the significant Brechtian techniques employed in M. Butterfly is narration. The play is narrated throughout from the perspective of Rene Gallimard, a prisoner and an ex-diplomat (see fig. 2). The first scene of the play opens with Gallimard sitting in his prison cell, while Song Liling appears upstage dancing to Peking Opera music and the “Love Duet” from Madame Butterfly. When Gallimard turns upstage admiring Song’s dancing, Song does not acknowledge his observation. When he turns away, Song disappears. This opening scene foregrounds the entire play as an ambiguous mixture of Gallimard’s memory and fantasy.
Moreover, when Gallimard starts to address the audience directly, he reveals that the story he is telling is one of his repeated attempts to re-imagine a better ending: “Alone in this cell, I sit night after night, watching our story play through my head, always searching for a new ending, one which redeems my honor, where she returns at last to my arms” (Hwang, M. Butterfly 9-10). The narration, mediated through Gallimard’s fantasy, functions to make apparent its constructedness and artificiality. As a Brechtian technique, the inclusion of the narrator serves multiple functions to produce the V-oeffekt. In M. Butterfly, Gallimard is not only an actor in his story, but more importantly an observer of the past events and a commentator on his actions. The self-reflexive intervention in his narration keeps the audience from indulging in the sentiment of the story, and provokes them to make their own judgment about Gallimard’s action.

Meanwhile, the opening scene frames Madame Butterfly as a play within the play, or what Richard Hornby terms as “the inner play,” which “the outer play” i.e. M. Butterfly.
Butterfly draws on (45). As the audience sees Gallimard moving between his own story and Madame Butterfly, as well as making comments on the opera, it becomes obvious that the inner play is a constructed performance. This revelation of the constructedness of the inner play further sheds light on the artificiality of the outer play. As Hornby points out, “the fact that the inner play is an obvious illusion…reminds us that the play we are watching is also an illusion, despite its vividness and excitement” (45). In other words, the play-within-the-play structure also functions to achieve the Brechtian V-effekt.

The Actors’ Transformations Onstage

Another significant Brechtian technique that Hwang employs is onstage costume and makeup transformations. To reenact the story of Madame Butterfly, Gallimard “pulls out a naval officer’s cap from under his crate, pops it on his head, and struts about” (Hwang, M. Butterfly 10). This costume transformation is followed by a change in the way he walks, indicating his transformation into Pinkerton, the naval officer in Madame Butterfly (see fig. 3). The minimalist costume addition adequately implies the link between Gallimard’s fantasy and the opera. However, it does not suffice to engender an illusion of complete transformation or cast a spell on the audience. Similar to a demonstration of a traffic accident, which Brecht refers to as a model for Verfremdung, it is made apparent that the reenactment of the opera initiated by the costume change is a demonstration of the event (“The Street Scene” 180). In this respect, the costume change functions to underscore, rather than conceal, the artificiality of this scene.
The employment of onstage transformation as such is crucial for *M. Butterfly*. In addition to the first costume change discussed above, there are four transformations, achieved by means of costume and makeup addition or removal, throughout the play. Each of the transformations serves structural, aesthetic and ideological functions in the performance.

The second transformation takes place as a transition between Gallimard’s recount of *Madame Butterfly* and his reminiscence of meeting Song Liling for the first time. Gallimard’s encounter with Song is during her performance of the death scene from Puccini’s opera, which transitions smoothly to Gallimard’s narration. In Gallimard’s fantastical reenactment, Madame Butterfly is imagined as Song Liling. When this imagined Butterfly changes into her wedding dress in Gallimard’s fantasy, it is the same process for Song dressing up for her singing at the German ambassador’s parlor.

Meanwhile, Gallimard breaks away from his reminiscence and begins to talk about his marriage, while having his wife Helga helping him to change into a tuxedo. Both Gallimard and Butterfly/Song’s transformations imply a gradual transition from the
fantasy of the opera to Gallimard’s memory of seeing Song perform the death scene. The process of transformation is used as a visual image that bridges the two scenes: Butterfly changing her clothes and Song putting on her costume. In this respect, Hwang’s employment of onstage costume transformations functions to suture the scenes and make the transition seamless, and in the meantime correspond to the presentation of the story as Gallimard’s stream of consciousness. In other words, here the playwright employs the transformations for the advantage of theatrical economy and effects.

Furthermore, the transformations between Butterfly and Song, Pinkerton and Gallimard, imply Gallimard’s identification of the Butterfly myth, in the sense that he identifies his relation with Song as a simulation of the sado-masochist relation between Pinkerton and Butterfly. This identification is key throughout the play, because the plot revolves around this identification and its shift. Hwang employs the Brechtian characterization of man as changeable rather than a fixed point (“Notes on the Opera” 65). The narrative of the play is largely dependent on the changeability of Gallimard and Song’s characters and subsequently their relationship.

In an interview with Hwang, he acknowledges that he is interested in using transformation as a dramatic device, as “a way to move plot forward” (Hwang, personal interview). The onstage transformations serve as the critical moments of discovery and reversal in the plot, which is demonstrated in the TV commercial for the first Broadway production. The commercial is composed of four shots of Gallimard and Song, showing each character before and after the transformations according to the plot development in
the play. The teaser’s condensation of the plot to the transformations demonstrates their significance in the narrative of the play.

Furthermore, as Hwang states in the interview, he was trying to deal with the fluidity of identity in *M. Butterfly*, especially concerning gender and power (Hwang, personal interview). In this respect, the transformations serve to turn the abstract notion of fluidity into visual, corporeal forms to embody the ideological underpinnings of the play. Each of the changes or transformations that Song and Gallimard undertake for the rest of the performance serves to problematize Gallimard’s perception of the sadomasochist power dynamics between him and Song. More significantly, these transformations complicate the issue of identification and reveal the artificiality, changeability and multiplicity of an individual’s identities. In order to unpack the aesthetic and ideological implications of *M. Butterfly*, each of the transformation scenes will be examined in detail.

**Butterfly and the Dragon Lady**

Song’s characterization alters through peeling off layers of disguise. At the first encounter with Gallimard, Song is a sharp critic of the imperialist fantasy behind the narrative of *Madame Butterfly*. As the romantic interest rises between Gallimard and Song, she confides that her outspokenness is a disguise, an attempt to imitate a Western woman. However, her essential Chineseness, i.e. being modest and shy, conflicts with the “Western woman’s strong face” that she puts up (Hwang, *M. Butterfly* 27).
Song’s revelation strikes Gallimard as a confession of her sense of inferiority to Western women and more so to him, which cultivates in him a sense of superiority and power. When Song bares herself as fearful and powerless in front of Gallimard, he identifies the powerful position with Pinkerton’s in the Butterfly myth. As soon as he identifies with Pinkerton, Gallimard starts to toy with Song’s feeling as a sadistic test to confirm his power over her and subsequently to identify her as his Butterfly. This sense of empowerment has an impact on Gallimard’s masculine identification and changes him into an “aggressive confident...thing,” which earns him a promotion in the embassy (Hwang, M. Butterfly 32). Gallimard’s psychological change demonstrates the construction of his masculine identity as positioned opposite to Song’s performance of femininity. The constitutive role of the Butterfly persona in Gallimard’s identification symbolizes the relationship between the imagery of the Orient and the identity of the West. As Said contends, the Orient is …one of Europe’s “deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (1-2). In other words, Europe defines its identity against the Other, i.e. the Orient. In M. Butterfly, it is Song’s submissive and masochist docility that facilitates Gallimard’s growing assurance of his masculinity and power.

As Gallimard enjoys the benefit of being a Pinkerton, Song is revealed to the audience to be a spy and a man. The meeting between Song and Comrade Chin begins with a tableau with Chin opening the door and Song standing, wearing a qi-pao dress and heavy makeup with her right hand on her waist (see fig. 4). Song’s appearance recalls the
stereotypical image of the Dragon Lady, a cunning, deceitful female image populated by the character Ling Moy in a series of Fu Manchu movies. The visual resemblance with Dragon Lady is enhanced by the act of Song leaking the details of America’s plans to bomb Vietnam, which she learns from Gallimard, to Comrade Chin, a Chinese communist. This scene immediately contrasts with the submissive Butterfly persona (see fig. 5), and exposes the modesty and shyness of her so-called essential Chineseness as a deliberate performance.

The coexistence of these two contrasting stereotypes of women of Asian heritage in Song’s performance is based on the screen persona of Anna May Wong, the first Asian American actress who made a career in Hollywood. In the play, when Song invites Gallimard to her parlor for the first time, the stage direction indicates that she dresses up in a gown from the 1920s and “stands in the doorway looking like Anna May Wong” (Hwang, *M. Butterfly* 25). In David Cronenberg’s film adaptation, based on Hwang’s screenplay, Song explains to Comrade Chin that her disguise is based on the images of Anna May Wong in Hollywood magazines (see fig. 6).
Since Anna May Wong is a model for Song’s conscious mimicry, an examination of the signification of Wong’s image and film persona could illuminate our understanding of the roles that Song is consciously performing. Born as the third generation Chinese American in San Francisco in 1905, Wong’s pursuit of a film career was a struggle against racism and typecasting in Hollywood. She got her first major role at the age of seventeen in *The Toll of the Sea*, in which her character “Lotus Flower” was a reworked image of Madame Butterfly (Doromal). But Wong’s more widely recognized roles are the villainesses, or the Dragon Lady, such as in *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931) and *Shanghai Express* (1932). It was believed that the term “Dragon Lady” was coined out of *The Daughter of the Dragon*, one of the Fu Manchu films, in which Wong played a deceitful, manipulative villainess that turned out to be Fu Manchu’s daughter. Throughout her film career, Wong had been typecast as either Butterfly or the Dragon Lady. Her screen persona epitomized the way in which Asian women were represented in Hollywood films around the 1920s and 30s.
Drawing inspiration from Wong, Song’s performance is modeled on the Westerners’ imagination and two-dimensional representation of Asian women. In “From Yellow Peril to Yellow Fever: The Representation of Asians from Anna May Wong to Lucy Liu,” Krystle Doromal points out that Wong represents the idea of artifice through the stereotypes of Asian women that she was cast to perform. In this sense, Song’s performance is the mimicry of another artificial construct, and therefore as what Jean Baudrillard terms as “simulacrum” that is hyperreal and has no real life referent. In Leighton Grist’s analysis of the film adaptation of *M. Butterfly*, he points out that Song’s revelation of learning to be the essential Oriental woman from the Hollywood magazines exposes that femininity is “assumed, performed, and culturally determined” (10). Song’s cross-dressing to pass as a woman makes apparent that, in reference to Joan Riviere’s statement, womanliness is a masquerade. In other words, Song’s performance of womanhood reveals that femininity is performative itself.

Furthermore, the womanliness that Song performs is also racialized. To expand on Riviere’s notion of womanliness as a masquerade, the intersection of the essential Orientalness and femininity not only exposes the performativity of womanliness, but also the constructedness of the Orient as well. In Grist’s analysis of the femininity that Song reenacts, he points out that she performs “exaggerated and stylized varieties of femininity,” which “combines insinuating (false) modesty with excessive ‘feminine,’ ‘Oriental’ submissiveness” (11). Grist’s observation of the film was fleshed out even more in the first Broadway production of *M. Butterfly*. B. D. Wong, who played Song Liling, delivered a performance that was self-consciously excessive (see fig. 7). In
Wong’s reenactment of the Butterfly image, he adopts the corporeal signs of hyperfemininity so that his manner of talking, gesturing, walking, standing and reclining all seem to embody a hyperbolic version of femininity. His female persona’s submissiveness and self-debasement are presented as excessive and problematic.


Thus the act of adopting the masquerade of womanliness and the Oriental makes possible a slippage in the mimicry and the potential subversion of these tropes. As Mary Ann Doane argues, “The effectivity of masquerade lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable” (26). From this perspective, Song’s performance is not only modeled on Anna May Wong’s screen persona, but also her way of acting that was potentially subversive of these personas. In “The Art of Screen Passing: Anna May Wong’s Yellow Yellowface Performance in the Art Deco Era,”
Yiman Wang argues that Wong had adopted a performative strategy of passing so as to “act and overact in a wide range of racialized roles, by which she brings to the fore the stereotypical and Orientalist underpinnings of these roles” (160-161). Borrowing the concept of “Black Blackface” proposed by Arthur Knight, Wang argues that Wong’s performative strategy should be seen as “Yellow Yellowface Performance,” in which she imitates and appropriates the conventions of yellowface performance. In her reenactment of the “authentic exoticism” of Asian stereotypes, Wong’s acting was ironically excessive, and her overacting was self-conscious (170-172). To extend this examination to the film adaptation of *M. Butterfly*, Wang opines that Song Liling consciously adopts Anna May Wong’s tactic of yellow yellowface performance and acts out the subversive potential in mocking the Butterfly myth. By this means, Song demonstrates “how Orientalism can in fact backfire and destroy those who create and sustain the Orientalist myth” (179).

From Kimono to Armani Suit: Butterfly’s Metamorphosis

The subversive potential of Song’s mimicry is not fully realized until the costume transformations that reveal Song’s biological sex as a man. As Grist argues, the potential for deconstruction is enhanced by the evident disjunction between Song’s biological sex and his assumed femininities (11). Song reveals his biological sex to Gallimard through two bodily transformations by means of makeup and costume change. The alterability of Song’s identity by changing clothes, makeup and hair exposes the constructedness of an individual’s identity as mere representations and displays.
The most critical transformation takes place at the intermission between Act Two and Three, and the placement of this scene has certain implications. Usually, the actor’s removal of his disguise is undertaken backstage during the break. However, David Henry Hwang deliberately locates this transformation onstage to allow the audience to voyeur into and witness the magical process of Song’s metamorphosis.

This transformation is choreographed to be a spectacle. Song explains to the audience that s/he is going to change and invites the audience to leave their seats for a break, as she sits down opposite to a mirror with a wash basin of water. Accompanied initially with fast-paced music featuring mainly *pipa* (Chinese lute), Song washes her face and dexterously removes the eyelashes, mascara and lipsticks with cotton balls. Taking off the hairpiece of the Butterfly costume, Song reveals his short haircut and skillfully parts his hair after spraying some water onto it. With the help of two *kurogo* dancers, i.e. stage assistants from Japanese kabuki theater who are dressed in all black, Song takes off his kimono and reveals his shirt and suit pants underneath. While the dancers help Song put on an Armani suit, the accompaniment changes drastically to Jazz music with saxophone. The whole transformation is undertaken to the beat of the music in a quick pace and takes place in less than five minutes. As soon as the transformation is complete, Song poses with both his hands in the pockets of his pants. This contrasts radically with the posture of his Butterfly persona, who often has her hands in front of or on her chest. After posing, Song lifts his leg and slowly takes a wide stride, and begins to speak in his real voice. The way he walks stands in contrast to the small steps of his Butterfly persona and his low voice with Butterfly’s high pitch tone (see fig. 8).
Figure 8. Screenshots of the TV commercial of *M. Butterfly* in 1988. The commercial is composed with Gallimard and Song’s transformations by means of montage. The images of Song’s personas are juxtaposed and overlapped during the transition between two shots.

The transformation makes visible the process of identity construction through changing one’s appearance, and exposes the artificiality and deceptiveness of the Butterfly image. In reference to Homi Bhabha’s discussion of “colonial mimicry,” Song’s deliberate imitation of the stereotypes produces slippage or difference from the stereotype, and therefore “necessarily raises the question of the authorization of colonial representations” (90). Similarly, Said points out that “Orientalism is premised upon exteriority,” the principal product of which is a representation that “relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient” (22). The visibility and readability of the Orient relies upon “institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes…not upon a distant and amorphous Orient” (22). As Song’s onstage transformation reveals, the
representation of the identity of the Orient is an exterior, a facade that can be easily put on and taken off. The disjuncture between Song’s representation as Butterfly and Song’s biological identity as a man visualizes the rupture between the essentialist definition of the Orient and its heterogeneous presence and identity.

In the court trial scene, Song’s explication of the Westerner’s mentality that makes possible the misidentification serves to further problematize the authority and legitimacy of the Westerner’s representations of “the Orient”:

The West has sort of an international rape mentality towards the East…. The West thinks of itself as masculine—big guns, big industry, big money—so the East is feminine—weak, delicate, poor…the feminine mystique…when he [Gallimard] finally met his fantasy woman, he wanted more than anything to believe that she was, in fact, a woman. And second, I am an Oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man. (Hwang, M. Butterfly 62)

As such, the connotation of sexism in the West’s imagination of the East, the colonizer’s of the colonized, mobilizes the Orientalist discourse of feminization and emasculation of the “Oriental.” As the shy, self-debasing and self-sacrificial Butterfly that Song plays to lure Gallimard, Asian femininity is imagined by the West as hyperfeminine, in a sense that it is more powerless in front of male dominance. Meanwhile, this colonialist mentality is tied to the emasculation of Asian men, as the notion of masculinity is contingent on political, military and economic power.

In this sense, the transformation of Song from the Oriental Butterfly to a man in an Armani suit not only constitutes a moment of discovery and reversal in the narrative of
the play, but also serves as a visual signifier of Song’s powerful position over Gallimard (see fig. 9). By means of performing a politically subjugated image of the Butterfly, Song achieves his aim of manipulating Gallimard. When the true power relation between Song and Gallimard is revealed through the transformation and the court trial, Song’s powerful position is symbolized by the Armani suit he wears. In Anne Anlin Cheng’s analysis of *M. Butterfly*, she makes an observation that “Song does not come to power or his political critique by acquiring some authentic Chinese male identity” but by “donning an Armani suit and adopting the colonial voice” (27). Song’s choice of this particular brand of suits has significant implications. According to *Fashion, Costume, and Culture*, “during the 1980s the Armani suit projected authority and self-confidence and became the ultimate ‘power suit,’ a name given to suits that were meant to display the power, or at least the ambition, of the wearer” (Pendergast and Pendergast 980-981). Informed by this perspective, what Song transforms into from the Butterfly persona is another disguise that is modeled after the powerful position of the Western colonizer.
The Naked Body and Masked Identities

The performativity of this identity is revealed in the following scene where Song strips naked in front of Gallimard. However, despite Song’s peeling off his exterior disguise, this transformation does not reveal any fixed identity, but rather the complexity and multiplicity of Song’s gender, sexual and cultural identifications.

In the scene following the court trial, Gallimard confronts Song, which also appears to be part of Gallimard’s fantasy. As Song begins to take off his clothes, Gallimard begs him not to. However, Song keeps on stripping because “your mouth says no, but your eyes say yes,” which is him mocking the Westerners’ rape mentality that he criticizes in court (Hwang, M. Butterfly 65). In this respect, Song is imitating the colonizers’ psychology and behavior to the point of producing an effect of difference and
double articulation, creating a caricature. From this perspective, Song’s stripping is an act of empowerment to further demystify the Orientalist emasculation of Asian men. Since Song’s male identity was revealed in earlier scenes, the significance of baring his body is to further expose the performative nature of the Butterfly persona and disillusion Gallimard and the audience from the fantasy. As Anne Cheng points out, “the moment that Song drops his pants is also the moment that the structure of fantasy gets revealed in all its force” (116).

In Sue-Ellen Case’s examination of the naked body in performance art, she indicates that “the naked body was presumed to organize a dramaturgical site from which a political charge and a seductive promise could be launched” (186). The act of stripping and the revealed naked body in M. Butterfly signifies the shifting power relation between the characters and thus functions to enable a reflection on the political hierarchy in contemporary society. Related to this engagement with political issues, the naked body is not presented as seductive or erotic, but rather to strip the erotic fantasies or what Josephine Lee terms as “the seduction of the stereotype” (89).

The power implicated in the act of stripping is enhanced in the Broadway production through the arrangement of position and movement between the two actors. The stage, designed by Eiko Ishioka in the original production, consists of a curved ramp. As Song begins to strip, he stands downstage at a low point of the ramp with Gallimard upstage on the high point. When Song drops his briefs, he turns to Gallimard, leaving his back to the audience. Hence, the penis is not visible to the audience, but only Gallimard’s reaction at the sight of it. After a few seconds’ pause because of shock, Gallimard, played
by John Lithgow, loses his balance on the ramp and rolls downstage. This physical, kinetic reaction visually denotes how the revelation of Song’s body brings Gallimard from the fantasized dominant position to the reality and makes tangible the reversal of power relation between the two characters.

However, following Song’s disrobing is his claim of an essential self as Gallimard’s Butterfly in spite of his anatomical body. Trying to persuade Gallimard that he is “not just any man,” Song puts on the kimono and dances in the way Butterfly did. Covering Gallimard’s eyes with one hand, Song draws Gallimard’s hand up to feel his face.

SONG. It’s the same skin you’ve worshiped for years. Touch it.

GALLIMARD. Yes, it does feel the same. …This skin, I remember. The curve of her face, the softness of her cheek, her hair against the back of my hand…

SONG. I’m your Butterfly. Under the robes, beneath everything, it was always me. (Hwang, *M. Butterfly* 66) (see fig. 10)

Song’s self-revelation appears to be another act of stripping down his disguise, more thoroughly than baring his body. His claim to be Gallimard’s Butterfly and “always” being so seems to suggest an essential self-identification that is incongruent with his biological male identity. In this respect, Song’s bare body is implied to be another false signifier of his identification, not unlike the masquerade of the Armani suit and the kimono.

John Berger’s criticism of the presentation of female nudity in oil paintings could shed some light on the implication of Song’s exposure of his body. In one episode of his BBC program *Ways of Seeing*, Berger argues for a distinction between nudity and nakedness:

> there is great difference in being seen as oneself naked or seeing another in that way and a body being put on display. To be naked is to be without disguise, to be on display is to have the surface of one’s own skin, the hair of one’s own body, turned into a disguise, a disguise which cannot be disregarded.

Illuminated by this insight, Song’s physical stripping and psychological disclosure can be seen as his attempt at self-presentation. The complete self-revelation is his attempt to bare who he is to establish a foundation of truthful contact and love, to be recognized and understood for the disjuncture between his biological body and his identification with the role of Gallimard’s Butterfly.

Through this scene, the playwright problematizes the fixation of individual’s identity by his/her biological body, or the view of the anatomical body as a signifier of identity. When Song tries to persuade Gallimard that he is still the same person that the
latter has loved, he resorts to the sense of touch. The familiarity of the touch represents a tangible signifier of who he “always” is beneath the anatomical body of a man. As Grist points out in his analysis of this scene in the film, Song’s temporary performative reversion to his feminine persona is acknowledged by Gallimard through the touch of the skin. The limit of the biological body “is ultimately—if briefly—implied to be mutable” (15). Phelan’s argument about the implication of body in performance art could apply to our understanding of this scene, in which the performer’s body is presented to “pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body per se” and “frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body” (150-151). And it is this lack of being that questions the notion of an essential, unified identity, and blurs male/female, masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual binaries.

Therefore, this scene adds to the profundity of the play’s exploration of identity in the sense that it demonstrates that one’s identity is not fixed by birth or biology, but rather is changeable and performatively constructed. In the keynote speech at 2014 Comparative Drama Conference, when an audience member asked Hwang whether Song is merely playing Gallimard or actually loves him, Hwang said, “Song is playing at the beginning, but after a while, who you play becomes who you are” (Hwang, “A Conversation”). This insight echoes with Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity. To extend her critical lens beyond the scope of gender, one’s identity is “performatively produced” by repeated acts and “always a doing” rather than a fixed being (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 34). In other words, identity is not a preexisting essence, but an ongoing process of construction through reiterated acts. One’s subjectivity is “the repeated
stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (45). Informed by this perspective, the ambivalence and changeability of Song’s identity embodies the process of its construction through acts that are not coherent and do not belong within a unified regulatory frame. When he claims to Gallimard that “I’m your Butterfly,” it implies that he has come to identify himself as the role he was assigned to. The identification is constructed through repetitive acts of the role, and therefore is performatively constituted. In this respect, the process of identification with the Butterfly undermines the boundaries between the categories of gender, cultural and sexual identities as well as the notion of identity as essential and fixed.

**Becoming Butterfly: Gallimard’s Metamorphosis**

This transcendence of biological limitation, however, is followed by Gallimard’s rejection. Gallimard rejects Song because he claims that there was no return after seeing Song’s “true self” (Hwang, *M. Butterfly* 66), which for him is limited to Song’s biological body. Song’s attempt to establish a truthful relationship by means of complete self-exposure fails when Gallimard chooses to enclose himself in the space of fantasy. Meanwhile, this scene further complicates the power relation between Song and Gallimard. Song plays the submissive role to achieve the purpose of manipulating and deceiving Gallimard, who then refuses to accept Song after his male body shatters the Butterfly fantasy. As Jodi Kim points out, as contrasted with Gallimard’s rejection of Song, it becomes ambiguous as to who occupies the position of power, and moreover,
what constitutes power itself (72). The final transformation undertaken by Gallimard further adds to this ambiguity of the power relation between him and Song.

With the help of two *kurogo* dancers, Gallimard first covers his whole face with a white base, which is followed by drawing eyebrows, reddening his lips and putting on the Butterfly wig (see fig. 11). The makeup on Gallimard resembles the kind in the opera of Madame Butterfly that presents Japanese women in exaggerated amounts of cosmetics. As the makeup is complete, Gallimard refers to Song as Pinkerton, and himself as Butterfly. He tells the audience that his identification with Butterfly is so intense that it has “rearranged the very lines” on his face and when he looks at a mirror he sees “nothing but…a woman” (Hwang, *M. Butterfly* 68). The dancers assist Gallimard to don the kimono and hand him a knife. The transformation symbolizes Gallimard’s effort to maintain his fantasy by assuming the role of Butterfly against Song, whom Gallimard identifies as Pinkerton.

Similar to Song’s onstage costume and makeup transformation from Butterfly to a man, Gallimard’s change has a quasi-ritualistic quality in that it marks a ceremonial transformation of him into Madame Butterfly. As Cheng points out in her psychoanalytical reading of this scene, Gallimard’s transformation demonstrates a psychological cross-identification with Butterfly’s role in his fantasy. This psychological change is embodied in the physical acts of putting on the makeup and the kimono, i.e. the visual signifiers of the Butterfly identity. Echoing with Song’s transformation between Butterfly and the male identity, Gallimard’s transformation also highlights the discrepancy between his biological body and the Japanese feminine image that he assumes. The incongruity between his biological identity and his identification as Butterfly problematizes the notion of identity as organic and unified, and additionally the binary structuring of gender, sexual and cultural identities.

Meanwhile, this transformation exposes the performativity and constructedness of Gallimard’s shifting identifications between Pinkerton and Butterfly. Since both of these roles that Gallimard identifies with are from the fictional text of Madame Butterfly, the performativity of his identity becomes more apparent. In reference to Hornby’s investigation of the metatheatrical device of role playing within the role, “the dualistic device…sets up a feeling of ambiguity and complexity with regard to the character” (67). In David Eng’s analysis of M. Butterfly, he argues that Gallimard is passing between “an acceptable white male heterosexuality and an abjected white male homosexuality” (143). Linked closely with heterosexuality, the conventional white male subjectivity is also dependent on “the maintenance of both a hegemonic whiteness and an occluded racial
boundary” (Eng 165). In Gallimard’s transformation, he literally puts on a white mask, which brings the naturalized identity of whiteness into visibility (see fig. 12). In other words, the transformation functions to relativize whiteness and expose its constructedness and contingency. Gallimard’s donning of whiteface exposes the crossing of sexual and racial difference, and therefore illustrates that “borders between heterosexual identification and homosexual desire, between white and non-white identity, are hardly clear-cut; they are unable to function in isolation” (Eng 165).

To add to Eng’s observation, Gallimard’s transformation, i.e. his “becoming” of Butterfly, reveals both femininity and masculinity as a masquerade and as being performative. The device of role playing within the role serves to remind the audience that all human roles are relative, that identities are learned rather than innate (Hornby 72). Hornby’s argument about Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Iago applies to Gallimard and Song: “the fact that these characters are represented as playing roles created a feeling that they have unplumbed depths… Their characterizations are fluid, shifting, mysterious, and hence fascinating” (68). Gallimard’s performance of Butterfly and his cross-identification with this role sheds light on the fluidity of one’s identity.
Figure 12. Screenshots of the TV commercial of *M. Butterfly* in 1988, featuring John Lithgow as Gallimard. The first shot and the last shot of the commercials demonstrate the change that Gallimard undertakes in the play.

Following his transformation, Gallimard commits suicide by *seppuku*, which echoes with the scene in *Madame Butterfly* that Song performs at their first encounter. This ritualistic suicide enhances the ceremonial atmosphere of this scene. The “Love Duet” of the opera accompanies this climactic scene, and Song appears upstage, standing as a man, smoking a cigarette and staring at the fallen Gallimard. The nonchalance of his reaction to Gallimard’s death is also presented in the indifferent tone in which he calls for Butterfly, which differs from the ending of Puccini’s opera with Pinkerton mourning the sight of Butterfly’s body. However, in L.A. TheaterWorks’ production of the play as an audio recording, Song’s calling of Butterfly was set in a different tone conveying strong feelings of shock, sadness and regret. As the ending of the Broadway production seems to suggest a reversal of power relation through Song’s manipulation of Gallimard, the dramatized audio recording presented the power dynamic as shifting and obscure, rather than a fixed structure of dominator/dominated, powerful/powerless.
Conclusion

The contrast between the interpretations of the ending by the Broadway production and the L.A. TheaterWorks production implies that *M. Butterfly* is ambiguous. Furthermore, it is a play meant to allow for different understandings as well as variations of the nuance in its theatrical realizations. The obscurity of the relation between Song and Gallimard relates to Hwang’s intention to present the mutual misperception between the East and the West in the play, rather than merely criticizing the West’s domination of the East. Some critics have charged that *M. Butterfly* is an “anti-American play, a diatribe against the stereotyping of the East by the West, of women by men” (qtd. in Hwang, “Author’s Notes”100). In an interview with John Lewis DiGaetani, Hwang responds to this criticism as following:

> The East is guilty or complicit in this dual form of cultural stereotyping…The colonial power…has an attitude of condescension toward the East. But the East has played up to that to its short-term advantage without thinking of the long-term ill effects that reinforce those racial stereotype causes. I think both sides are equally guilty. (Hwang, “M. Butterfly: An Interview” 142-43)

Song’s performance of the myth and Gallimard’s identification with this fantasy demonstrates the operation of Imperialism that underlies the imaginations between the East and the West. To refer to Foucault’s observation of the tie between power and knowledge, the mutual perceptions between the East and the West are produced and thus affected by power. In the play, Gallimard’s perception of Song is affected by the Butterfly myth, which was produced through the imbalance of economic, political power
between European countries and Japan. Meanwhile, Song’s perception of Gallimard is founded on his knowledge of the stereotypes of Asian femininity that fascinate Westerners. Based on this observation, he adopts the strategy of reenacting these images to deceive Gallimard for political empowerment. However, Song’s use of knowledge to advance power is also presented as questionable and counteractive in the play.

The play ends with Gallimard’s death because of his disillusionment and the failure of he and Song’s romantic affair. This ending seems to imply the tragic consequences of mutual misapprehension and lack of truthful contact between the East and the West. In this respect, *M. Butterfly* seems to raise the question of whether truthful contact between the East and the West is possible. Hwang argues that the play is “a plea to all sides [East and West, women and men] to cut through our respective layers of cultural and sexual misperception, deal with one another truthfully for our mutual good, from the common and equal ground we share as human beings” (Hwang, *M. Butterfly* 100). Being aware of the constraining impact of the myths on cultural contact, Hwang believes that “truthful contact between nations and lovers can only be the result of heroic effort” of going to lengths to look deeper than the simplified perceptions (100).

As a plea to exorcize the stereotypical views of one another, *M. Butterfly* attempts to demystify the false preconceptions that haunt transnational or intercultural contact. Similar to Said’s purpose of studying Orientalism, Hwang is concerned with abjuring the sense of fixed identities, crossing rather than maintaining barriers (Said 336). One of the aesthetic and political means that Hwang employs to achieve this purpose is onstage transformations. As John J. Deeney points out, the physical transformations in *M.
Butterfly function metaphorically as Hwang’s “calling for change and the stripping away of the masks which both sides wear” (28). The play is an exploration of the possibility for truthful contact that is based on recognition of cultural difference free from “othering” and hostility.

In addition, as the examination conducted above reveals, the play is also a critical exploration of the complexity of individuals’ identifications. In this respect, the precondition for mutual understanding between the East and the West or any cultures is to adopt a non-essentialist view of identity. This contention of the play echoes with one of the implied messages of Orientalism that “any attempt to force cultures and peoples into separate and distinct breeds or essences exposes not only the misrepresentations and falsifications that ensue, but also the way in which understanding is complicit with the power to produce such things as the ‘Orient’ or the ‘West’” (Said 347). Song and Gallimard’s transformations suggest that their masquerade is constitutive of their identifications, and their subjectivities are shifting between categories such as masculine-feminine, heterosexual-homosexual, Eastern-Western, Asian-Caucasian, etc. The physical transformations embody the processes of psychological positioning and becoming, which serve as critical interventions to problematize the categories of identities. At the end of M. Butterfly, Gallimard is ridiculed within French society for breaching the boundaries of white heteronormativity, and chooses to perform Butterfly. On the other hand, Song appears in the Armani suit as Pinkerton. The shift of their roles and power relations make the boundaries between the East and the West, between “us” and “them” more porous.
Employed as a technique to create Brechtian \textit{V-effekt}, the costume and makeup transformations present the characters as alterable, rather than fixed. The demonstration of their metamorphosis exposes the characters’ identities as constructed and artificial, which serves to further demystify the cultural misperceptions between the East and the West, male and female, white and Asian, heterosexual and homosexual.

To conclude, the bodily transformations in \textit{M. Butterfly} function as a theatrical device to expose the constructedness of the characters’ identities. This enhances the play’s political underpinnings that point to subjectivity as socially, historically and politically constructed, and to the boundaries of gender, sexual, ethnic and cultural categories as artificial, shifting and transformable.
CHAPTER 3: QUESTIONING CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY AND THE BOUNDARIES OF “ASIAN AMERICAN”: ON NAOMI IIZUKA’S 36 VIEWS

In 36 Views Naomi Iizuka employs onstage transformations to explore the issues of perceptions and illusions of cultural identities. The central conflict revolves around the “discovery” of an ancient pillow book, i.e. a type of private journal in Japanese classical literature, written by a woman from the Heian era (eleventh century) Japan. The characters, including art dealers, restorers and scholars, struggle with the authenticity of the manuscript, while their relationships are tested. Iizuka makes use of onstage costume and makeup transformations as significant points of discovery and reversal. This contention with forgery and authenticity in the art world foregrounds the exploration of the question of perception and illusion as related to individuals’ identities and human relationships.

Written in 1999, Naomi Iizuka’s 36 Views was originally produced in March 2002, by Berkeley Repertory and New York’s Public Theatre (36 Views 8). After the premiere, the play has been produced by various regional theaters across U.S. My analysis is based on an examination of the script and my viewing experience of the Constellation Theater (Washington, D.C.) production that I attended in November, 2013.

As indicated by the title, 36 Views draws inspiration from the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai’s woodblock series The 36 Views of Mount Fuji (1826-1833). The series contain forty-six prints created between 1826 and 1833, in which Hokusai depicted Mount Fuji as seen in different seasons and weather conditions from various locations and distances (Katsushika Hokusai). Hokusai’s effort of examining the subject from
multiple perspectives inspired Iizuka to reflect on the issue of authenticity “in a larger sense that includes issues of identity, love, and relationships with culture.” Iizuka believes that the series suggests “it is impossible to see something clearly and completely head on. In order to understand a piece of art or a person or a relationship, you really have to look at it from many different angles” (Iizuka, “interview with Yoon”). This idea of multiplicity and shifting perspectives, in contrast to a monolithic or essentialist way of seeing, is central to *36 Views*.

Iizuka draws on Hokusai’s series conceptually and structurally to present the story and the characters from multiple points of view. *36 Views* contains 36 scenes, each of which shows a layer of the story and characters’ relationship from a different angle. The play’s exploration of the questions of authenticity and identity is centered on Darius Wheeler’s relation with and perception of three main characters: his romantic interest Setsuko Hearn, his assistant John Bell, and art restorer Claire Tsong. The layers of these characters, concerning their motivations or identities, are revealed through their onstage costume transformations. These transformations serve as the critical moments of discovery that complicate the audience’s perception of the characters and their relationships with one another. In addition, Iizuka creatively incorporates Japanese kabuki theater’s techniques of costume change into these transformations to signify the multiplicity of identities and demystify the separatist view of cultures. Hence, this chapter focuses on these onstage transformations and each of their theatrical and political significations and functions.
Setsuko Hearn’s Transformations

One of the main characters in 36 Views, Setsuko Hearn, undergoes costume transformations twice onstage between two personas. At her first appearance in Scene One, Setsuko is revealed in Heian era kimono, wig, and white face paint. She appears onstage in the middle of Darius Wheeler’s story of risking his life to purchase antique artworks in Burma:

True story. This is a true story. … I’m talking early eighties, opium in every little village east of Mae Hong son, opium not even the half of it—sapphires, ivory, pigeon-blood rubies from the Mogok Valley—blackmarket all of it, and you could get a bullet in your brain trying to do business with these people. Some hop-head Palang with an M-16, he just blows you away on the spot, cause he thinks you’re a white devil...Or maybe, maybe he just doesn’t like the look in your eye. (Iizuka, 36 Views 11-12)

Wheeler’s story depicts contemporary Burma as an exotic, hyper-violent and hostile land, reinforcing the stereotypical image of Asia as unchangingly barbaric, uncivilized and backward, as opposed to the image of the West. This imagery is reinforced by the exoticism of the traditionally attired Japanese woman’s presence onstage. However, as Wheeler continues to tell the story, the woman undertakes a costume change.

The transformation is first accompanied by the sound of shakuhachi flute. When the drums join in, Setsuko begins to turn with the beat. Each turn is followed by the removal of a layer of the kimono. As the pace of the flute and drums intensifies, Setsuko’s turning and changing becomes faster. Eventually, when the sound of the flute
ends, the transformation in the fashion of hikinuki completes. In Iizuka’s stage direction, she indicates the detail of the transformation: “Hikinuki, a Kabuki costume change in which threads are pulled, and the outer kimono falls away, revealing a new costume underneath” (36 Views 12) (see fig. 13). A contemporary Western dress is revealed after removing the kimono, and Setsuko Hearn transforms into an “urban, late twentieth-century, Western woman” (12) (see fig. 14). In the following scene, she is introduced to the audience as a university professor of East Asian literature.

Figure 13. Hikinuki costume change in kabuki performance; Gungi 146.
This scene serves as an exposition of some layers of the characters and foregrounds the romantic relationship that is going to develop between Wheeler and Setsuko later in the play. The introduction of Wheeler’s profession in this scene is of significance. As a dealer of Asian artworks and artifacts, Wheeler is a businessman who invests in and profits from dealing with Asian arts and people, for which end he also presents himself as an experienced expert in this field and asserts his reputation for assessing the authenticity and value of Asian arts. In this opening scene, Wheeler begins his story by stressing its authenticity: “True story. This is a true story” (Iizuka, 36 Views 11). However, his image as an authority on Asian arts is revealed to be artificial and made-up as much as his story. As Setsuko points out in the following scene, the tales he tells about his adventure in Asia have a “wilted quality to them” (14) and are “very sort of Hunter S. Thompson meets Apocalypse Now” (16). These satirical remarks imply that Wheeler’s tale is pieced together with various fictional representations and stereotypes of
Asian cultures and purposefully invented for self-glorification and self-promotion. Throughout the play, Wheeler’s character is revealed to take advantage of people’s trust in his authoritative status for profiteering purpose and in the meantime to take credit for other people’s work to make up his reputation. As the status of his knowledge is exposed to be fake, Wheeler’s representation of Asia and Asian culture is also revealed to be untruthful and fictional.

As Setsuko comments in the following scene, Wheeler is “a man with a weakness for stereotype” (Iizuka, 36 Views 14). His idea of Asian cultures and arts is exemplary of the discourse of Orientalism, which is less about truthful representation than his subjective perception through the lens of his own consciousness, interest and desire. Wheeler’s knowledge of Asian culture and people is not based on the impartial empirical reality, but rather upon “a sovereign Western consciousness,” which selects and filters the reality “first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections” (Said 8). The exoticism of Burma in his story demonstrates Wheeler’s distorted view, whether intentional or unintentional, of Asian cultures.

Meanwhile, his subjective filtering of reality manifests in the appearance of Setsuko in traditional, medieval Japanese attire during his story. Throughout the play, when Wheeler reads the discovered pillow book that is alleged to come from a Heian era woman, he imagines Setsuko to be the image of the writer. In this sense, Setsuko’s
appearance in the Heian era woman persona could be seen as Wheeler’s misperception of her image.

Setsuko’s onstage transformation in the fashion of kabuki hikinuki underlines the contrast between her self-presentation and Wheeler’s Orientalist imagination of her identity. In traditional kabuki theater, the hikinuki method of costume change “involves an arrangement whereby the clothing on the upper half of the body pulls out of the obi” (Gunji 49). This technique allows a quick costume change onstage, and is used mostly for “the visual appeal” (Gunji 49). Differing from this use of hikinuki in kabuki theater, Iizuka employs hikinuki with innovation and subversion. Instead of removing one layer of the costume, Setsuko sheds off all the layers of the kimono and reveals an “urban, late twentieth-century, Western” dress underneath (Iizuka, 36 Views 12). This transformation implies that despite her contemporary Western attire, Wheeler filters Setsuko’s image through Orientalist stereotypes of Japanese women. Wheeler’s misperception illustrates his anachronistic view of Asian femininity and dogmatic view of “the Oriental” as “a kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction” (Said 8). By using hikinuki in a more radical way, Iizuka highlights the discrepancy between Setsuko’s self-presentation and Wheeler’s fantasization of Setsuko’s image.

Furthermore, Iizuka’s creative incorporation of hikinuki highlights the falsehood and artificiality of Wheeler’s Orientalist perception of Setsuko’s identity. The enactment of hikinuki points to the kabuki tradition of an all male cast and having female roles performed by male actors. Hence, this incorporation of kabuki element serves to further
cast doubt on the truthfulness of this fantasized imagery of Japanese women, and reveal the Orientalist imagination of Asian femininity as artificial.

Wheeler’s preference for traditional Asian arts is another manifestation of this Orientalist perception. Later scenes reveal that Wheeler despises Utagawa, a contemporary artist’s works, which Setsuko acclaims for their mixing of Asian and Western forms, classical techniques and contemporary visions (17). Wheeler opines that the problem with Utagawa’s works is that they are not about beauty, but ideas. Setsuko’s further inquiry exposes Wheeler’s absolute and uncritical notion of beauty. Another character, Owen Matthiassen, comments that Wheeler’s despise of contemporary art is “very contrary, willfully anachronistic” (Iizuka, 36 Views 26). On a similar note, Setsuko sarcastically points out that the reason for Wheeler’s dislike of Utagawa’s contemporary approach is that the art is “not oriental enough” (18). Contrary to Wheeler’s claim that “beautiful means beautiful” (27), his anachronistic and almost primitivist taste in Asian arts and female images suggests that his notion of beauty is inflected by his desire and interest rather than being absolute or disinterested. Meanwhile, Wheeler’s character is suggestive of people who hold onto the ideal of an authentic Asian culture that is fixed in history and immutable, resistant to modernization or cross-cultural influence from the West.

In this respect, the transformation of Setsuko between the two personas visualizes the gap between Wheeler’s anachronistic, two-dimensional perception of her identity and the multiplicity of her self-identifications. The onstage transformation makes the contrast between the two personas more prominent, and thus raises the questions concerning the
rupture between perception and self-representation, illusion and reality. As Alan MacVey points out in the introduction to the play, “in the opening scene, when a medieval woman is transformed to become a university professor, we are already forced to question our assumptions about what is real” (36 Views 7). This scene echoes the epigraph of the play: “Only a part of what is perceived comes through the senses from the object; the remainder always comes from within” (qtd. in 36 Views 9). Cited from Matthew Luckiesh’s Visual Illusions, this quote foregrounds the main questions that Iizuka raises in the play: Is one’s perception of the world objective or subjective? Is one’s perception of an object or a person twisted by his/her subjective preferences or preconceptions? How does the gap between the object and the perception of it inform cultural communication or miscommunication?

The Myth of Cultural Authenticity

The staged process of transformation embodies the ongoing process of identity production within representation. As Stuart Hall argues in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” “instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact...we should think...of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222). In 36 Views, the costume and makeup transformations visualize the alterability and multiple layers of the characters’ identities, and therefore challenge the notion of authenticity of cultural identity. As Hall states, “cultural identity...is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. ...Cultural identities…undergo constant
transformation” and “are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (225).

Another notion of cultural identity that 36 Views sets out to challenge is the definition of cultural identity as a collective “one true self,” an essence shared by all the individuals of the group. As Stuart Hall discusses this issue in relation to the Caribbean diaspora, he points out that “within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us...with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (223). In 36 Views, the various aspects of the characters’ identities presented to us are conscious embodiment of the complexity of each individual’s personal histories.

To take Setsuko’s character as an example, in addition to the identities presented by the two alternating personas, another revelation is made to the audience at the end of the play. Following a discovery of the forgery, her relationship with Wheeler is falling apart. Making a last attempt to get to know each other, Setsuko reveals her childhood and upbringing. Her confidence surprises Wheeler as well as the audience: growing up in Fairfield, Iowa, her father was American with Scottish/Irish/German ancestry, her mother’s family is Japanese, but she was actually adopted from an orphanage in China, and she is Chinese by birth. When Wheeler asks whether she remembers China, Setsuko says: “No. If no one had told me, I would never have known, I would never have even guessed. My earliest memories are of cornfields and big sky and college football. My dad was a big college football fan” (Iizuka, 36 Views 85).
When this revelation was made in the production I attended, some audience members chuckled at the unexpected twist. Setsuko’s relaying of her personal history upsets all the assumptions that Wheeler and the audience make about her national or cultural identity. However, the gap between her born national identity and her present identifications influenced by her upbringing further complicates the issue of identity. As Stuart Hall states, identity is not an essence but positioning. The ancient and the contemporary, Japanese and Scotch/Irish/German American, China and Iowa, become “differential points along a sliding scale” rather than “mutually excluding categories” in Setsuko’s identities (Hall 228). The presentation of identity as fluid, as a process of positioning functions to “re-site” the boundaries between these categories and demystify the notion of racial or cultural purity and isolationism (228). According to Iizuka, the main question she is concerned with in the play is “how we define authenticity” and “what the anxiety is that propels us to privilege authenticity over other values” (“Naomi Iizuka and 36 Views”). In other words, she intends to question the notion of authenticity as well as the way of perceiving, consuming and making judgment on cultural artifacts and presentations through the lens of authenticity.

The Androgynous Mind: John Bell’s Transformation

As exemplified by Setsuko’s onstage transformation, the character John Bell, Wheeler’s assistant, also undertakes a costume transformation onstage, which functions to embody the gap between Bell’s self-identification and Wheeler’s perception of Bell’s identity. Bell’s transformation serves to further problematize and dismantle the absolutist
and uncritical notions of authenticity and beauty that are symbolized by Wheeler’s character.

The complications and crisis in 36 Views revolve around a manuscript penned by Bell. It first appears in Scene 3, when Claire Tsong reads a transcript that is voiced by Bell onstage, informing the audience of Bell’s authorship of the words. The second appearance of the transcript is in Scene 10, when Wheeler finds the transcript on Bell’s desk and reads it. In contrast to the first appearance of the words from the manuscript, Setsuko shows up in Heian era attire and recites the words, which implies Wheeler’s false assumption and fantasization of the authorship of the writing. Wheeler’s misidentification of the manuscript’s authorship is due to not only his lack of knowledge of Bell’s capability, but more significantly, his essentialist, exoticized and sexualized imagination of Japanese woman and literature.

The words from the manuscript are performed differently in these two scenes. While Bell in Scene 3 stands still without much movement, the woman in kimono as imagined by Wheeler performs the texts in an erotic and exotic manner. In contrast to John Bell’s casual attire with a hoodie and a pair of jeans (see fig. 15), Setsuko is dressed in layers of exquisitely decorated kimono. She carries a fan and shifts it in her hands to accompany the movements of her body (see fig. 16). The movement is choreographed as resembling a geisha dance to add to the eroticism of the words, which are delivered with rising, enticing tones and short breath:

A list of beautiful things:

The curve of a lover’s neck,
The touch of a lover’s fingertips,
The weight of a lover’s hair, the scent,
The rustle of silk undone,
Your tongue, your lips,
The taste, salt and wet,

Warm breath against one’s skin. (Iizuka, 36 Views 34)

Presented as Wheeler’s imagination, the exotic performance of the words reflects the association that Wheeler makes between eroticism in the writing and the image of Japanese woman and specifically his desire for Setsuko Hearn.

The eroticism of this scene is further enhanced when a *kurogo*, i.e. stage assistant dressed in black, shows up and gropes around Setsuko’s waist and breasts from behind. As an element of kabuki theater, the *kurogo* appears to assist Setsuko’s costume transformation, in which several layers of kimono are removed one after another during her recitation of the words. Similar to her first transformation, the process of disrobing the kimono as a signifier of stereotypical view of Asian femininity serves to expose the fantastical nature of this imagery in contrast with the contemporary, Western dress underneath and the unspectacular presentation of her identities.

Following Setsuko’s transformation, the *kurogo* moves upstage and begins removing his black over-costume. He starts with the body suit, and finally takes off the last piece of fabric covering his face, revealing himself to be John Bell. This transformation scene is exemplary of Iizuka’s incorporation of the kabuki elements not
only for the purpose of stylization, but more importantly for enhancing the characterization and unifying the plot.

To unpack the implication of Bell’s transformation, it is important to first examine the function and signification of the *kurogo*. In kabuki theater, *kurogo*, literary meaning “black fellows,” are the stage assistants muffled in black from head to foot, who function to move the props, sets and help the actors undertake costume changes (see fig. 17). As Makatsu Gunji indicates in *Kabuki*, the *kurogo* are supposed to be invisible stagehands despite of their appearance onstage: “black is the color of nonexistence, and although they appear on the stage they are not in fact there according to kabuki tradition” (4). In other words, the *kurogo* play significant, indispensable roles to ensure the seamlessness of a kabuki performance, whereas their appearance onstage has to be non-existent and unnoticeable. In *36 Views*, by casting John Bell as and revealing him to be the *kurogo*, Iizuka indicates the character’s significant role in the plot, which is unacknowledged and invisible to other characters.

Figure 17. *Kurogo* moves props in kabuki performance; “Remarkable features”.
Prior to this transformation scene, Bell appears as the marginal character in the scenes centered on Wheeler. The revelation of Bell under the *kurogo* costume is followed by a scene with him and Claire Tsong, the art restorer, which exposes the aspect of his identity that is unknown to Wheeler and the audience. This scene diverges from the centrality of Wheeler’s role and depicts the inter-character relation from a decentered point of view. Bell’s title as Wheeler’s assistant corresponds with the *kurogo*’s role to assist costume changes in the play. Meanwhile, as the *kurogo* who conceals himself in black costume, Bell hides his knowledge and capability from people. Having a master’s degree in East Asian studies, Bell is fluent in Japanese, Korean and several dialects of Chinese. Tsong thinks of him as a “Renaissance man,” whereas Bell sees himself as “Jack of all trades, master of none” (Iizuka *36 Views* 38). Bell and Tsong’s debate on Wheeler’s character suggests that Bell’s low self-esteem is a result of living under the shadow of Wheeler’s reputation and exploitation. Tsong points out that Wheeler is using Bell as “cheap, overeducated labor,” implying that Wheeler’s exploitation of Bell’s labor negatively affects Bell’s assessment of his own capability (39). Bell’s underestimation and concealment of his knowledge makes part of his identities unknown to Wheeler, similar to the *kurogo*’s performance of his role without being acknowledged for his existence.

This exposition of Bell’s character foregrounds his misinforming Wheeler of the authorship of the manuscript. In Scene 14, when Wheeler inquires about the manuscript, Bell tries to hide his authorship and makes up a story of its origin being a pillow book penned by a Japanese woman of Heian era. Being ensured by Bell of its authenticity,
Wheeler shows it to Setsuko, who is amazed by the authentic voice behind the writing. Setsuko even goes as far as to remark that the voice in the writing is “singular and unmistakably female” as other Heian era pillow books by women (Iizuka 36 Views 62).

The mistaken authorship stirs the complications of the plot and the development of personal relations, and ends up revealing the hidden sides of the involved characters’ identities. As the actual manufacturer behind the writing, Bell’s character is key in coining the misinformation and pushing the plot forward. Similar to the function of the kurogo, Bell plays a vital role in the performance, the effectiveness of which is highly dependent on the invisibility of his presence to other actors.

While Bell’s role is unnoticed to Wheeler and Setsuko, the audience is informed of his authorship of the writing. Thus it produces dramatic irony for the audience that Bell’s writing could pass as the voice of a Heian era Japanese court lady in front of an expert who specializes in this period and genre of literature. This irony serves to question the notion of what is “real” and “authentic” concerning literature, arts in relation to the authors’ identities. Despite the huge gap between Bell’s and the assumed author’s ethnic, gender, sexual, national identities and the times he/she lives in, it seems that he is able to imagine himself as her, empathizes and identifies with her, and creates a voice for this persona. From this perspective, Bell’s transformation from the kurogo to his revelation signifies his crossing of cultural boundaries.

This authorship of a white male behind the voice of a Japanese woman is seen as problematic to some critics of the play. Some even compare this scenario with Arthur Golden’s authorship of Memoirs of a Geisha. In an interview, Iizuka acknowledges this
problem and states that she intends to characterize Bell to trigger these complex issues with the ambiguity and ambivalence of this character’s identities (“Interview with Yoon”). To address the issue of transracial literary authorship, Iizuka draws on Virginia Woolf’s idea of the androgynous mind: “In Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, she talks about how good writers are androgynous and are able to embody lots of different characters, genders, and I would extend this to ethnicities and races” (Iizuka, “Interview with Yoon”). Hence, Bell embodies Iizuka’s expansion of Woolf’s notion of androgyny in that he is able to assume identities that not only cross gender but also racial boundaries.

A closer look into Woolf’s idea of the androgynous mind clarifies Iizuka’s implication behind Bell’s character and how it is an integral part of the unifying vision of the play. Founding her idea on interpreting the term androgyny that is first brought up by Coleridge, Woolf believes that each individual’s soul contains two powers, one male and one female (107). And the creative mind of a great writer is one in which the two powers “live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating” (107). Only when this fusion takes place can the mind be fully fertilized and use all its faculties, whereas “a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine” (108). Instead of being confined by a pure and simplifying notion of sex, “the androgynous mind is resonant and porous...it transmits emotion without impediment...it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” (108).

In Iizuka’s characterization of John Bell, not only the boundary between genders but also the boundaries between ethnic, racial, and cultural identities become porous. Bell’s convincing voice as a court lady living in eleventh century Japan demonstrates that
literary presentation is a set of codes and tones, which can be studied and learned. This implication sheds light on artistic presentations in general and problematizes the assumption of the link between the author’s biological being and the artistically presented identities. The character Professor Matthiassen’s skeptical remark on Bell’s success as a writer, after his authorship is revealed and his talent is recognized at the end of the play, epitomizes this simplifying assumption:

OWEN MATTHIASSEN: ...one always hears that fiction is based on real life. Of course, that would mean you’d have to be a Japanese woman going on a thousand years old, give or take a few decades. As far as I can tell, you are not. …

JOHN BELL: I just wrote what I wrote. I don’t know where it came from. Maybe I was just inspired. …

OWEN MATTHIASSEN: ...Such literary talent, such business acumen. You surprise me, John, how far you’ve come. I never would have guessed you had it in you.

JOHN BELL: You don’t really know me. You don’t know me at all. (92-93)

Matthiassen’s judgment of Bell’s character is based on the surface of the “fact” as perceived from his partial point of view. Each of the characters is limited by his/her perspective and thus unable to obtain a full-round understanding of other characters and the big picture. Iizuka places the audience in the omniscient position and allow us to see inside each main character’s deeper motivation and ambivalence, and thus the ambiguity and complexity of their identities. In the case of Bell, despite of being almost invisible
under Wheeler’s shadow, he is so knowledgeable and talented that he is capable of writing in a boundary-crossing, androgynous literary voice. The fluidity of his identifications and the multiplicity of voices that are present in Bell’s writing demonstrates the transformability and heterogeneity of one’s gender, racial, national and cultural identifications.

Passing for Mobility and Resistance: Claire Tsong’s Transformation

In addition to Bell, there is another character in the play who embodies the androgyny of the creative mind: Claire Tsong. Initiating from an onstage transformation, Tsong reveals her hidden identities beneath her ambiguous self-representation that is mistakenly perceived because of heteronormative and sexist preconceptions. The act of Tsong’s passing, adding to Hearn and Bell’s characterizations, underlines the complexity and fluidity of an individual’s identities and further questions the demarcation of categories of gender, race and sexuality.

A dialogue between Tsong and Bell has revealed her as an independent art restorer working odd jobs for Wheeler, whom she despises, to fund her own art. When Bell consults Tsong to deal with his lie to Wheeler about the manuscript, she helps him to forge the “original,” thousand-year old manuscript (see fig. 18). Her craftsmanship in the forgery fools the whole art world to believe in its authenticity and makes the manuscript a hot object of pursuit on the market. As soon as Tsong instructs Bell to undertake a scheme to sell the manuscript to Wheeler, she reveals her hidden identity and ulterior motive with an onstage transformation.
Scene 25 begins with Tsong changing out of paint-spattered work clothes into dress clothes: “she puts on makeup, fixes her hair, transforming herself” (65). Prior to this scene, Tsong always appears in gender-neutral clothes, wears no makeup and has her hair tied up. Her usual appearance stands in contrast to the self-presentation she changes to: she puts on a dress that combines kimono with a mini skirt, wears a pair of red high heels and lets her curled long hair down. After putting on makeup, which is especially marked by the use of vividly red lipstick, Tsong transforms her image from unnoticeable and gender-neutral to hyper-feminine, sexually attractive and highly visible.

Following this cosmetic makeup is a spectacular costume transformation. Standing upstage in light, Tsong undertakes a transformation in front of Bell and the audience. In the fashion of bukkaeri of kabuki theater, she pulls threads from the top of her dress to allow the hidden fabrics to fall down over the lower half revealing another pattern. This transformation results in a complete transformation of Tsong’s appearance, as indicated in the stage direction. Its effect is manifest in Bell’s reaction, who is almost
shocked and confused by this revelation. In response to his comment “you look different,” Tsong simply says, “I just changed my clothes. That’s all” (Iizuka 36 Views 69). This exchange reiterates the central theme of the play, i.e. the gap between one’s self-representation and others’ perception of him/her, especially how others’ perception of one’s identities is apt to be two-dimensional and limited by the visible and superficial appearance.

Iizuka makes use of the technique of quick costume change in kabuki theater to signify the revelation of Tsong’s hidden identities. Bukkaeri, literally meaning turning over, is another procedure of costume change in addition to hikinuki, which Iizuka uses for Setsuko’s transformations. According to Ruth Shaver, in straight drama as opposed to dance drama, bukkaeri is used “when a character reveals his true identity,” to “disclose a different personality or social status in the least possible time” (Shaver 354). Adophe Clarence Scott details the function of bukkaeri in The Kabuki Theatre of Japan: “Bukkaeri is used to convey the idea that the actor has now assumed a character and personality which has formerly been concealed” (142). This device is often used to reveal the villainy of the character, as exemplified by the figure below (see fig. 19):

When the officer of the barrier guard in the play Seki no To reveals his true identity as the archvillain Otomo no kuronushi, his costume undergoes a bukkaeri change (aided by an assistant), switching from a commonplace padded kimono to a nobleman’s dress. At the same time, his hood is removed to allow his hair to fall into the style known as “prince wig,” and he uses a mirror and makeup concealed in an axe to make up his face. (Gunji 149)
Tseng’s transformation shares similarity with this example in the sense that it is completed with changes of not only costume but also hair and makeup. From a certain perspective, Tsong is the mastermind and “villain” who takes advantage of the opportunity that Bell unintentionally creates to destroy Wheeler. In the last scene of her appearance, Tsong confides her history with Wheeler to Elizabeth Newman-Orr, a reporter who, thanks to Tsong, writes a sensational article on the infamous forgery of the manuscript. Tsong recalls how Wheeler takes advantage of her trust and deceives her to sell her possessions to him at low price, and later sell them and gain profits from the difference. When Tsong finds out, she confronts Wheeler, who justifies himself by saying that “art and business were two different things” and offers her a job doing restoration (Iizuka 36 Views 90). Tsong’s confession reveals that she has seen the side of Wheeler that is hidden beneath his glorified image, and more importantly, she has been deliberately hiding her potential and identities, waiting for a chance to take revenge on Wheeler.
On the other hand, Iizuka’s use of *bukkaeri* technique is a gender-bending subversion of kabuki tradition. Echoing Setsuko’s *hikinuki* transformation, Tsong’s *bukkaeri* costume change diverges from kabuki tradition of featuring an exclusively male cast and having male actors enact female roles. Iizuka has two female characters, Setsuko and Tsong, undergo the costume changes of *hikinuki* and *bukkaeri* to embody the multiple dimensions of these female characters’ identities. By having the female bodies undertake the theatrical practice that has been traditionally exclusive to men, Iizuka adds a twist to the kabuki tradition of embodying female identities.

Additionally, this gender-crossing subversion of kabuki techniques functions to embody Tsong’s transgression of the boundaries of gender identity and sexuality. The highly attractive and almost flamboyant outfit that Tsong transforms into signifies a hidden aspect of her identities and potential. The final scene of the play makes another revelation that links Tsong to the reclusive, never-before-seen artist Utagawa. The artist makes her first appearance in public in the exhibition of her new work, and makes it known that Utagawa is the pseudonym that Claire Tsong takes to hide her identity. The outfit she transforms into, which contrasts with her prior image, turns out to be worn for her first appearance as Utagawa. In other words, the transformation signifies Tsong’s coming out of the shadow and bringing her hidden capability into visibility. Given that Utagawa is a Japanese family name that is gender-neutral, the widely held assumption of Utagawa being male suggests that the art world is not rid of either sexism or the stereotypes of patriarchal oppression of women in Asian communities. Gathered from the characters’ comments on Utagawa’s works, the artist’s approach is avant-garde in
combining traditional forms with contemporary ideas. To associate this aggressive, bold artistic style with a masculine identity of the artist, the critics and experts in the art world unquestioningly hold onto the essentialist view of gender binary. In this sense, the bias reflected in the misidentification of Utagawa’s gender could also be read as a reason for Tsong’s deliberate concealment of her identity. Passing behind an ambiguous pseudonym might be the only way for her to break into the art scene, given the art world’s preconception and prejudice towards women and especially women of Asian descent.

Another layer of identities that Tsong is hiding is her sexuality. As she reveals herself as Utagawa, Tsong’s sexual orientation is brought into light at the kissing scene with Elizabeth. Despite of her “failure” to conform to the notions of feminine behavior, as embodied by her gender-neutral attire, Tsong is still mistakenly assumed to be heterosexual by the male characters in the play. Bell shows romantic interest in Tsong, who rejects his gesture of affection. Her past with Wheeler is vaguely presented, and some scholars interpret that Tsong and Wheeler were once romantically involved (Metzger 281). Wheeler and Bell’s unquestioning assumption of Tsong’s sexual orientation is not only conditioned by the assumption of heterosexuality as the social norm, but more significantly reinforced by theessentialist trope of Asian women’s sexuality as being hyperheterosexual. As Sherrie A. Inness points out in The Lesbian Menace, spectators play significant roles in an individual’s passing: “passing is not always volitional for a lesbian. She passes or does not pass as a heterosexual because of how she is viewed by heterosexuals,” who often assume that everyone is heterosexual
In this sense, “the heterosexual spectator has the power to make a lesbian pass, whether or not she wishes to, and this must be taken into account” (174).

From this perspective, Tsong’s two-fold passing, i.e. from woman to man, from homosexual/bisexual to heterosexual, is what Inness terms “the partial pass,” in which case the passer does not actively mimic the identity he/she wants to pass as but instead provides an opaque surface on which viewers can inscribe either end of binaries (168). Tsong’s gender-neutral appearance obscures her gender and sexual identification so that those who view her do not recognize her status, especially when their perceptions are filtered through falsified assumptions and self-interest. Therefore, Inness argues that it is the spectator, at least partially, who makes a pass feasible (173). As Teresa de Lauretis writes, “the very issue of passing, across any boundary of social division, is related quite closely to the frame of vision and the conditions of representation” (36). In Tsong’s case, her passing is preconditioned on the convergence of sexism and racial stereotypes, especially the assumptions of male privilege in the art world and Asian women as being hyperheterosexual. Her passing is based on refusing to contest others’ partially informed or biased and normalizing construction of her subjectivity, by not flaunting her artistic potency and sexuality through legible codes such as visual or conversation markers. In other words, Tsong exploits others’ need to see only what they want to see, and passes by refusing to introduce her sexuality and artistic aggressiveness into visibility and withholding detectable markers of her self-identifications from self-presentations.

This partial passing reinforces the central focus of the play, which is the discrepancy between one’s self-presentation and others’ perception, or one’s self-
identification and one’s identities as viewed by others. As Pamela L. Caughie defines passing in “Passing as Pedagogy: Feminism in(to) Cultural Studies”: “all passing is marked by the double bind that opens a discrepancy between what one professes to be and how one is actually positioned in a society, institution, discourse” (78). Or in Stuart Hall’s words, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past,” which is a process of negotiation between the first position, i.e. the socially constructed one, and the second position, i.e. the self-identified one (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 226). This negotiation is what Hall calls the “politics of identity,” or “politics of position,” because of which cultural identities are not an essence but a process of positioning (226).

Tsong’s act of passing reflects the deliberate control of identity signifiers so as to empower herself to a position of mobility in the discourse. As Linda Schlossberg points out in her introduction to the anthology Passing, “passing… can be understood at the most basic level as an attempt to control the process of signification itself” (3). This mobile positioning reveals how one’s identities and imageries are structured around a logic of visibility and constructed with visual and conversational codes. Alice Parker defines passing as a potentially subversive reinterpretation of the codes: “Passing seems more and more like rereading, reinterpreting the codes, reworking the masks, the disguises. It is a radical refusal of a fixed place” (335). On a similar note, Schlossberg argues that passing has the potential to challenge or even subvert social discourse and politics of identities. As she points out, “Because of this seemingly intimate relationship between the visual and the known, passing becomes a highly charged site for anxieties
regarding visibility, invisibility, classification, and social demarcation. It disrupts the logics and conceits around which identity categories are established and maintained” (Schlossberg 1).

While denaturalizing the link between visual markers and identity construction, the act of passing dismantles the foundation of binary categorization of identities. Schlossberg argues, “If passing wreaks havoc with accepted systems of social recognition and cultural intelligibility, it also blurs the carefully marked lines of race, gender, and class, calling attention to the ways in which identity categories intersect, overlap, construct, and deconstruct one other” (2). As Inness argues, passing problematizes the boundaries in the categories of identities, and “has the potential to lay bare the myth that our culture is built upon: the presumed essential difference between men and women, blacks and whites, or homosexuals and heterosexuals. Passing shows that these binaries are not as ‘natural’ as many might presume and raises the suspicion that many of the boundaries in our lives are no more than artificial constructs and that conceptions of authentic selfhood are suspect as well” (Inness 158).

Her deliberate concealment of her sexual identity is related to the implication of the lesbian visibility. According to Barbara Creed’s investigation, lesbian bodies are perceived as uniquely threatening, especially as it jeopardizes the boundaries between male and female, active and passive (105). In this respect, Tsong’s disguise of her sexual identity is intentional for the purpose of making herself seem passive, harmless or even invisible to her enemy.
In addition to the ambiguity and multiplicity of Tsong’s identities, she is the character in the play who articulates how reality and “authenticity” is subjective and relative. She questions the absolute notions of “real” and “original,” pointing out to other characters the relativity of these concepts, that they all depend on how one defines the terms from his/her perspective. In a sense, Tsong articulates the central theme of shifting perspectives and the ambiguity of reality of the play. Tsong’s transformation and the revelation of her hidden identities is a climactic moment that elevates the play’s acknowledgement of the fluidity of identities and reality in general. As Tsong reveals herself to be the acclaimed artist Utagawa, the fine line between what is real and what is fake becomes blurred, for the manuscript now proves to be “a fake Heian era manuscript” but “also an original work by a contemporary artist” (Iizuka, 36 Views 94). The judgment of the authenticity and value of the work is informed by and dependent on the shifting perspectives of viewing.

The fluidity of reality and identities is epitomized and visualized in Utagawa’s work that appears onstage in the finale of the play. Utagawa’s thirty-six paintings displayed onstage “shift their alignment to form a larger picture, like individual tiles of a larger mosaic” (Iizuka, 36 Views 95). The picture formed is a portrait of a woman, echoing with the painting that appears in the first scene, i.e. a portrait of a Japanese woman in formal pose of Kamakura era that is hung in Wheeler’s house. In contrast, the mosaic is “part ancient, part contemporary, part Japanese woodblock print, part anime,” (95) which reiterates the complexity and multiplicity of individuals’ identifications. This final scene highlights the play’s innovative adaptation of Hokusai’s 36 Views of Mount
Fuji, for each painting is incorporated as a fragment and integral part of the whole picture, which cannot be fully grasped without putting all the perspectives together. The shift of alignment functions similarly with the onstage transformations of Setsuko Hearn, John Bell and Claire Tsong, which visualizes individuals’ identities as dynamic and creative processes as piecing together a mosaic with heterogeneous components and fragments.

Pushing the Boundary of “Asian American”

The playwright’s critical engagement with the myth of cultural authenticity is partly based on her personal experience as a racially mixed individual with diverse cultural heritage. Born in Japan to a Japanese father and an American mother of Hispanic descent, the issues of identity become more complicated for Iizuka, especially concerning others’ perception of her and finding home in a specific ethnic community (“interview with Yoon”). Similar to Setsuko’s character in the play, Iizuka’s upbringing exposed her to a wide range of cultures: after spending her childhood in Japan, Indonesia, Holland, she was brought to the U.S. and went to a private Catholic school in Chevy Chase, Maryland; after obtaining a Bachelor’s degree in Classics at Yale University, Iizuka entered the MFA program in playwriting at the University of California-San Diego in 1992; before writing 36 Views, she became known for her contemporary adaptations of classics, a majority of which do not address the issues of mixed race or Asian American identity.
According to Esther Kim Lee in *A History of Asian American Theater*, Iizuka’s approach is representative of the third wave of Asian American playwrights that emerged in the 1990s. This wave is distinct from the first two waves of writers, because they expressed both the relevance and irrelevance of their ethnic identities in their lives and works (E. Lee 202). Instead of taking on the responsibility to represent the entire group of Asian Americans, the third wave of Asian American playwrights “began to tell their individual stories, in which the Asian American identity is only a part of their complex experiences” (E. Lee 204). As Lee illuminates on Iizuka’s plays, instead of addressing the issues of mixed race directly, she focuses on exploring the fluidity and blurring of all categories, including the boundaries that define “Asian American.” In “The Myth of Immutable Cultural Identity,” a preface written for an anthology of Asian American plays, David Henry Hwang raises a question as to what constitutes as an “authentic” vision of Asian American experience. Instead of clinging to the myth of an authentic Asian Americanness free from the influence of white America, Hwang argues that it is significant that the new wave of playwrights recognize that the identities as Asian/Pacific Americans cannot be separated from the other cultures that have also become part of their personal histories (“The Myth” viii).

To look at the history of Asian American theater movement that began in the 1960s, we could see that between the first two waves and the third wave of playwrights the notion of “Asian American” shifted from one that seeks a shared essence of the entire community to one that recognizes the multiplicity and difference within the boundary of Asian American. Iizuka’s *36 Views* is an exemplar of the updated notion of cultural
identities in questioning and pushing the boundaries of “Asian American” and reconfiguring the category, not by essence or purity, but by acknowledging its innate hybridity, heterogeneity and transformability.
CHAPTER 4: COSMETIC TRANSFORMATION AND ASIAN AMERICAN FEMALE IDENTITIES: ON JULIA CHO’S BFE

I’m the right size for love.

–Stephen Dunn (qtd. in Cho BFE 1)

This quote, placed at the beginning of Julia Cho’s 2005 play BFE, summarizes the focus of the play: the individual’s consciousness of one’s body image and its social signification in exchanging inter-human connection and affection. Centering on an Asian American family, BFE specifically deals with the impact of the racialized discourse of body aesthetics that is perpetuated in the white-dominant society on Asian American women’s identities.

BFE was commissioned by New York Theatre Workshop in 2001. The play premiered in April 20, 2005 in the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut. This production transferred to New York’s Playwrights Horizons in May (Cho, BFE 4). SIS Productions presented the play’s northwest premiere between February and March, 2008 in Seattle.4

In BFE, Julia Cho presents a complex story about how an adolescent Asian American girl resorts to plastic surgery. The influences that propel Panny to self-

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1 The off-Broadway production received attention from the press, including The New York Times and Variety magazine. Both reviews focused on the writing of the play, but voiced opposite opinions. While Anita Gates at The New York Times offered a positive review of the writing, Marilyn Stasio at Variety magazine believed that the play was diffuse and lacked focus on its central character and conflict (Stasio). Echoing with his criticism, Elyse Sommer of CurtainUp viewed the plot as being overstuffed. However, she believed that “the play’s excesses matter less than the interesting questions it raises about self-perception and reality” (Sommer).

2 Despite my efforts to look for a recording of a production of BFE, there does not seem to be any recording made for the theatrical production of the play. Limited by this circumstance, my analysis will focus on Julia Cho’s text.
transformation include the images of beautiful women circulated by the mass media, the pressure imposed by her post-surgery mother, a failed telephone romance and a traumatic experience of encountering a serial killer. By showing the pressure imposed on Panny to be “beautiful” by the domestic and social environment, the play demonstrates how the social, ethnic landscape of the society might transform an individual, psychologically and physically. As James Tabafunda pointed out, the play “explores the clash between self-identity and the traditional standards of beauty in American culture.” To be more specific, *BFE* focuses on the clash between Asian American women’s identity and the standard of beauty held by a white-dominant society, and therefore grapples with the complex issue of the socio-political construction of one’s ethnic, cultural, age and gender identities.

In addition to the focus on Asian American women’s body image and identity, alienation and isolation constitutes the central development of the play. As the complications of the plot elevate to drive Panny to plastic transformation, instead of gaining more social advantage from a modified body image, she falls deeper into alienation from herself and the outside world. In a review of the off-Broadway production of *BFE*, Anita Gates summarizes the play as “an insightful, beautifully structured drama about the agonies and comforts of isolation, told through the struggles of Panny and her family.” In *BFE*, each member of the family, i.e. Panny, Isabel, and Lefty, is trying to make connection with other people, but eventually fails and falls back into deeper isolation.
Grappling with the issues of individuals’ identities at the intersection of the discourse of racialization and beautification, *BFE* offers an in-depth reflection of the stakes of being an Asian American woman in the age of consumable plastic transformation. Since the play deals with the real-world issues, my analysis will draw on social science, specifically investigations of interracial adoption and the global phenomenon of plastic surgery as well as their impact on individuals’ identities. To further unpack the play’s critical exploration of the discourse of beauty and beautification, I will examine the text through the lens of Jean Baudrillard’s “Ethnics of Beauty” and Bernadette Wegenstein’s theorization of the “cosmetic gaze.” These theoretical lenses inform my inquiry into the critical questions that the play attempts to raise, such as what is the social meaning of a woman’s body, what it means to violently modify one’s body, what is the standard of beauty and whether aesthetic judgment is free from politics.

*BFE* brings attention to the complexity of these issues and points to the importance of questioning the notions of beauty that are taken for granted. The multiple forces that affect Panny to self-transformation demonstrate the perpetuation of the beauty discourse and its disciplining power on different social fields in a global scope. To further complicate the investigation of ethnic implications of plastic surgery, Cho points out the prevalence of such surgery in Korea and thus asks us to reevaluate the phenomenon in the context of globalization. A detailed examination of the play reveals that both the local social landscape and the globalized cultural hybridity work together in the construction of
an ideal of beauty, which exerts its disciplining power and reconstructs Panny’s body and subjectivity.

The Landscape of *BFE*

Cho chooses a specific location for the play to foreground the local ethnic landscape that enables the story to take place. The setting of the play foregrounds the theme of isolation. The location of the play is indicated as B.F.E., which is short for Bum Fuck Egypt, a slang term that means “in the middle of nowhere.” Although it is not stated explicitly, the play offers some hints about the landscape of the location. In *BFE*, Isabel, i.e. Panny’s mother, describes the place “as hot as lifeless” (Cho, *BFE* 44). Some scenes in the play take place in the desert. These hints imply that the Southwest of America might be the real-life reference for *BFE*. In light of Julia Cho’s experience of growing up in Arizona between twelve and sixteen (“Desert Memories” 46), one could assume the location of the play to be a small town in Arizona.

In an interview with Sung Rno about the landscape of *BFE*, Julia Cho talks about the impressionable experience of spending her adolescent years in Arizona and the effects of the natural landscape on the social environment in which she lived. On the one hand, the landscape of the desert makes people more conscious of the importance of inter-human connection and civilization: “when I see the desert, it’s kind of a scary place; I’m so conscious that if you don’t have water, man, you’re dead. Civilization becomes so important because people really do need each other” (“Desert Memories” 46-47).
On the other hand, as a Korean American, Julia Cho was struck by the lack of ethnic diversity in Arizona, which became more upsetting in light of the increasing need for community living in the desert. In the interview, Cho talks about her experience of the ethnic landscape in Arizona in comparison with Los Angeles, where she was born: “It’s oddly comforting to be back in L.A. Looking back now, I realize how incredibly diverse it was. I was friends with a Mexican and a Filipina; a Chinese family lived down the street. At the time I didn’t realize how unique that was, but then we moved to Arizona, and I was like, whoa.” Cho then affirms that her experience of growing up in Arizona is the inspiration for BFE: “I don’t think I would have written BFE if I had grown up in L.A. Place is really important. It’s like a whole other character. …I don’t think I would have been able to imagine what it would be like to be in a BFE type of place if I was surrounded by total diversity” (“Desert Memories” 47).

The world imagined in BFE was based on and a reflection of Cho’s experience of the natural, ethnic, and social landscape of Arizona as a Korean American. In this respect, Panny’s adolescent dilemma seems to have some autobiographical touch to it. In the play, the landscape is not only geographically isolated by the desert, but also lacks ethnic diversity, because of which the main characters, i.e. an Asian American family, are alienated. Therefore, the location as B.F.E., i.e. in the middle of nowhere, after which Cho named the play, implies not only the geographical setting, but more importantly the social and ethnic landscape and its impact on the characters’ definition of their places in this world.
In addition to this particular social landscape, Cho foregrounds the plot and characterization on subtle but detailed relaying of each main character’s personal history. The play centers on a dysfunctional Asian American family. Lefty and Isabel are brother and sister, with Panny as Isabel’s daughter. From Lefty’s conversation with Evvie, we get to know that Isabel and Lefty are adopted, and the experience of being raised by white parents have had a significant impact on their identification:

We were adopted, my sister and me. Don’t know anything about our birth parents except that they didn’t want us. And the family that raised us sure didn’t know what to make of us. Lots of times it felt like we just gave birth to ourselves. And I didn’t want her kid to grow up like that. Always feeling…wrong. Like you’ve put on someone else’s glasses, or sat in the wrong seat. (Cho, BFE 37-38)

This revelation corresponds with the characters list, in which Cho designates Isabel, Left and Panny’s ethnicity as “Asian-American” without further specifying their national origin (Cho, BFE 1). Lefty’s disclosure reveals his and Isabel’s experience of alienation in their adopted family, being raised by white parents.

Isabel and Lefty’s experience of conflicted feelings about being raised by white parents is a reflection of the experience of the children of interracial and intercountry adoptions in the United States. According to Sandra Patton’s investigation of interracial adoption, the development of a meaningful sense of racial identity is profoundly complex and problematic for multiracial adoptees raised in white families. “While all these adults have managed to work out the racial implications of their lives for themselves,” Patton
states, “their acquisition of cultural maps to enable such negotiation has typically been a struggle” (200). The sense of dislocation in adoption is reinforced by the biological difference between the adoptee and his/her parents, especially in light of the dominance of whites in the American society. As Sara Dorow points out, dislocation of bio-kinship is made more difficult because it is “akin to racial disjunctions, and more specifically, to the dominance of whiteness” (206). Therefore, in the case of adoption of multiracial children by white couple, the sense of dislocation multiplies, and thus poses contradictions of belonging to the adoptee. In BFE, Lefty describes this contradiction of belonging from the adoptive experience as sitting in the wrong seat, and always feeling wrong.

The history of intercountry adoption in the United States reveals that Isabel and Lefty’s characters are referring to the first generation of adoptees from Asia. BFE is set in the late nineties, when Isabel and Lefty are in their thirties. Therefore, we could deduce that they were born and adopted in the 1960s, which was during the first wave of intercountry adoption in the United States. Beginning from the middle of 1950s, humanitarian efforts were initiated to bring children orphaned and abandoned as a result of the Korean War to the United States (Rojewski and Rojewski 2). According to the statistics provided by Altsten and Simon, between 1953 and 1962, approximately 15,000 foreign-born children were adopted by American families. In the ten years ending in 1976, about 65 percent of foreign-born children adopted by U.S. citizens (approximately 32,000) came from Asia, primarily from the Republic of Korea (4).
This association between Isabel and Lefty and the historical context of the first wave of U.S. citizens’ adoption from Asia deepens our understanding of their adoptive parents’ treatment of them. As Lefty says, their parents did not know what to make of them. This rings true to the historical context of 1960s when civil rights activists were struggling against racial discrimination and racism was still at issue in the United States. Meanwhile, the fact that this movement of intercountry adoption was unprecedented in the States implies an explanation for the adoptive parents’ cluelessness of what to do with their non-white children from another country. For Isabel and Lefty, their adoptive parents’ lack of understanding or lack of interest in understanding them creates an alienating atmosphere in their family. Therefore, instead of fostering a sense of belonging by integrating Isabel and Lefty into the family, their adoptive parents aggravate their sense of dislocation and add to their struggles of identification.

In the meantime, as a minority in the white-dominant American society, individuals with Asian heritage have to negotiate with the imagining or fantasizing of their images by the others. As Diana Fuss indicates in Identification Papers, identification is a process that happens between individual psyches and the subject positions invented by culture, politics and markets (2). In American society, the dominance of whiteness in the ethnic landscape primarily determines the mainstream culture, politics and markets. And it is this socio-political discourse that operates to construct the subject positions of Asian Americans. Focusing on two Asian American female characters, BFE explores the process of individuals’ identification with and
against the subject position of women with Asian heritage, invented by the white-dominant society.

In *BFE*, Isabel’s character reflects a fluid process of identification between individual psyches and her subject position as an Asian American woman. This subject position is first of all invented by the discourse of racial politics, specifically the Orientalist gaze by the white-dominant society. This discourse has invented the stereotypical images of Asian femininity, which makes an impact on Isabel’s subjectivity.

In scene 15, we are informed of Isabel’s ideal of becoming a “fascinating woman”:

> When I was just a little girl, I asked my mother what would I be and she said, if I were lucky, I would be a housewife just like her. Well. I said to her, I don’t think so. Just like that. I don’t think so. I know what I would be. I would not be my mother. I would be what I have always wanted to be: a fascinating woman. …At the age of seven, I remember going to sleep at night, and on my nightstand I had a notebook. In this notebook, I had written reminders to myself on How to be a Fascinating Woman. One: Speak quietly. …Two: Listen well….Three: Smile without showing teeth. … And four: Always, always pause in the doorway before entering a room. (She holds a pose briefly, as if she is leaning against the doorframe like a silent movie star….) (Cho, *BFE* 35-36)

This notion of a “fascinating woman” is reminiscent of the contradictory stereotypes of Asian woman as either the modest, submissive “lotus blossom” (E. Lee 12) or hypersexual prostitutes (Moy 89). According to Lee, these stereotypes became popular with the emergence of Orientalist romantic melodramas at the turn of the nineteenth to
twentieth century, exemplified by *Madame Butterfly* (1900) by David Belasco and *The Yellow Jacket* (1912) by J. Harry Benrimo and George C. Hazelton (12-13). In these plays, “female Asian characters embodied imperial presumptions about ‘Asianness.’ They were submissive (as the West wanted to see Asia) or powerful, evil, and threatening (as representative of the Yellow Peril)” (E. Lee 13). In *BFE*, Isabel’s “fascinating woman” incorporates a heightened femininity and female sexuality, in addition to an image of a quiet, reserved woman that is reminiscent of the stereotypical notion of Asian femininity. In James Moy’s analysis of the presentation of Chinese in early twentieth century Hollywood films, he traced back to the emergence of a popular stereotype of promiscuous, sexually available Asian woman (89-90). And this “cinematic inscription of Asian female promiscuity,” as Moy pointed out, was historically constructed (89). Limited by a series of exclusion laws and anti-miscegenation laws that were passed after 1850s, Chinese men exploited for their labor in America were not allowed to have families. Accordingly, “white America tended to view all Asian women as prostitutes” (89). Mixing these contradictory stereotypes of Asian femininity, Isabel’s notion of a “fascinating woman” demonstrates that she has registered the gaze by the white-dominant culture into her subjectivity, which alienates her from herself and creates a split in her identity.

A similar sense of alienation and schizophrenia has been nurtured in Panny’s subjectivity. Living in a white-dominant society, Panny is marked as different, and therefore isolated and marginalized. In a dialogue between Panny and her uncle Lefty in scene 5, Panny refers to her Korean pen pal as “chink.” Lefty tells her it is a bad word
and asks her where she learned it. Panny tells him that she has known this word since she was five. Later in the conversation, in reaction to Panny’s joke to make fun of Korea and Korean culture, Lefty points out that it is improper for Panny to joke about this, because she is not like the kids in her homeroom who would find the joke funny (Cho, *BFE* 17). This conversation subtly reveals Panny’s experience of isolation as a child: she probably has grown up as the only Asian among her peers, and the reason why she learned of the racist word “chink” is possibly that someone called her so when she was five. In light of this revelation, the place where Panny grows up not only isolates and alienates her, but abuses her with racist derogation.

As a second-generation Asian American, Panny’s family, specifically her mother, does not relieve but instead reinforces her sense of alienation. In scene 2, Isabel forgets about Panny’s birthday, and when reminded, gives her a plastic surgery as a gift, implying that there is something wrong with Panny that needs change (see fig. 20). Isabel has internalized the gaze of the other to not only look at her own but also Panny’s image. Isabel’s influence on Panny shows us how a subject, who is subjugated by the socio-political discourse of body politics, ends up being a perpetuator of the very discourse that victimizes herself.
As Panny reaches out to make other friends, she comes across more alienation and rejection, all of which reinforces the sense of difference, otherness and isolation that she has felt as an Asian American in the white-dominant community. Panny’s Korean pen pal Hay-Yoon expresses her disappointment knowing that Panny is not white: “I didn’t realize you were not full American. You are just another Asian person like me” (Cho, BFE 21). As a foreigner, Hay-Yoon equates American-ness with whiteness, which accords with Panny’s experience of the ethnically monolithic society in her hometown. In a sense, Hay-Yoon’s statement articulates Panny’s confusion of her identity: despite that she identifies herself as an American, she has been marked as racially different and thus alienated, and despite the fact that she does not like Hay-Yoon and does not identify with Asian culture, she was constantly reminded that she was “just another Asian person.”
The Discourse of Beauty and the Cosmetic Gaze

While the characters’ individual developments are of significance, there is also an overarching discourse of beauty that is critical for the play’s exploration of the issue of identities. In BFE, the discrepancy of Panny’s body image with that of white girls not only informs her ethnic identification, but also the aesthetic, moral judgment of her body. According to the discourse of body aesthetics dominant in the world of the play, Panny’s body is derogated as being plain, unattractive, undesirable and unlovable. To put it in Stephen Dunn’s words as Cho quotes in the epigraph, Panny is not “the right size for love” (qtd. in Cho BFE 1).

In the world of BFE, the aesthetic judgment of woman’s body image is inseparable from the discourse of racialization. It is implied that the standard of female beauty is set up on Caucasian women’s physical features. At the exposition of the play, Panny informs the audience that three of the most popular girls from her school have disappeared and been murdered. In scene 4, through Isabel and Panny’s dialogues, we are informed that all of the victims have blonde hair and blue eyes. That all of the most popular girls in Panny’s school look this way implies that the aesthetic standard held by the society at large is based on Caucasian female’s physicality.

In addition, the popularity of these pretty girls in school implies that a woman’s body image is directly related to her social well-being and how other people treat her. In other words, the aesthetic judgment of a woman’s body image is conflated with the socio-political evaluation of her subject position in this society. As Stephen Dunn’s quote implies, to exchange for love, one has to be “the right size.” And whether one’s size is
right or wrong is judged in reference to the standard of beauty that is set up around white female’s physicality. For a woman, physical beauty, which is evaluated on a racialized scale, is seen as a capital that enables her to exchange for certain social status and privilege.

This implied social signification of body image reflects Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the “Ethics of Beauty” in “The Finest Consumer Object: the Body.” As Baudrillard indicates, the body is “a cultural fact,” a signifier of social status and a “narcissistic cult object or element of social ritual and tactics” (279). Applying Marxist evaluation of capitalism to theorize the notion of body and beauty, Baudrillard argues that beauty is “a form of capital” and “the finest consumer object” in the capitalist society (280). He further illuminates on the conflation of moral, political and aesthetic judgment of the body, which he terms as the “Ethics of Beauty” (280). The ethics of beauty involves a reduction of the use-value of the body to its exchange value, meaning that beauty is valued not on the basis of the pragmatic function of the body, but rather its social, cultural signification, i.e. its exchange value for social status and privilege.

Therefore, the notion of beauty, which is key to the play, is revealed to implicate a socio-political discourse that concerns gender, ethnicity, and capitalist consumption. In other words, the aesthetics of woman’s body image becomes a discourse itself, and a medium through which the socio-political discourse of gender, ethnicity and capitalism operates its disciplining power on the subjects.

The disciplining power of the discourse of beauty manifests in Isabel’s advocating for plastic surgery. Having had cosmetic surgery, Isabel attempts to persuade Panny to go
under the knife, which reveals her internalization of the discourse of female beauty perpetuated by the society. Isabel points out to Panny that being a woman means answering to the society’s expectation:

A girl becomes a woman, I believe, when she understands sacrifice for the first time. …The world asks things of us constantly. It is never content with what we are; it asks us to dream of what we wish to be and then to have the courage to become that dream. A woman is one who understands what the world asks of her, and answers with an eternal YES, an affirming YES. I say to you, Panny, now is the time to look at what the world asks of you and say YES, YES, YES! This is my gift to you….Plastic surgery. (Cho, *BFE* 14)

In light of Foucault’s definition that the “docile body” is both subjected and useful, the subjugation of the body by the discourse of beauty is inseparable from the aesthetic value of the body. The “docile body” is thus a useful body in the sense that it is reaesthetisized for the sake of improving its social function, as a cultural signifier, as a sign for exchanging social status. Illuminated by Baudrillard’s theorization of the “Ethics of Beauty,” the aesthetic value is not the end of cosmetic surgery. In other words, the beautification of the body is not for the sake of beauty itself, but for the improvement of its exchange value. As a major influence on Panny, Isabel’s social conditioning facilitates the internalization of this discourse in Panny’s subjectivity, and initiates Panny’s psychological and physical transformation.

Isabel’s speech about womanhood, as quoted above, reflected an internalization of what Bernadette Wegenstein termed as the “cosmetic gaze.” In *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body*
Modification and the Construction of Beauty, Wegenstein argues that the boom of plastic surgery at the end of the twentieth century has given rise to and benefited from the “cosmetic gaze.” Wegenstein defines the cosmetic gaze as “one through which the act of looking at our bodies and those of others is informed by the techniques, expectations, and strategies of bodily modification” (2). In other words, the cosmetic gaze “perceives all bodies in light of some potentially transformative completion” (X). Meanwhile, she adds that it is also a “moralizing gaze—a way of looking at bodies as awaiting a physical and spiritual improvement that is present in the body’s structure as an absence or a need” (2).

Isabel’s perception of cosmetic surgery is emblematic of the cosmetic gaze, which perceives the human body as an object that could be transformed. In an attempt to persuade Panny to undertake plastic surgery, Isabel uses herself as a successful example:

Panny, I too was a plain little girl with big yearnings. A diamond in the rough.
And all I did was polish it a little. That’s all this is: polish. Everyone does it.
Every celebrity over the age of thirty-five. Everyone! I mean, I watch TV, I know.
Don’t think of it as surgery. Think of it as a simple act of constructive, self-improvement. …True beauty is not born. True beauty is an act of will. And all you have to do is choose it, Panny. It’s yours to choose. (Cho, BFE 15-16)

Isabel’s notion of plastic surgery as a legitimate measure for self-improvement reflects how the culture of cosmetic makeover results in the increasing passivity and objectification of human body. However, this increasing subjugation and “docility” of the human body is mistaken for freedom and collapsed by the illusion of freedom of consumption.
Thus, the discourse of beauty and cosmetic beautification draws its source from and affects capitalist consumption and consumerism. Echoing Isabel’s association of beauty with freedom of will, Hae-Yoon’s mother tells Hae-Yoon that “we are lucky that it is so easy to be pretty” (Cho, BFE 22). This freedom is a freedom of consuming cosmetic surgery, and therefore closely related to the illusion of freedom afforded by consumerism. In his book Making the Cut, Anthony Elliot lists consumerism as a global social influence that lead to the boom of cosmetic surgery. Research has shown that plastic surgery has become more affordable to the middle class in the United States, because of which more people have the financial capability to become pretty like celebrities and the wealthy people. Hae-Yoon’s mother and Isabel exemplify the consumers of beautification discourse, who are under the confluence of globalized consumerism and celebrity culture.

In addition, Isabel’s speech reveals that her internalization of the cosmetic gaze might have been a result of the perpetuation of beauty discourse by celebrity culture and mass media. As Wegenstein points out, “the cosmetic gaze is deployed in individuals but is nurtured and evolves in the media of culture” (X).

In BFE, one of the main driving forces that push Panny to self-transformation is mass media’s perpetuation of cosmetic discourse. The first scene of the play begins with Panny reading a magazine in the store where her friend Nancy works in. “Do you think I’d look good with this hair?” Panny asks her friend Nancy about the image in the magazine “Look, it’s that model we hate. She’s everywhere. She’s pretty, huh?...I think she is.” (Cho, BFE 11) To see this scene in light of the rest of the play, Panny’s comment
on the magazine suggests that the images of female body in the mass media have served to set up a standard of beauty and attractiveness, which has taken roots in Panny’s mind. This notion of female prettiness is thus associated with an impossible proportion of the body of a model, a professionally polished hairstyle, and a face that is expertly made up and photoshopped, and an outfit that was luxurious and flattering to the figure. The impact of this simulacrum of beauty on Panny, as seen later in the play, is that she judges her own body in reference to this standard, which results in a sense of inferiority and her self-denial. In Wegenstein’s critical analysis of the sociology of plastic surgery, she points out that being surrounded by made-over bodies produces a desire for one’s own makeover and also a gaze that is circular: “I see myself in the bodies of others, and the bodies of others tell me how I look or could look” (2). The question Panny asks in the first scene “Do you think I’d look good with this hair?” hints at an internalization of the cosmetic gaze in Panny’s examination of her body image, and foreshadows her eventual resort to plastic surgery.

The First Cosmetic Transformation

The first bodily transformation of Panny is largely attributable to the impact of the magazine and the cosmetic discourse it perpetuates. Situated in the middle point of the play, this scene serves to visualize the gradual change in Panny in her evaluation of her body image, and marks a crucial transitional point from an initial hesitation about surgery to a desperate decision to transform herself.
As the adolescent period is a phase of building one’s self-esteem and exploring one’s identity, the denial and isolation from the outside world, as discussed above, aggravates Panny’s insecurity and propels her into self-denial. It is this psychological status that drives Panny to lies and masquerade when she tries to make friends with Hugo. Through an accidental misdial, Panny and Hugo become romantically involved on the phone (see fig. 21). Learning that Hugo is in college, Panny lies about her age as eighteen instead of fourteen. When Hugo proposes to meet Panny, she panics because she thinks that she does not look like what he might expect her to look like, i.e. white. In preparation to meet Hugo, she resorts to cosmetics to transform her appearance.


This self-transformation through makeup should be read as an attempt to not only look more mature or prettier, but also to look more fitting, normal, and less racially different. However, the process reminds Panny of the difference of her Asian body from that of the standard beauty constructed on the physicality of whites. Since she has no
experience in using makeup, Panny refers to the instructions in a magazine. Not
surprisingly, the instruction of applying makeup in the magazine is based on the facial
feature of a majority of Caucasians, and further underlines the sense of difference to
Panny. Following the instructions, Panny looks for the crease of her eyelid, under which
she is supposed to apply the eyeshadow, and finds out that she has no crease (Cho, BFE
35). As the magazine is supposed to be applicable to the majority of people, it is
associated with standard and normalcy. In reference to this standard of normalcy, Panny’s
single eyelid is marked not only as different, but also as lacking, and even as abnormal.

Panny’s resort to cosmetics implies that she has registered the discourse of
beautification in her mind, and believes that putting on makeup would reconstruct and
improve her physical appearance and make her more desirable to Hugo. It is significant
that this act takes place simultaneously with Isabel’s monologue of her ideal of being a
“fascinating woman,” for it suggests that Panny is gradually inheriting Isabel’s notion of
beauty and femininity. At the end of Panny’s cosmetic transformation, she “strikes a pose
vaguely similar to Isabel’s,” i.e. leaning on the door as if in a silent film. Cho notes that
Panny “has succeeded in applying a lot of makeup to her face. She doesn’t exactly look
older but she does look very different” (Cho, BFE 36). This “difference” achieved by
cosmetic transformation marks the first step for Panny’s denial of herself in pursuit of a
new self. Therefore, this scene marks a significant transitional moment in the narrative
arc of the play.

However, this cosmetic transformation does not achieve its aim as Panny
expected. Hugo is not impressed by Panny’s made-over appearance, and immediately
recognizes that she was not as old as she claimed. Hugo storms off without allowing Panny to explain herself.

The Final Transformation

The final stimulus that pushes Panny to plastic surgery is her encounter with the serial killer who serves as a metaphor of the moralizing cosmetic gaze perpetuated by the society. In the play, the discourse of body aesthetics is foregrounded by the killer’s preference in choosing girls with blonde hair, blue eyes as his victims. Panny’s friend Nancy, who is blonde, pretty and popular at school, is the serial killer’s next target. However, Hugo and Panny’s appearance for their appointment disrupts the killer’s plan. Nancy ends up catching a ride with Hugo, with Panny left alone at the store. Hence, Panny becomes the serial killer’s victim. When she begs him to let her go, Panny tries to persuade the killer that she is not his type. The killer admits that taking Panny was an accident because his plan to get Nancy backfired. Then he takes out a backup blonde wig, and forces Panny to put it on.

In the end, Panny survives. However, the serial killer does not let Panny go without leaving marks on her. When Panny tells the story to the audience, she raises her shirt and on her belly was a scar, spelling as “UGLY,” which the serial killer carved into her skin. The psychological abuse that comes with this mark is much worse than the physical abuse, which left Panny with trauma and complete self-denial: “He didn’t kill me. I wasn’t his type. I was too ugly, even for him” (Cho, BFE 51). This is the last straw that finally drives Panny to a complete self-denial and her resort to self-transformation
through plastic surgery. In an interview, Cho states that “Panny’s surgery and that carving are inextricably linked, that one cannot be without the other. On some level she would never have decided to do the surgery if she hadn’t felt marked, felt deeply that something about her was very, very wrong” (“Interview with Julia Cho” 45).

From this perspective, the serial killer could be read as a symbol of the hostility of the society towards Asian American women’s body. To borrow Heyes and Meredith Jones’ examination of plastic surgery, I would argue that BFE suggests that the characters’ “choice” of cosmetic surgery is overdetermined by a racialized, patriarchal structure, which “makes cosmetic surgery like the only option for psychological survival” in a world hostile to Asian American women’s body (6). The violence imposed on Panny by the killer embodies the violence that the aesthetics of the society imposes on its subjects, both psychologically and physically. The discourse of body politics places Panny in a paradoxical position: the murder of the pretty girls implies the hostility of the society against women’s body; on the other hand, the moralizing judgment of women’s body image determines that beauty is a necessary capital for economic, social and psychological survival. The mark carved into Panny’s skin by the serial killer could be read as a symbol of the internalization of the society’s aesthetic standard in her subjectivity. Through this mark, the judgment of her body image as being “ugly” registers in Panny’s subjectivity, and finally propels her to succumb to the violence of the surgery on her body.
When Hugo visits Panny, their conversation further elevates the play’s insight on the paradoxical relation between a woman’s freedom in controlling her body and the restricting social discourse on women’s body image.

HUGO: Why did you need surgery? Did he hurt them [eyes]?

PANNY: No. It was my choice. I wanted … a change. (Cho, BFE 52)

Panny’s claim echoes with Isabel’s association of surgery with free will in the earlier scenes. Here, the irony lies in not only the contrast between Panny’s claim and the actual incidents leading to this “choice,” but also in the implication that the only freedom she has is to have her body transformed.

In this scene, Cho presents Panny’s plastic transformation using a Brechtian device to create $V$-effekt. Instead of visualizing the violent act of the surgery, BFE has Panny put on gauze on her eyes and a pair of dark sunglasses onstage. The employment of the technique of Verfremdung serves to highlight the artificiality of the performance and propel us to critically reflect on the act.

In the meantime, the concealment of her eyes behind the gauze and sunglasses makes it impossible to read Panny’s feelings and thus signifies her deepened alienation from the outside world and from herself. Similar to her first transformation through makeup, the gauze and sunglasses in the place of cosmetics make Panny look different and alien to herself and others.

Panny’s deepened self-alienation echoes the impact of plastic surgery on Isabel and her family. Through Panny’s monologue, she recalled her feeling of what Freud called Unheimlich, i.e. uncanny, when she saw Isabel’s surgery-transformed face.
Unheimlich. That’s what Freud called it when something familiar becomes a little strange. He says it’s the familiarity which makes it disturbing. …One day my mother came home looking as if she’d been hit in the face with a two by four. She stopped going to work; she just stayed home. And when the bandages finally came off, she was all healed and I guess she looked good. I mean, I guess she looked great. But when I saw her face for the first time, all I wanted to do was run away. (Cho, BFE 14)

It suggests that plastic surgery was an act of self-alienation, which could result in an increasing alienation and further estrange one from oneself and others.

Isabel and Panny’s altered life style after their surgeries also demonstrates their increasing isolation from the outside world. After the surgery, Isabel becomes increasingly agoraphobic, and cannot bring herself to step outside the house. Echoing Isabel, plastic surgery seems to not only alter Panny’s body, but also affect her personality to become self-enclosed and agoraphobic. The last scene presents Panny, Isabel and Lefty sitting in front of TV. When the telephone rings, no one picks it up (see fig. 22). Both Isabel and Panny are alienated by their family and marginalized in the white-dominant society. The racialized discourse of beauty perpetuated in the society has registered in Isabel and Panny’s subjectivity, and driven them to self-denial, self-transformation and self-alienation.
Asian Eyelid Surgery

Isabel and Panny’s choice of plastic surgery and its impact on their subjectivities demonstrate the effect of the racialized beauty discourse and cosmetic gaze on Asian American women’s identities. This racialized cosmetic gaze marks the body image of Asian Americans as an absence, as lacking, or even as abnormal. Informed by the discrepancy of Asian Americans’ body image and the ideal of beauty set up around Caucasian’s physical features, Isabel passes judgment on Panny’s appearance and urges Panny to have a surgery done on her eyes and nose.

PANNY: What’s wrong with my nose?

ISABEL: Well, there’s no bridge. I mean, pfft. Nothing.

PANNY: Do I need a bridge?

ISABEL: Okay, forget the nose. How about the eyes?

PANNY: What’s wrong with my eyes? (Cho, BFE 15)
BFE offers an intriguing reflection on a prevalent practice among women of Asian heritage in the United States: eyelid surgery. According to the statistics of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, from 2005 to the present, the three most popular surgical procedures for Asian Americans were nose reshaping, eyelid surgery and breast augmentation (“Briefing Paper”). Eyelid surgery has received much attention and was the most discussed politically controversial ECS, i.e. Ethnic Cosmetic Surgery. It is a procedure popular with people with East or Southeast Asian heritage who have a single upper eyelid, i.e. one without a visible crease or supratarsal fold in it. The aesthetic purpose of this procedure is to create the impression of a more wide-open, rounder eye.

The controversy surrounding the practice of Asian eyelid surgery is based on an essentialist notion that the lack of a supratarsal fold is an ethnic feature of the Asian eye, and thus a feature that marks the biological difference of Asians from non-Asians. According to the observation of plastic surgeons such as Edward Kwak, “an absent supratarsal fold is not a feature seen in all individuals of East Asian descent, and 30 to 50% of East Asians have some form of a rudimentary supratarsal fold” (102). However, it is pointed out that the “rudimentary supratarsal fold” is “less arched and closer to the lash line” in comparison to most non-Asians’ eyelids (Heyes 194). The undertaking of eyelid surgery has received criticism from feminist scholars, who see it as an attempt to “eradicate signs of ethnicity” (Davis 87).

One of the most influential critical texts on ESC is Eugenia Kaw’s 1994 article “Opening Faces’: The Politics of Cosmetic Surgery and Asian American Women.” She
argues that Asian Americans’ undertaking of surgeries on their eyes and noses are of a different nature from their concern with their breasts,

Because the features (eyes and nose) Asian Americans are most concerned about are conventional markers of their racial identity, a rejection of these markers entails, in some sense, a devaluation of not only oneself but also other Asian Americans. It requires having to imitate, if not admire, the characteristics of another group more culturally dominant than one’s own (i.e. Anglo Americans) in order that one can at least try to distinguish oneself from one’s own group. (254)

Kaw’s argument became quite influential and widely cited in later works by other scholars, and was almost seen as a canon in the field.

However, Cressida Heyes points out that Kaw uses double standards in her examination of Asian eyelid surgery than of other kinds of plastic surgeries. Furthermore, Heyes indicates that Kaw’s argument feeds on and reinforces two prevalent stereotypes of Asian Americans. On the one hand, East and Southeast Asian immigrant groups in the States are labeled as “model minorities,” who are willing to conform to the standards required for success under capitalism. On the other hand, Asian women are presented as “passive, prone to conventionality, and subservient to patriarchal values” (Heyes 200). To offer an alternative approach, Heyes suggests reading all bodies as ethnically marked, and calls for a “more fine-grained analysis of women’s complicity, resistance, passivity, and agency” (193).

Heyes’ argument refutes the simplistic assertion that Asian eyelid surgery is an attempt of whitening in the United States. In addition, the popularity of eyelid surgery in
East Asia makes it seem more problematic to argue that white-supremacy of American society is the primary stimulus for the prevalence of eyelid surgery among Asians.

In *BFE*, the Korean character Hae-Yoon, i.e. Panny’s pen pal, sheds light on the fact that eyelid surgery is a prevalent practice among women in Korea. This contextualizes the phenomenon of eyelid surgery under the impact of globalization, and thus problematizes Kaw’s argument. In the play, Hae-Yoon tells Panny that plastic surgery is very popular and common in Korea. She had eyelid surgery at the age of four, and all of her friends had it. It was a common practice because all the movie and singing stars have surgery, and the surgery is easy, as she puts it, “my mother take me to doctor and I go in and out” (Cho, *BFE* 22). Hae-Yoon’s description about the popularity of eyelid surgery reflects the commonality of plastic surgery in contemporary South Korea. According to Lisa Takeuchi Cullen, “in Korea, surgeons estimate that at least one of 10 adults have received some form of surgical upgrade and even tots have their eyelids done” (20). Earlier statistics provided by Joyce Nishioka in 1999 estimates that 40 percent of Korean women were undergoing double-eyelid surgery. These statistics indicate that eyelid surgery or plastic surgery in general has boomed from the end of the twentieth century and continued to prosper in the early twenty-first century in South Korea.

In this respect, *BFE* asks for a deeper investigation of the global social discourse that affects people to undergo Asian eyelid surgery. In an interview with Eric Ting, Cho talks about her insight of the motivation behind such surgery. When Ting asked what she thinks is achieved by eye alternation, Cho said: “It’s too easy to say that it makes people
look more Caucasian. Maybe the roots of it came from that impulse, but it’s become something else, a certain ideal of perfect prettiness” (“Interview with Julia Cho” 45). In light of this statement, BFE could be seen as Cho’s attempt to question what this ideal of perfect prettiness is, and more significantly, how this standard is constructed.

Some research indicates that a number of people choose eyelid surgery because they believe that one of the essential traits for standard prettiness is round, big eyes. In Wen Hua’s fieldwork research about eyelid surgery in China, most interviewees said that they undertook eyelid surgery because “double eyelids make my eyes bigger and more beautiful” (278). When she asked them why big eyes are considered beautiful, some of them were puzzled. As one informant said: “It’s universal! Big eyes are always considered beautiful. It is kind of a benchmark of whether a woman is pretty or not. Aren’t big eyes beautiful?” (278) The aesthetic preference of bigger eyes has been taken for granted, and its arbitrariness as well as constructedness is left unquestioned.

Scholars offered different explanations for the construction of this aesthetic ideal. Lisa Cullen suggests that the popularity of eyelid surgery in Asia is mobilized by Asia’s changed aesthetic ideal “under the relentless bombardment of Hollywood, satellite TV, and Madison Avenue” (21). Some existing research in Korea frames cosmetic surgery as “an undesired effect of western cultural influence” (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 59). In Ruth Holliday and Joanna Elfving-Hwang’s article “Gender, Globalization and Aesthetic Surgery in South Korea,” they seek to challenge the simplistic explanation that interprets eyelid surgery as a culturally imperialist practice. They points out that
The existing literature has a tendency to reify globally mediatized bodies as western, but the globalized body is already “mixed” and bears little resemblance to actual women in either the West or the East. Rather, the “western” body links to idealized (and, of course, exceptional) characteristics in many countries. …Positioning blepharoplasty as westernization ignores the fact that wide eyes have local significations such as youthfulness and active desire, and that western women also routinely undertake similar surgeries. Claiming Korean women want to look western denies the constructed nature of western beauty and that western beauty has been valued because it entered Korea fitting preexisting notions of class and status. Such claims position western cultural borrowings as appropriation and non-western ones as colonization while ignoring the fact that all modern nations actively appropriate, reject, hybridize or acquiesce in elements of transcultural influences that circulate through the globalized media, cheap travel and migrations. (75)

In light of this argument, the globalized body that represents a globalized ideal of beauty is a product of multicultural hybridity. Holliday and Elfving-Hwang believes that the aesthetic preference of wide eyes in South Korea is more related to the local significations that associate bigger eyes with youthfulness and active desire. And they suggest that the so-called Western ideal of beauty is also a construction, in which certain facial or physical features are arbitrarily given certain social significations. Another insight provided in this argument is that the construction of aesthetic ideal is closely related to social classification and economic status. Rather than simply reducing eyelid
surgery as a byproduct of imperialism or westernization, Holliday and Elfving-Hwang offer a more up-to-date reading of the complex phenomenon by placing it in the contemporary context of globalization and cultural hybridity, and drawing on Marxist lens of classes and economy.

Since the ideal of beauty is undefinable, subjective and personal, one would wonder how it is measured that round eyes are more beautiful than slant eyes, that a higher nose is more aesthetically pleasing than a lower bridge. Drawing inspiration from Anthony Elliott’s examination of the global boom of plastic surgery in addition to Holliday and Elfving-Hwang’s in-depth investigation of eyelid surgery in Korea, I would argue that the aesthetic ideal is determined by the economic, political, and cultural dynamics of globalization in the context of the early twenty-first century. To further complicate this larger context of globalization, *BFE* demonstrates the impact of the local ethnic landscape on the construction of an ideal of beauty, and subsequently on the construction of an individual’s subjectivity.

**Conclusion**

In Julia Cho’s *BFE*, bodily transformation becomes the central theme that epitomizes the complication of gender and ethnic identities under the hegemony of beautification discourse and makeover culture. The play offers a nuanced and detailed depiction of the characters’ motivation to undertake plastic transformation and the surgery’s impact on their subjectivities. The plot and characterization embodies Cho’s in-depth investigation of the discourse of beauty and beautification concerning its
construction and perpetuation by local and global economics, politics and cultural
significations. *BFE* implies that the aesthetic judgment of body image is inseparable from
gender and racial politics, and begs a further inquiry about the cultural, political
signification of the body or body image of Asian American women in the age of
globalized plastic transformation.
CHAPTER 5: QUEERING THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA: TRANSFORMATIONS IN RAMBLE-ATIONS: A ONE D’LO SHOW

As BFE presents minority subjects’ struggles with and internalization of white supremacist discourse, the performance discussed in this chapter illustrates an alternative narrative of identity construction. In Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show, D’Lo performs his (dis)identification as “Gay Hindu Hip Hop,” a hybridity that contests the mainstream American imagination of diasporic subjectivity and cultural identity (“Ramble-Ations Program Note”).

Sri Lankan American writer/performer D’Lo first performed Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show at New World Theater (Amherst) in 2006, and has toured around the States since. This solo show has had runs at Pangea World Theater (Minneapolsis), Highways Performance Space (Los Angeles), Ashe Cultural Center (New Orleans) and a number of performance spaces and theater festivals across the States (“Performer links”). The reviews for Ramble-Ations are unanimously positive. NYTheatre extols D’Lo’s “impressive versatility” in enacting six characters, while Richard Dodds of Bay Area Reporter praises that “Ramble-Ations…takes us on a cultural and gender journey that has never been explored in quite this way” (“Performance”).

This multimedia performance contains several vignettes of live performance and video projections as intervals, during which D’Lo changes costume and makeup onstage. The performer’s transformations between a variety of personas facilitate an in-depth exploration of racial, gender, and sexual identities. A review by Broadwayworld on the 2010 performance in Brava Theater (San Francisco) remarks on the significance of the
show’s messages: “As America debates the state of its borders and threat of mass immigration, Ramble-Ations reminds us of the cultural tensions and synergies that define and affirm us as a nation” (BWW News Desk). On a similar note, the artistic director of Brava Theater contends that Ramble-Ations “allows for a deeper dialogue on what it means to be American” (BWW News Desk). In view of the current political debate about national borders and identity in America, the messages of Ramble-Ations seem to be more pertinent and urgent.

Through solo performance, D’Lo states that he intends to embody the hybridity of his identities. Born into a Tamil-Sri Lankan Hindu family, D’Lo is “raised by Hip Hop” culture and identifies as gay and transgender (D’Lo’s website). Born a girl, D’Lo thinks of himself as a boy trapped in a girl’s body and prefers the gender pronoun “he” instead of “she.” The constant negotiations between these cultural values and sexual energies motivate and inspire D’Lo’s autobiographical performance. In the program note he states, “Gay Hindu Hip Hop—these 3 things make me but don’t allow for one another. This [performance] is my attempt at fusing these elements of my being…onto the stage” (D’Lo, “Ramble-Ations Program Note”).

In other words, Ramble-Ations is D’Lo’s attempt at presenting the hybridity of his identities using the artistic means of theater. I am interested in investigating the following questions in this chapter: How does D’Lo present hybridity and identities theatrically? How does the performance of identity make intervention into identity politics? In order to address these questions, I am going to examine D’Lo’s embodiment of the ensemble of
characters in *Ramble-Ations* as well as the aesthetic, political function of the transformational style of solo performance.

In the opening scene D’Lo appears as a tour guide introducing the geography, history, and cultures of Sri Lanka and his diasporic community in Lancaster, California, to the audience. This character embodies an ambiguous gender identity that lacks legible gender markers. This deliberate concealment of his gender identification is also demonstrated in the show’s title, in which D’Lo changes “One Man Show” to “One D’Lo Show.” When the tour guide enters the stage, s/he wears a white oversized tracksuit jacket, baggy shorts and white trainers, concealing any trace of sex characteristics. Adding to this ambiguity, s/he has her/his head shaved bald and ears pierced, wearing earrings. When s/he speaks, her/his voice is high pitched and female, which contrasts with the Hip Hop inflected slang and sweeping arm gestures that s/he uses that are reminiscent of Hip Hop male MCs (see fig. 23). In this opening scene, D’Lo presents the character in an obscure blending of feminine and masculine corporeal and linguistic signs.

![Figure 23. D’Lo embodies Hip Hop style in the first scene; Screenshot from the video recording of *Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show*.](image)
In this respect, the tour guide also embodies a hybrid cultural identity that blends the cultures of Sri Lankan diaspora and Hip Hop. When introducing the histories of Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan diaspora, the tour guide’s verbal and body languages are by contrast Hip Hop, a style that is usually associated with African American communities. For example, when talking about the ethnic populations and religions in Sri Lanka, D’Lo refers to Hindu god Kali as “a godness known to kill mufuckers” (“Ramble-Ations” 2). Similarly bold and irreverently, he lovingly calls Sri Lanka “the little fart that India let off the side of its ass” (2).

The writer indicates in the script that the tour guide is “an exaggerated form of D’Lo” (“Ramble-Ations” 1). In other words, D’Lo presents his “Gay Hindu Hip Hop” identities through the enlarged, highly visible and tangible corporeal signs of this character.

If the tour guide is a heightened representation of D’Lo himself, the other five characters in the show are inspired by his real and imaginary friends and family. These characters include D’Lo’s Amma (Mother), and her spiritual friend White Eagle “who tries to help Amma ‘change’ D’Lo,” his hyperfeminine cousin Vanathi, Grandfather who is “the reborn, reincarnate avatar of Gandhi,” and finally his friend Nic(ole) who identifies as a butch. These characters can be seen as representations of D’Lo’s domestic environment and ethnic community, the dominant values of these communities and their influence on his subjectivity. By transforming into these characters onstage, D’Lo attempts to theatrically present how he negotiates between his gender and sexual disposition and the dominant ideology of his social sphere.
D’Lo and Amma

To examine Ramble-Ations in more detail, I first focus on D’Lo’s transformation between two characters: the tour guide (D’Lo) and Amma.

Following the first scene (as seen in a video recording of the performance), the stage light is turned off and a Powerpoint video is shown to the audience that tells D’Lo’s childhood experience through family photos and explanatory texts. Accompanied with a traditional Sri Lankan song, the video informs the audience of D’Lo’s identification as a boy at an early age despite being born a girl. When this short video ends, a traditionally attired South Asian woman appears onstage wearing a red, neatly tied saree, a long black braid, light lipsticks and long earrings, speaking English with a heavy Tamil accent. Despite her vastly different appearance than the tour guide, the audience immediately recognizes that this is D’Lo in a wig and drag.

In addition to Amma’s physical appearance, her other corporeal signs also embody the traditional expectation of femininity in the South Asian diaspora. In contrast to the previous character, Amma’s voice is soft and gentle, her hand gestures and body movements are contained. The containment of her movement is partly caused by a stage device to aid the performer’s costume transformation. The outer layer of Amma’s saree is a piece of red cloth hung on a horizontal bar on the right side of the stage. Because this cloth is tied to the bar, D’Lo’s character Amma can only move left and right within a limited area (see fig. 24). As she moves, the loose end of her saree (which is tied to the bar) falls loosely around her left shoulder, and therefore she has to adjust it from time to
time. By having part of the character’s costume tied to a bar, D’Lo illustrates the physical restrictions of South Asian women under the diasporic discourse of female domesticity.

Figure 24. The outer layer of Amma’s saree is tied to an overhead bar, restricting her movement; Screenshot from the video recording of Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show.

The contained and soft manners of Amma also contrast sharply with D’Lo bold and irreverent language and Hip Hop style, which embodies his rebellion and divergence from the traditional values of his ethnic community. This divergence is further illustrated by the disparity between Amma’s and D’Lo’s religious practices. While addressing the audience, Amma holds a piece of cloth to wipe clean a Buddha statue. This act signifies the mother’s domestic responsibility of maintaining the religious practice for the household. It demonstrates D’Lo’s remark on his mother as the “community woman... The upholder of religious activities, the safe-keeper of rituals precious and ancient” (“Ramble-Ations” 11). This respectful manner stands in contrast with D’Lo’s irreverent jokes about Hindu gods that the tour guide voices in the previous scene.

Amma’s character represents the diasporic community’s ideas regarding gender roles for women. Scholars point out that in South Asian communities, women in marriage
are expected to play the role of “keepers of culture” responsible for preserving culture in the form of religion, language, dress, food, and child-rearing (DasGupta and Das Dasgupta 327). In this scene, Amma’s physical appearance, body language, and actions all speak to her performance of the role to preserve culture in the household.

The disparity between Amma and D’Lo demonstrates his disidentification with the values and expectations of his ethnic community. As scholar Sandra Chatterjee points out, “stable femininity and masculinities, and heterosexual gender relationships are at the core of the imagination of … the diaspora” in South Asian community (“Impossible Hosting” 449). Identifying as a transgender male, D’Lo’s sexuality and gender identification conflicts with these core values. Amma’s monologue reveals her initial frustration and shock at her daughter’s coming out:

You know...in 1999 my daughter told me she was a gay. Since then, she has further explained that all her life, she has felt like a little boy trapped in a woman’s body. I tell you, We should have never left Sri Lanka...At first it was a shock. I mean we don’t have gays in Sri Lanka...I know what a gay looks like, I watch tv. You know Ellen Degeneres, Rosie O’Donell, that tennis player Martina Navabalachandran, you see, they are all white and my daughter is not fair skinned… (D’Lo, “Ramble-Ations” 4)

The association Amma made between queer identification and whiteness indicates not an absence but effacement of queer identities in the diasporic community because of the dominant ideology of stable gender roles and heteronormativity.
The conflict between D’Lo’s transgender sexuality and the values of his ethnic community is demonstrated further in his encounter with White Eagle, a “spiritual friend of Amma’s who tries to help Amma ‘change’ D’Lo” (D’Lo, “Ramble-Ations” 1). D’Lo transforms into White Eagle by wrapping himself with the yellow cloth tied to a bar onstage right and layering a yellow veil on top (see fig. 25). Coaxing D’Lo into a hypnotic state, White Eagle tries to talk D’Lo out of his transgender identification by preaching about spirits and karma:

Your spirit picked your body, but all spirits have a gender.

A male gendered spirit had picked your body for a purpose.

Your past lives dictate that there was some karma for you to reconcile.

Your male spirit knew that he would burn karma by entering your female body, so that he wouldn’t have to come back here again.

You must focus your energy with discipline and fight against the urge to be male-identified.

Trust the spirits that are talking through me…grow your hair long…you’ll be SO happy with a man. (13)
Following White Eagle’s spell is the performer’s sudden removal of the veil. Growling angrily, D’Lo throws the veil on the ground and turns around to unwrap himself out of the yellow cloth in a fast and anxious manner (see fig. 26). This angry transformation manifests D’Lo’s rage at the denial of transgender identity by the community under the guise of Hindu religion. He points out to the audience that the Hindu faith “traditionally has never said that spirits have a gender” but nevertheless “secularly didn’t have space for gays” (14). Despite the “known power of the hijras,” i.e. male-to-female transsexuals or transgender individuals in the Hindu tradition, queer identities outside of the norm of heterosexuality and stable gender identifications are seen as nonexistent in the Hindu community of the diaspora.

Figure 26. D’Lo transforms out of White Eagle with angry movements; Screenshot from the video recording of Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show.

From this perspective, D’Lo makes visible a queer diasporic subjectivity that is “previously believed impossible” within the framework of dominant diasporic ideology (Gopinath 15). When Amma told D’Lo “it’s ok that you are a gay, just don’t tell anyone,” D’Lo responded, “Amma, I don’t have to tell anyone that I’m a gay, they already know”
because he “dresses like a boy” (D’Lo, “Ramble-Ations” 4). D’Lo’s shaved head manifests his queer identity prominently, because in Sri Lanka a shaved head is “imposed upon outcastes, such as widows, to mark their pariah status” (Sharma 156). In a poem that D’Lo published previously in an anthology, he wrote about the significance of a shaved head to him as opposed to what it is associated with in Sri Lankan culture:

over there, bald heads were for
bad people turned pious
or just bad people
and bad people are ugly
coz hair always matters.
And these bald women had to wait
as punishment
to slowly become beautiful.
And she? She re-shaved her head once every week
And waiting to do it
Was punishment.

--“From Silent Confusion to Blaring Healing.” (qtd. in Sharma 156)

Despite the negative signification of a bald head in his ethnic community, D’Lo chooses to shave his head, making visible his identification with a masculinity that is modeled after Hip Hop emcees and rappers. The baggy track suits he wears also performatively present his identification with Hip Hop culture.
The disparity between D’Lo’s and Amma’s corporeal signs illustrates his divergence from the Sri Lankan diasporic community’s expectation of how a woman should look and behave. When Amma’s scene ends, D’Lo undertakes a costume transformation onstage. With the saree tied to a bar overhead, D’Lo is able to strip off the layers by quickly turning around a few times (see fig. 27). This transformation is followed by a video projection, in which D’Lo wears an oversize man’s leather jacket and talks in a low deep voice. When the performer reappears onstage, he becomes the tour guide again, having the wig and makeup removed and putting the baggy clothes back on. This costume and makeup transformation is a metaphorical gesture of D’Lo’s divergence from his elder generation’s values and his negotiation of a queer identity.

Figure 27. D’Lo transforms out of Amma with the aid of a stage prop; Screenshot from the video recording of Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show.

D’Lo and Vanathi

Amma’s scene demonstrates Nitasha Sharma’s statement in *Hip Hop Desis* that “many South Asian elders feel it their duty to indoctrinate children with culturally appropriate gender roles and sexualities” (159). In *Ramble-Ations*, the character of
Vanathi, as D’Lo’s cousin and peer, represents a daughter whose gender performance conforms to the encoded rules of the Sri Lankan diasporic community. She has long hair, wears light lipstick, long drop earrings and a matching necklace. Her form-fitting shirt matches with a knee-length skirt, showing her womanly curves (see fig. 28). She wears a pair of glittery peep-toe heels that visually lengthen her bare legs. In addition, Vanathi speaks in a high-pitched voice and delivers the eulogy for her friend with stereotypical American teenage girl’s diction and cadence. Every detail of her appearance and acts shows off a hyperbolic and stereotypical femininity. As a model daughter who Amma often compares D’Lo to, Vanathi signifies a second-generation diasporic subject whose identity fits within the community’s fixed options of gender norm.

Figure 28. Vanathi’s appearance and body language stands in sharp contrast with D’Lo; Screenshot from the video recording of *Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show*.

However, a later scene reveals another side of Vanathi that implies her divergence from the community’s expectation of normative sexuality. The character “G,” i.e. D’Lo and Vanathi’s grandfather, addresses the audience as Vanathi about seeing a guy sneaking into her room:
How is that young chap I see sneaking into your room from the backyard.

It’s good that I have evolved.

If I told your amma, you would be black and blue right now. (“Ramble-Ations” 17)

Here, “G” reveals the family’s value of women’s chastity prior to marriage. Sharma notes that South Asian elders hold women up to the following expectations: “To be marriageable, girls should be chaste and not date. In marriage, they should emulate their mother’s role as ‘keepers of culture’ responsible for enculturating their children with religious, linguistic, and culinary practices” (159). Therefore, Grandfather here makes a revelation of Vanathi’s secretive digression from her parents’ regulation against exogamous relations. Furthermore, this information adds to the complexity of this character. The uncovered divergence in gender and sexual acts sheds a light of irony on her seeming conformity to the normative rubric of the community as presented previously.

Besides her closeted diversion from the regulation of chastity, the final scene uncovers Vanathi’s transgression from the heteronormative norm valued by her community. The character Nic (ole), who is D’Lo’s friend and a butch lesbian, reveals to the audience that he and Vanathi are dating and she is keeping this relationship a secret from her family. This scene further complicates Vanathi’s characterization for it shows that the model daughter in D’Lo’s Amma’s eyes secretively digresses from the sexual norm as expected by her family. Thus, Vanathi differs from D’Lo, because she keeps her transgression hidden and invisible while D’Lo chooses to come out to his parents and
community and deliberately present his transgender identity through arts. On the other hand, Vanathi parallels with D’Lo in rebelling from the values held by their family and ethnic community.

In this respect, these two characters offer the audience a view of how second-generation Sri Lankan American individuals negotiate the values passed on by the elders of their ethnic community and construct their own identities. They present what Sharma calls “alternative desiness,” i.e. an alternative way of negotiating one’s diasporic identity. The term “desis” is commonly used, especially among the second generation, to refer to South Asians in America. In *Hip Hop Desis*, Sharma coins the term “alternative desiness” to describe the desi individuals who contest hegemonic desiness and craft new ways of being desi. She sees D’Lo as a representative among the desi artists whose writing and performance present “alternative desiness” (Sharma 21).

**D’Lo and Nic(ole)**

In addition to the tour guide D’Lo and Vanathi, another character Nic(ole) demonstrates a second-generation diasporic subject’s configuration of his identities between his dispositions and the proscribed expectations of how to be desi. Showing up onstage in a janitor’s uniform with a snapback hat, Nic(ole)’s appearance is similar to the tour guide in its lack of detectable gender markers. Nic(ole) later reveals his identification as a butch and his association with the lesbian community. He describes the lesbian community as his “only family,” who supports him when his parents reject him and expel him from home at his coming out (D’Lo, “Ramble-Ations” 20). Resonating with D’Lo’s
story of coming out to his Amma, Nic’s coming out has a different turnout. His parents’
denial of him is illustrative of the hostility and homophobia that gay people often face in
their domestic home.

As a fellow member of the LGBT community, D’Lo voices the experience of
having to constantly negotiate one’s gender and sexual identities through Nic(ole): “I
know it may seem a little schizo, but you gotta understand that … I’m battling here both
my sexual energies. Masculinity and Femininity” (21). Nic confides in the audience the
conflict within his gender disposition: while being sexually attracted to women, he admits
that he wears Victoria Secret panties and that he is proud of his “female body flow” (21).
This clash between his female body and his butch identification is integral to his gender
identity: “that’s just me in my entirety. Got no shame to my game, cuz all of this…is me”
(21). Instead of struggling to fit himself neatly into one category of gender identity, Nic
accepts the coexistence of conflicting dispositions within his subjectivity.

Besides this shared experience of battling sexual energies, Nic and D’Lo share a
common love for Hip Hop culture, and identify themselves as “b-boi,” (20) i.e. a
transgender male who is involved with Hip Hop culture. The term “boi” is used in the
lesbian community to refer to “a young transgendered/androgynous/masculine person
who is biologically female and presents themselves in a young, boyish way” (“Boi”).
Thus, a “b-boi” is a queer transgression of “b-boy,” i.e. “a male who engages in the
pursuit of hip-hop culture or adopts its styles” (“B-boy”). Both the tour guide D’Lo and
Nic embody their b-boi identifications visibly. For instance, the way in which they talk
and move resembles Hip Hop rappers and emcees, and the languages they use contain
many Hip Hop slangs and references. And when Nic shows the audience a poem that he writes, instead of reading it he performs the verses through a rhythmic and energetic rapping (see fig. 29).

![Nic(ole) raps a poem to the audience; Screenshot from the video recording of Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show.](image)

These characters are embodiment of D’Lo’s real life experience of negotiating his hyphenated identities as a second-generation Sri Lankan American through Hip Hop. Growing up in the 1980s with Hip Hop, D’Lo regards it as “the music of the second-generation immigrant” (“in conversation with K. Bhumika” 2004). Being raised in suburban neighborhoods in Lancaster, California, a predominantly white neighborhood, D’Lo experienced racism from a young age. As a teenager, he heard Hip Hop music on radio, while the politically charged lyrics such as Public Enemy’s enlightened him. In “Beats, Rhythm, Life,” D’Lo addresses how he came to love Hip Hop as “a tool of empowerment”: “From a young age, I respected hip-hop’s place in Black culture, but I also came to realize that hip-hop had a central place in my identity as a South Asian American” (140). In Hip Hop’s expression of blacks’ frustration against injustice, D’Lo
saw a connection between different ethnic minorities and found a voice to articulate the struggles of South Asian immigrants and other disenfranchised subalterns (139).

Other than speaking to his sense of belonging and resistance, Hip Hop enlightens D’Lo in finding a way to perform queer masculinity. “Hip hop has done more than sharpen my identity as a Sri Lankan American,” D’Lo states, “It has also provided an outlet for the other aspects of me: my sexuality and gender” (“Beats” 144). Seeing himself as a boy trapped in a girl’s body, D’Lo’s gender and sexual disposition clashes with the fixed options within the dominant ideology of his ethnic community. As a second-generation immigrant, D’Lo has access to only one generation of female elders within his insular diasporic community. Because of a lack of female role models who speak to D’Lo’s queer subjectivity, he drew from the range of sexpressions among black female rappers and emcees. In interviews D’Lo states that he draws inspiration from “all the female MCs,” especially Hip Hop pioneers Sweet Tee, Cookie Crew, and MC Trouble (qtd. in Sharma 153). From these role models D’Lo explores his sexpressions as a b-boi, and performs his masculine identifications in forms borrowed from Hip Hop artists. The characters of the tour guide and Nic(ole) are illustrative of this Hip Hop inspired way of performing transgender masculinities.

Hence, within D’Lo’s hybrid identifications of “Gay Hindu Hip Hop,” Hip Hop offers a means by which he figures how to be a transgender male while being Hindu at the same time. In other words, D’Lo finds in Hip Hop a sensibility of belonging and resistance that enables him to contest the orthodox or authentic way of being a second-generation South Asian American.
However, Hip Hop is not a jigsaw puzzle piece that neatly fits within D’Lo’s identities. This hybrid identification as a Sri Lankan American b-boi is unimaginable given the discrepancies and mutual exclusiveness between gay, Hindu diasporic and Hip Hop cultures and communities. As D’Lo states, the three things of gay, Hindu, and Hip Hop “make me but don’t allow for one another” (D’Lo “Ramble-Ations Program Note”). Previous discussion of Amma and the tour guide’s corporeal signs and gender performance addresses the conflict between being gay and Hindu as well as the clash between being Hindu and Hip Hop (between Sri Lankan community’s expectations regarding femininity and domesticity and the body aesthetics and masculine performance codes of Hip Hop). What’s more, D’Lo’s identification as a “b-boi” entails an unimaginable hybridity because Hip Hop culture is notoriously homophobic. In other words, it is an inconceivable notion to be gay and a member of Hip Hop community. In “Beats, Rhythm, Life,” D’Lo articulates his struggle with the blatant homophobia and sexism in the Hip Hop community as a “gay Sri Lankan American woman rapper” (144). He admits that “it seems contradictory to love music that hates you”; however, “from the inside we understand why we cannot let go of our hip-hop, even if the culture, at times, does not want to accept us as part of the larger hip-hop community” (145). The contradiction between D’Lo’s sexual and ethnic identities and his love of Hip Hop culture seems to be irresolvable but an integral component to his identities.
D’Lo and D’Lo in Flesh

This political sensibility resonates with a later scene where the tour guide D’Lo talks about how he deals with the incongruence between his body and his subjectivity. The performer embodies this experience of negotiation through a scene of costume transformation and removal to reveal his biological body. After the scene with “G” ends, D’Lo takes off the mustache and reappears onstage with the white shawl loosely wrapped around him. Following a monologue about what it means for a transgender person to walk in the public, the performer takes off the shawl and reveals his half naked upper body (see fig. 30). Having only bras on, D’Lo lays bare his female breasts. While uncovering his body, he confides to the audience about his constant questioning of the disparity between his body and his subjectivity:

Do I want to change my body? Not really. Do I want to pass as a man to make my life easier? Yes. Do I want a voice that’s lower than this mickey mouse [sic] high pitched shit I got now? Hell yeah. Do I have the money to do that? No. (D’Lo, “Ramble-Ations” 19)

In the recorded performance, D’Lo turns around and walks towards the back of the stage while asking the question repeatedly:

Do I want to change my body?

No.

Do I want to change my body?

Yes.

Do I want to change my body?
Not really. *(Ramble-Ations)*

The repeated questioning and the changing answers reflect D’Lo’s constant debating and negotiating with the incongruence between his body and his gender identity. With his back to the audience, D’Lo takes off his bras and puts on a white tee shirt. When he turns to face the audience, we see that the form-fitting tee shirt shows D’Lo’s female characteristics instead of concealing them as the tour guide’s oversize jacket does.

Figure 30. D’Lo takes off the white wrap and reveals his half naked body with only bras on; Screenshot from the video recording of *Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show.*

D’Lo then voices his concluding decision:

I keep this body for the theatre. …

The greater the gift the greater the responsibility.

Your body is your vehicle.

Move.

I keep this body for myself. *(Ramble-Ations).*

He rings a hand-bell twice to mark this statement, with the stage light focused on him. Between the two bell rings, D’Lo undertakes a Hindu salutation known as *sashtanga*
namaskar by prostrating with the feet, knees, chest, forehead, and arms touching the ground (see fig. 31). However, instead of paying respect to the Hindu Deities or the elders, D’Lo dedicates this reverence to his body in its incongruence with his identity.

Figure 31. D’Lo dedicates sashtanga namaskar onstage; Screenshot from the video recording of Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show.

D’Lo’s performance of this ritualistic bowing also carries a meaning of rebellion from Hindu tradition, for according to Hindu scriptures, only men are allowed to perform sashtanga namaskar because the womb and the breasts of women, the regions of the body that associate with childbearing, should not touch the ground (Baptiste). Here, D’Lo chooses the prostration that is exclusive to men in Hindu tradition, which suggests that by performing this ritual he is paying respect to and even celebrating the queer hybridity of his identity. In this respect, D’Lo presents the Hindu ritual and tradition with a queer subversion.

Furthermore, D’Lo also deviates from the traditional practice in his performance of the Hindu ritual arati. He pays respect to his own “deities” who speak to his identification, thereby subverting the ritual. The script indicates that D’Lo designs the
aural, visual and performing elements in this scene to recall a Hindu religious ritual, *arati*, a ceremony performed in extolled greeting and thanksgiving of the Deities (“Arti”). Traditionally in *arati*, the *pujaris* (attendants to the Deities), who perform the ritual with *sadhus* (Hindu monks), wave lighted wicks before the sacred images and sing prayers appropriate for the specific god or goddess. According to *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, the *pujari* “may also ring a small bell in an effort to gain the attention of the gods” (Cush 43).

In this scene, D’Lo serves as the *pujari*, i.e. the performer of the ceremony of *arati*. However, he diverges from the traditional practice of *arati* by performing the ritual in lighted stage facing the audience rather than the sacred images, and rings the bell to draw attention from the audience instead of the Hindu gods. In his following monologue D’Lo articulates that in this ceremony he replaces the Hindu deities with his own gods for worship: the theater and the audience.

I got this stage…and I got you

And I revere this like I revere any woman,

Lover Mother Sister Friend

Cuz this stage holds me up like only a woman can. (D’Lo, “Ramble-Ations.” 19).

In the recorded performance, D’Lo gestures the space between him and the audience to indicate what he is referring to as “this” in his statement “I revere this like I revere any woman” (19). The object of his reverence is thus the theater that enables queer individuals such as D’L himself to communicate and connect with the audience. The theater offers a space where a queer performer obtains artistic freedom to construct a presentation of self. Also, the theater space at certain extent provides security to the
performers, which is not available to them in the street where queer individuals are susceptible to people’s stares, insults and even abuses. As Harry Elam states, “The unique conventions and inventiveness of theater allow for provocative explorations of identity not possible in the outside social environment” (98). The freedom and safety of self-presentation that is enabled by the theater is why D’Lo pays his ritualistic reverence and why he states that “this stage holds me up like only a woman can” (“Ramble-Ations” 19).

Also, D’Lo’s statement is premised upon his belief that theater has the power to push for social change. For D’Lo, the purpose of artistic creation is to connect to people, to connect the audience to other people, and to empower his community to “liberate themselves from close mindedness” (“Artistic Statement” 122). His theater works primarily concern issues of social injustice and oppressions against minorities, echoing with Hip Hop music in their anti-establishment tone. Through his theater monologues, D’Lo attempts to create an art form that intersects with Hip Hop (122). The tour guide and Nic(ole)’s monologues are exemplary of his exploration of a way to integrate Hip Hop into theater performance. By means of this performance, D’Lo aims to push for social change. His theater monologues are based on his conviction of storytelling being the “most powerful tool for change” (122).

In addition to his conviction in the power of theater, D’Lo’s decision to preserve his body for the theater implies that he believes in his responsibility to make his transgender identity visible. D’Lo talks about his biological body as a “gift,” for he sees this conflict between his body and his gender identification as something that enables him to embody the alternative way of identifying that defies the rubrics of normativity.
Resonating with Nic(ole)’s monologue, the embodied experience of transgender and b-boo identification challenges the commonly held assumption of identity being aligned with one’s biology and ancestry. Therefore, a theatrical representation of queer life experience can function to provoke the audience to reflect on certain discourse of identity politics that are often unquestioned. Because a queer body onstage can mobilize such critical interventions, D’Lo regards his body as his “vehicle,” which enables him to make theater to connect the audience to queer people’s experiences and provoke people to reflect on the issues of social inequality (“Ramble-Ations” 19).

**D’Lo and “G”**

D’Lo’s effort to raise awareness of social issues can be seen throughout *Ramble-Ations*. Prominent examples include the monologues regarding police brutality and domestic violence. As an activist against police brutality, D’Lo includes this activism within his poems and solo performances.

In *Ramble-Ations*, the tour guide D’Lo tells a story about two cops pulling him over for riding a bike without a bike light while ignoring a white guy of the same condition. When he spoke with a girlish voice and tried to “pass as a woman,” the cops looked stunned. After doing a background check on D’Lo, the cops finally let him go.

This incident, D’Lo comments, is hardly notable compared to the countless times he got followed by the cops in random neighborhoods, or when he was kept in the back of a cop car for an hour for no good reason, “except because I have a profile that resembles a black or Latino male” (“Ramble-Ations” 15). But still “it wasn’t as bad as the times when
a black or brown man was pulled over, like I was, but was instead threatened, kicked, hit
or detained” (15). This story is an epitome of the injustice that the police regularly inflict
upon black and Latino male bodies because of the dominant stereotypes that associate
these bodies with crime.

The following scene further complicates the issue of violence through a character
who is a reincarnate Gandhi. An onstage transformation takes place in which D’Lo puts
on a white dhoti, i.e. a traditional men’s garment worn in the Indian subcontinent, and
drapes his upper body with a large white shawl. This entire costume is recognizable as
Gandhi’s signature attire. In addition to the outfit, D’Lo puts on a mustache and a pair of
round eyeglasses (see fig. 32). Adding a crane in his right hand, D’Lo completes the
transformation into “G”: “The re-born, reincarnate avatar of Gandhi G aka D’Lo’s
Grandfather” (D’Lo, “Ramble-Ations” 1). Characterized as the historical figure who is
known for his promotion of nonviolence, “G” talks about the ubiquity of violence in his
domestic and social life, inflicted on him by his father, teacher, which he later inflicted on
his wife. Commenting on D’Lo’s transgender identity, “G” states that “Who cares if she’s
gay, at least she won’t get married and beat up by a husband,” pointing out the common
issue of domestic violence in the community. However, as the previous scene reveals,
D’Lo’s visibly masculine body renders him susceptible to violence of a different nature:
“But maybe she’ll get beat senseless by the police…cuz of her brown bald head” (17).
This joking remark illuminates a dilemma that a Sri Lankan American man or woman
lives with because of severe matter of violence in the domestic and social realm. On the
other hand, this statement adds to the tour guide D’Lo’s stories in fleshing out the real-life experience and the stakes of being a transgender male of color.

Figure 32. D’Lo appears as “G” through an onstage transformation; Screenshot from the video recording of *Ramble-Ations: A One D’Lo Show*.

The tour guide and Grandfather’s stories reflect the issues of police brutality and injustice that is relevant to not only South Asian Americans but African American, Latino and other ethnic minorities. The concerns with violence also relate across communities and cultures. Hence, D’Lo connects his audience, and connects his audience to other people by means of facilitating a shared concern and empathy through his stories.

**Six Characters in Search of an Author**

To observe *Ramble-Ations* as an entirety, the overarching concern is the performer’s identities as constructed through his embodiment of and transformations between six characters. D’Lo takes advantage of the ambiguity of his body as a theatrical signifier to embody characters that vary in their gender, sexuality, age and cultural identifications. My previous examination of the individual characters reveals that most of
them are presented as being multiple-layered and complex, and that D’Lo embodies each of their negotiations in their hyphenated and heterogeneous identities. To consider these characters in their juxtaposition and contrast with one another, this mixture of personas and D’Lo’s transformations between them function to create a disidentificatory performance of identities.

These six characters serve to provide the audience a peek into the diasporic community in which two generations of Sri Lankan Americans experience different challenges to belong and identify. While Amma, White Eagle, Grandfather illustrate the Sri Lankan diasporic community’s elders’ endeavor in protecting traditional values from the culture of the adopted country, the tour guide (D’Lo), Vanathi and Nic(ole) are representative of the second-generation Sri Lankan Americans’ negotiation with these values, which clash with their own gender, sexual and cultural identifications.

Between their individual dispositions and the socially encoded roles that are available to them in their ethnic community and in the mainstream American society, D’Lo, Vanathi and Nic(ole)’s characterizations illustrate their agency in constructing their own identities. D’Lo’s embodiment of these characters in Ramble-Ations suggests that second-generation diasporic subjects, such as himself, choose to disidentify rather than identifying or counteridentifying with dominant ideology.

Disidentification is a theoretical lens that Jose Munoz introduces to explore the complex issue of identity formation, specifically regarding subjects who “must negotiate between a fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects” (6). In other words, the author and the characters of Ramble-Ations are
among the subjects of Munoz’s investigation. To construct their identities, they have to negotiate between their individual dispositions and the socially encoded roles that are available to them in their ethnic community and in the mainstream American society.

To better observe this process of negotiation, Munoz proposes to consider a third mode in which subjects negotiate with the dominant ideology, which is to disidentify, as alternative to the modes of identification and counteridentification. Instead of assimilating into the ideology or strictly opposing it, a disidentifying subject works to hold onto this ideology and invest it with new life (Munoz 12). To apply Munoz’s theoretical observation to analyze the characters in Ramble-Ations, we can see that the tour guide, Vanathi and Nic(ole) illustrate this disidentificary strategy in that they selectively hold onto of the dominant values while at the same time rebelling from them.

In Ramble-Ations, the characters’ queer hybrid identifications demonstrate their disidentification with the ethnic community and the mainstream society’s heteronormative discourse. While conforming to the encoded gender role for women, Vanathi secretively dates a lesbian butch and thus diverges from the ideology of heteronormativity. The tour guide and Nic(ole) identify themselves as b-bois, and therefore contest the homophobia in Hip Hop culture and transgress the boundaries between ethnic cultures and communities. D’Lo, as presented by his alter ego character, struggles between his female body and transgender identification, and chooses to embrace the ambiguity so that he can present this disidentification in theater.

Each of these characters illustrates their agency in choosing to identify with some components of a culture that speak to their dispositions or sensibilities while filtering the
others. In the meantime, they reach out to cultures and communities outside their ethnic
groups to inspire or mobilize their self-identifications. To borrow Sharma’s statement on
desi (second-generation South Asian Americans) artists, D’Lo and his disidentifying
characters “embrace ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’ modes of identifications” (28).
Their identification with multiple communities demonstrates that they “live in and
through sameness and difference simultaneously” (Sharma 28-29). Through this selective
hybridity across the boundaries of cultures and communities, they operate beyond the
given value systems of their communities and the dominant ideology of the society.
Therefore, they seem to remain within the cultural systems but shed doubt on the values
and subvert them from within. Because of this hybridity in their identities, their gender,
sexual, and cultural dispositions do not completely conform to either their ethnic
community’s values or the mainstream American society’s dominant ideology. Neither
do their queer and hybrid identities comply with identity politics that is based on biology
determinism and essentialism. These hybrid identifications are what Sharma calls
“creative second-generation responses to the limitations of American, South Asian, and
Black ethnic and racial politics” (142). Through this queering hybridity and hybridizing
queer identifications, they disidentify with ideologies that are imposed on them in their
insular diasporic community and in the mainstream American society.

Hence, through these characters D’Lo performs the battling hybridity of cultural
identifications within his subjectivity. The embodiment of such heterogeneous and multi-
layered identities demystifies the common assumptions regarding identities. These
assumptions are often mistaken as true and left unquestioned, such as the belief that one’s
identity is determined by or aligned with one’s biology or cultural heritage, and that an individual’s identity is a seamless entity where each component fits perfectly like a jigsaw puzzle. From this perspective, the performance of hybrid identities presents alternative ways of identifying that transgresses the normalizing ideology concerning identity and community formation. As Munoz observes, because hybridity is a modality where “meaning or identifications do not properly line up,” hybridity as an identity practice is a productive site “where identity’s fragmentary nature is accepted and negotiated” (78-79). Therefore, to perform hybridity “is to constantly disidentify” with hegemonic ideology (78). In other words, D’Lo and his characters’ performance of queer and hybrid identities, either as everyday practice or as theatrical presentation, is an act of disidentification with dominant values.

From this perspective, D’Lo’s solo performance is itself an act of disidentification. As the performer states, Ramble-Ations is his attempt at fusing Gay Hindu Hip Hop—the three things that makes him but don’t allow for one another—onto the stage (“Ramble-Ations Program Note”). By making queer hybrid subjectivities visible through theater, D’Lo presents the disidentificatory strategy of identity construction.

More significantly, D’Lo intends to achieve social change through solo performance, and this effort is disidentificatory itself. As Munoz notes, to disidentify is a strategy that “tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance” (12). D’Lo’s characters and the stories they tell are
inspired by friends, family and his own everyday struggles to belong and to rebel. By
telling these stories in theater performance, D’Lo attempts to liberate people from close
mindedness and push for social change. “The disidentificatory performances,” Munoz
indicates, “strive to envision and activate new social relations” (5). In this respect, D’Lo’s
solo performances such as Ramble-Ations and his endeavors of theater making are acts of
disidentification themselves.

The Transformative Aesthetics of Solo Performance

D’Lo’s disidentificatory performance is made possible and heightened by the
transformational style of solo performance. The form of autobiographical performance, as
Jill Dolan asserts, “enables the performer to testify to his or her personal experience and
asks spectators to witness the performer’s life publicly” (Theatre and Sexuality 43).
These personal stories, compared to fictions, are more resonant to the audience, and the
stakes of telling them is much higher for both the tellers and the listeners. Because the
performers directly address the audience, they write and deliver the monologues with the
spectators in mind. Sometimes the audience is involved in the context of the
performance. According to Deirdre Heddon’s examination of solo performance, solo
performances are made with a spectator in mind and therefore are dialogic in nature:
“although autobiographical performances look, in form, monologic, the public context of
their work and the performers’ aspirations to communicate with their spectators
transform those works into dialogues” (5). For instance, in Ramble-Ations the tour guide
talks to the audience as the tourists, while Grandfather converses with the audience as if they were Vanathi.

Also, the mechanics of the performer’s transformations are revealed to the audience, highlighting the constructedness of the performance. The performer’s discernible metamorphosis from one character to another makes the performance of hybrid and fluid identities effective. Because solo performances underline rather than conceal the constructedness of the performance and the characters’ identities, they suggest to the audience that the real world outside the theater and people’s identities are also constructed through performance. The theatrical device that characterizes the genre of solo performance serves to aesthetically highlight the constructedness of the performance as well as politically imply the multiplicity and porousness of identities.

For instance, as a transgender male, when D’Lo transforms into Amma and Vanathi, he is crossdressing as a female, performing femininity. Being aware of D’Lo’s male identification, the audience realizes that he is wearing a wig and imitating feminine acts to become Amma and Vanathi. This act of crossdressing implies that gender is learned and performative, resonating with Simone de Beauvoir’s iconic statement about womanhood: “one is not born a woman, but, rather becomes one” (301). In this respect, the crossdressing enacts the characters with subversion and thus is a disidentificatory performance. The characters of Amma, Vanathi are juxtaposed with the tour guide’s persona and D’Lo’s real life story told through the videos. This contrast theatrically presents D’Lo’s disidentification with how women should look like and behave as expected by his ethnic community. The transformative nature of solo performance in
which one person enacts multiple characters illuminates the constructedness of one’s gender and cultural identity.

Therefore, the form of solo performance is particularly effective in presenting the complexity of identities and conveying a disidentificatory strategy of identification. In *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan indicates this theatrical form as “particularly suited for investigation as a site of utopian performatives because it models the fluidity of cultural identities and offers method through which performers and spectators might experience them” (98). Furthermore, she points out that the aesthetics of multiple-character enactment, “the immersion of one subjectivity in the dreams of another…calls forth the utopian performative, the performance of an identity not your own that allows you to build new worlds together” (82). In other words, the transformative aesthetics of solo performance is disidentificatory in its productive presentation of ambiguous and hybrid identities. Thus, such a performance calls for an inclusive and expansive way of community building and identity construction, which can affect the audience and even the real world outside of theater. The transformational style of performance functions to make connections between individuals, and thus offers a space to re-envision social relations and a utopian prospect of a better society. In this sense, solo performance is a productive site of disidentificatory performances and utopian performatives.
CONCLUSION

By examining the employment of onstage transformation in selected Asian American performances, I argue that contemporary Asian American playwrights explore the use of this technique to theatrically embody an identity politics that acknowledges the fragmentation, hybridity and fluidity of subjectivity. In these performances, we see a variety of ways in which onstage transformation signifies, communicates and subverts meanings. Through their innovative utilization of onstage transformation, Asian American playwrights not only further the Brechtian deconstruction of the conventional structure of dramatic realism, but also make interventions into the dominant ideology on identity and community.

Onstage transformation challenges the conventional structure of realist theater (or what Brecht calls Dramatic Theater, as opposed to Epic Theater) by questioning its use of the actor’s external appearance to fixate a character’s identity. As the semiotic study of theatrical elements reveals, the actor’s external appearance functions as a signifier of identity (Fischer-Lichte 67). In realist theater, the theatrical elements of costume, makeup, in addition to the actor’s face and figure are carefully arranged to reflect and communicate a character’s identity to the audience. This appearance should function in unison with other elements, including the actor’s movements, speech, etc., to create a coherent and unified impression of a person’s identity. In Brecht’s words, the Aristotelian Dramatic Theater present characters that are unchangeable and present “human nature as fixed” (“Notes on the Opera” 65).
Hence a character’s onstage metamorphosis functions to unsettle the audience’s impression of her/his identity, and present the character as “changeable and able to change things” (“Notes on the Opera” 65). Onstage transformation adds discontinuity to characterization, and presents characters whose identities are fragmented and subjected to change. Semiotically it disrupts the seamless unity of signs and adds disjuncture and ambiguity into the sign system. In this respect, onstage transformation functions as the Brechtian Verfremdung, a performance style that underscores the independence of elements instead of presenting them as “an indivisible whole” (“Plans” 124). In other words, this technique functions to make apparent to the audience that the performance is an artificial construction.

This disruption of the sign system serves to pose questions on the communicative process that is responsible for the production of identity. By upsetting the audience’s expectation of a character’s identity, onstage transformation functions to highlight and thus denaturalize the realist convention that signifies characters’ identity through appearance. In other words, this device provokes the audience to reflect on the validity of judging a person’s identity by appearance.

In the performances that I focus on, onstage transformations function to pose questions on the different aspects of the communicative process of identity constitution. Drawing upon Charles Morris’ observation on the three factors involved in the signifying process, I argue that the process of identity production consists of three factors: a person’s self-presentation made up with visual, kinetic and other signs; the social and cultural context which designate meanings to signs; and others’ interpretation of these
signs. The codes at work in a certain social context are responsible for associating signs with meanings, and therefore are the determining factor that has crucial impacts on the signs and the interpreted meanings. Hence, the dominant semiotic system and ideology in a certain society are irreducible factors in the constitution of a person’s identity.

Asian American performances employ onstage transformation to reveal this determining role of dominant ideology in the constitution of one’s identity. Some characters’ transformations serve to demonstrate how one’s perception of another’s identity is subjective interpretation filtered by dominant values and stereotypes. In a medium of mass communication such as theater, stereotypes are prevalent because they are readable and recognizable to the audience. Stereotypes designate certain cultural signification to certain visual signs, and thus provide a convenient way for playwrights and costume designers to create characters. Relying on this convenient characterization, the realist convention of linking appearance to identity reinforces rather than questioning stereotypes, despite how unrealistic stereotypes are.

In *M. Butterfly*, Song Liling takes advantage of the stereotypical view of Asian woman as the submissive and self-sacrificing “Butterfly” to resist the West’s subordination of the East. His onstage transformation reveals that he has been disguising as a woman and enacting the stereotype of Butterfly for the purpose of espionage. Prior to the transformation, his performance of Butterfly convinces Gallimard and the audience, because the recognizable stereotype of the modest Asian woman seems natural to them. By revealing this persona as a disguise through transformation, David Henry Hwang propels the audience to examine their biases that result in their misinterpretation of
Song’s identity. In this respect, *M. Butterfly* provokes the audience to question the stereotypes that designate fixed meanings to Asian body. Echoing his sensibility is Naomi Iizuka’s depiction of the discrepancy between Setsuko Hearn’s self-presentation and Wheeler’s exoticized fantasy of her image. This discrepancy embodies the gap between the signs and the receiver’s interpretation of these signs as a result of an Orientalist frame of mind.

In addition to problematizing the coding system, these Asian American playwrights cast doubt on the validity of visual signs in signifying the entirety of a person’s identity. Their works illustrate how appearance is often partial in presenting a person’s identification. As Fischer-Lichte points out, “appearance is an aspect of the individual, a view of himself which is given in a specific perspective and points to him in his totality, without actually being that” (67). Onstage transformation adds versatility and changeability to characters’ appearances, thereby enabling the embodiment of the multiplicity and hybridity within individuals’ identities.

In *36 Views*, Naomi Iizuka has three characters undertake onstage transformations, symbolizing how different viewing perspectives reveal different identities of a person. This contention resonates with D’Lo’s *Ramble-Ations*, where he enacts six characters to embody his “Gay Hindu Hip Hop” identifications. In these performances, onstage transformation makes it theatrically possible for the performer to embody the fusion and tension among multiple identifications within a person’s subjectivity.
Furthermore, Asian American playwrights deepen the discussion of identity constitution by addressing the impact of social discourse on individual’s self-presentation, i.e. the impact of the coding system on the signs. The performances discussed in this dissertation are revealing of how one constructs one’s self-presentation to fit into the ideal of the society, to assimilate, to pass or to resist.

In *BFE*, the character Panny puts on makeup to transform her look cosmetically, and eventually transforms her face permanently through plastic surgery. Subjected to the discourse of beauty that sets Caucasian physiology as the ideal, Panny’s efforts to transform symbolize her desire to fit into the community. Through Panny’s transformations, Julia Cho illustrates the normalizing power of dominant ideology on an individual’s body and subjectivity.

*M. Butterfly* and *36 Views* demonstrate how appearance can be manipulated for concealment and deception according to the codes. In *36 Views*, Claire Tsong’s transformation reveals that she has been deliberately putting on a neutral and unnoticeable appearance to pass as being heterosexual and docile. Similar to Song Liling’s disguise, both of these characters manipulate their self-presentations to resist and intervene into the hierarchy of power relations. On the other hand, their transformations illustrate to the audience how one can construct one’s visible self to manipulate how others think of her/him.

Thus, by means of disrupting the signifying convention of realist theater, onstage transformation operates to make intervention into dominant discourse on identity. As the performances question the mechanism of the process of identity production, they
facilitate a reflection on how one’s identity is constructed, what discourse and power relations affect individuals’ identities to form and change. Hence, onstage transformation functions to produce the aesthetic and political effects of Verfremdung by turning familiarity to awareness and provoking the audience to reexamine their preconceptions of racial, gender and cultural identities.

All four performances that I study in this dissertation employ transformation to embody how characters negotiate with the power relations and ideology dominant in their society, and present their different outcomes: some submit to dominant values, some refuse to assimilate and choose to counteridentify, while some choose to neither identify nor counteridentify, but to disidentify. These characters’ shifting negotiations and transforming identities point to the complexity of identity formation for minoritarian subjects in real life.

By embodying the shifting process of negotiation, Asian American performances explore the complexity of identity formation in relation to dominant values, and present identity as a process of becoming rather than a fixed being. Each of these works presents multi-layered and complex stories of identifying and belonging without trying to present an “authentic” collective imagery of Asian American. Instead, these contemporary playwrights demystify the notion of an immutable and collectively shared identity of Asian Americanness. In their performances, the issue of ethnic and racial identity does not constitute the entirety but only a part of the characters’ complex experiences. Additionally, these works also embody the ambiguity and rupture within the individuals’ ethnic and cultural belongings, the incongruity between one’s identification and her/his
biological identity or ethnic heritage. As what Esther Kim Lee calls “the third wave of Asian American playwrights,” these artists raise questions on the notion of authentic Asian American experience. Instead of constructing a unified imagery of Asian Americanness, through the performances that I discuss, these playwrights push the boundaries of “Asian American” and reconfigure the category by acknowledging its hybridity, connectivity with other communities, and its transformability.

Onstage transformation, as the theatrical device to productively embody these critical explorations, is what Munoz calls an innovative and productive strategy and tactic to enact minoritarian subjectivity (161). It is a device that functions symbolically to remove dogmatic, essentialist and one-dimensional imaginations of Asian American and refresh it with multi-dimensional view that addresses the fluidity and heterogeneity of Asian American identities.

By posing questions on the signifying process that constitutes identities in theater and in reality, these Asian American performances reject convenient and over-simplifying ways of presenting and interpreting identities. Through onstage performance, these performances provoke the audience to question the commonly held assumptions on identity, such as biological determinism and cultural isolationism. They serve to pose questions on the myth of an organic and seamless identity that is rooted in one’s ethnic and cultural heritage. These interventions link the Verfremdung effects of onstage transformation with Jill Dolan’s notion of Utopian Performative. Through onstage transformation, these Asian American performances embody a view of identity that recognizes and embraces the fragmentation, ambiguity and hybridity within individual’s
subjectivity. Therefore, these performances call for a utopian prospective of an inclusive way of community building and identity construction, and offer a space to re-envision social relations.
As I stated in the preface, this project arises out of my own struggles with finding my position as a Chinese and Asian minority living in America. The years of living in the States results in my increasing acculturation to American way of life. I notice this change when I talk to my parents and friends who have not lived abroad. These communications reveal how I differ from them in values, world view, habits and food preference because of my immersion in another culture.

While experiencing a growing distance from Chinese culture, I often feel alienated in American society because of cultural difference and the language barrier. In addition, as an ethnic minority I have come across a few people who either look at me or treat me differently, especially when I travel outside of this diverse college town of Athens to other places in Ohio and West Virginia. For the first time in my life I realized how much my Asian face stands out in a white-dominant Midwestern town. Later when I read Julia Cho’s BFE, my experiences allow me to feel Panny and her family’s isolation living in a white-dominant community. This feeling of alienation confirms what the tax form annually reminds me: that my legal status is a “nonresident alien.”

Thus I found myself in an awkward position between two cultures, affiliating myself with aspects of each culture without completely belonging to either. Instead of “getting the best from both,” I felt a strong sense of alienation from both cultures and struggled to fit my identity into one category of cultural identity. Because of these personal struggles, I became interested in the issues of racial and cultural identity and
Asian American theater performances that address individuals’ negotiations with the boundaries of identities and communities.

The Asian American performances that I analyze in this dissertation provide an alternative and more liberating way of identifying and belonging. They provide me with new perspectives to reflect on the limitation of my vision when insisting on fitting my identity within the boundaries of identity categories. As I gained deeper understanding of these performances, I obtained a more liberal view of identity and grew to accept, embrace and enjoy the hybrid cultural influences within my identity. Through this hybridity, I disidentify with the ideology that maintains the boundaries between identity categories, and seize agency in creatively constructing my own identities.
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