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Hung Van Lam, hELLA HUNG and the Hung Dynasty:
Agency and Social Intelligibility in Performance on the Margins

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in
Asian American Studies

by

Christopher David Woon

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Hung Van Lam, hELLA HUNG and the Hung Dynasty:
Agency and Social Intelligibility in Performance on the Margins

by

Christopher David Woon

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2012
Professor Victor Bascara, Chair

This paper is a character study of performance artist hELLA HUNG. Presented through the lens of a documentary filmmaker and confidant, an argument for the life and performances of hELLA HUNG as a boundary breaking figure who helps illuminate and reshape our societal boundaries as Asian Americans, boundaries imposed by both mainstream American society and ourselves. Significant not for his virtuosity, but rather the transitive way his performances bend and distort existing ideas of the model minority and the distorted racial and gender perceptions rooted in orientalist perceptions held by the mainstream American hegemonic forces, foundational theoretical concepts within Asian American studies. Using the archetypes of the reality show contestant, comic superhero, schizotypal/Asperger's/autistic performance, refugee, b-boy (breakdancer), professional wrestler, minstrel, and trickster figure, to frame a series of interviews, life observance, and recorded performances in order to illuminate the way his performances break and recreate our social boundaries.

The thesis of Christopher David Woon is approved.

Rachel C. Lee

Jinqi Ling

Victor Bascara, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles 2012

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B-Boy hELLA HUNG at a B-Boy jam in Inglewood, CA, 2011.

INTRODUCTION

The first time I ever saw the man we call hELLA HUNG, he was retrospectively the biggest 5'1" person I've ever seen. Not big by his height, nor by his half chubby, half muscular stature, but because his unmistakable presence towered above a landscape of what seemed to be over 500 other breakdancers, also known as "b-boys" on August 25th, at the premiere breakdance event in the United States, the 10th anniversary of "Freestyle Session"¹. Rather than jump into an existing dance circle, known as a cypher, he would make the crowd conform around him and create a new one. If he was half chubby and half muscular, he was all

¹ Freestyle Session is an event that was started in 1997 by Chris "Cros-One" Wright in San Diego, CA that helped connect and propel the worldwide breaking community. The now defunct Freestyle Session message board worked in tandem with the event where B-Boys and B-Girls for the first time had a year round forum to post and discuss their views and then show and prove their skills in the annual competition.

spectacle – grooving to the beat, throwing in non traditional b-boy moves, Kung Fu kicks and dancing with any female who dared to stand in the front row of onlookers. He offended every sensibility I held about what a good b-boy looks like, the definition of what we'd call "wack". His dancer was not dynamic and gravity defying, nor was it particularly sharp, agile and on beat. Despite his poor aesthetic form, made worse by his awkward body shape, and the way he would not acknowledge defeat in a battle, he was a spectacle I could not ignore, because he would not be ignored. It wasn't until years later that after befriending Hung Van Lam, the man known as hELLA HUNG, would I realize the significance behind these transitive performances and his being.

Throughout this first encounter, I was unable to frame his motivations; I saw abnormal behavior, by some weird guy who made the ladies he danced with uncomfortable. He was as extreme as his name, "hella" being a San Francisco Bay Area street slang pervasive throughout the entire Bay Area, an adverb indicating level of degree derived from "hell of a lot of,"² combined with his first name Hung. The name is also a play on the phrase "well hung," a colloquialism referring to a male individual with a large penis. Whether his name or his dancing offended you, he was not just the center of attention; he was the butt of everyone's joke. I was empathically shut off from him just like many others, because we had no context as of yet. Hung would come to tell me years later, "Breaking worked for me because I was playing myself to my full extent, without any regards to limitations from anybody." However not fully accepted by the breaking community, Hung not only defied the conventional idea of a B-boy, but also as an artist, I would come to learn. Just as a drag performer or a plus size burlesque dancer might bend notions of gendered bodies and what it means to be sexy, hELLA HUNG bends ideas of skill and masculinity in the Hip Hop and B-Boy worlds. Further, I would come to understand

² A common Bay Area term, it is debatable where the origins of the term came from, through hearsay I believe The Fillmore district in San Francisco or the Hunters Point, where Urban Dictionary (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=hella> lists Hunter's Point). Whereas as one definition contends that the term was being used in Berkeley public schools as early as 1979.

HELLA HUNG's performances as a form of resistance to those boundaries he found constricting in not just the Hip Hop and B-boy worlds, but also to the conditions he finds constraining his life as a perpetual underdog and an Asian American. This study investigates the unique brand of performance by hELLA HUNG as an agent that not only reaffirms, but also extends and even recreates the boundaries of who we are as Asian and Asian Americans. The performances of hELLA HUNG as a form of boundary breaking figure necessary to help us illuminate and reshape these societal boundaries as Asian Americans, whether imposed by ourselves or greater American society. His significance is neither for his ability to produce technical masterpieces in his performance nor for his popular recognition. Rather, his significance is his inability to fit into any single specific archetype as the antithesis to the idea of the model minority and the distorted racial/gender perceptions of Asian Americans, foundational theoretical concepts within Asian American studies. He does not represent the stereotypical model minority of the East Asian, intellectually elite and/or successful businessman who has achieved the "American Dream" of upward mobility that misrepresents the diversity of the Asian American community. His performances also play with the deep seeded ideas of orientalism that produce stereotypes of gender and emasculation in the Asian American community, in this case the concept of the hELLA HUNG's "performance on the margins" is part of expanding the multiplicitous idea of what it means to be Asian American.

My personal friendship with the man who calls himself hELLA HUNG began as a collaborator in helping to construct one of his seminal texts, *Hung Dynasty the Movie: The hELLA HUNG Solo DVD*, with Robert "Rob Nasty" Creer. Through our work together I came to gain his trust and become a close friend. Through our time I have played roles of mentor, student, crewmate and even roommate. There have been times I have considered him my best friend and other times that I have wanted to distance myself from him entirely, because of his confrontational and polarizing nature. This study is through formal interviews, informal discussions, debates and the opportunity to derive meaning from our regular interactions.

The lens, from which I am a participant observer, lastly cannot be separated from my life as a documentary filmmaker. Almost like a character study in the tradition of films such as Errol Morris' films³ that find the extraordinary within the ordinary, my choice in documentary film subjects I have referred to as "Hip hop on the Margins," referring to the stories of participants in Hip Hop culture that aren't part of the mainstream ideals of their chosen arts. Further, my documentary film style has almost never been one to purely observe as a fly on the wall, as I believe that is impossible to achieve unless I were to film using a network of hidden security cameras. The recognition of my position as some form of agent within the life of hELLA HUNG is itself something I have attempted to observe and consider in my study. However the part of the study most affected by habits as a filmmaker might be seen in the narrative I am constructing. The propensity to constantly show, rather than to tell creates a level of openness and ambiguity more suited for art than academia. As many film directors have been quoted as saying that the job of the filmmaker is to show the audience, "here is 1 + 1 and now it is your job to add them together to make them equal 2," it might be my job as a scholar to show the connections we make to such equations in our world, and the possibilities embedded that tell us why we get that answer, or provide the path to a different one. The documentary lens, the propensity to show without telling, however, does allow for the ability to imagine the possibilities, to cast hELLA HUNG as a sort of literary figure wrought with the complications he contains, because that as I will attempt to show, has been his nature.

³ Errol Morris' films such as *Vernon, Florida* and *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* are interview based documentary films that interview seemingly ordinary people in order to find the extraordinary.



Chris (left mirror) in full filmmaker garb with Hung (left) at their Los Angeles apartment, 2011.



B-Boy hELLA HUNG from Hung Dynasty the Movie, 2008.

ANALYSIS OF HUNG'S PERFORMANCES/PRIMARY TEXTS

The advent of video sharing on the Internet has played a central role in the advancement of the modern B-Boy, especially hELLA HUNG. For better or for worse, user uploaded video content sites such as YouTube have become pivotal in the spread of B-Boy/Breakdance culture by providing accessibility to the dance moves and styles themselves for anyone, anywhere in the world. Not only have the moves become more accessible but also the B-Boys themselves. Those who cannot afford to travel to far away events, can now watch videos of their favorite B-Boys and B-Girls dance on the internet, spawning a worldwide B-Boy star culture. For better or for worse, it is a new frontier possibly the only frontier where B-boys are able to market themselves and their product - their dancing. To many, it is yet to be determined what the

consensus is on hELLA HUNG, whether him and his brand of performances are for better or for worse.

Seen in person, initial exposure to the performance art of hELLA HUNG almost instantly evokes that simultaneous feeling of attraction and disgust. To see it in person allows for the additional activity of engaging with other spectators in dialogue regarding the hELLA HUNG experience, or even interacting with Hung himself. The democratization of media distribution through "user uploaded video sharing," especially YouTube, is a platform tailor made for hELLA HUNG. Through YouTube, others can upload videos of him and hELLA HUNG can upload videos of himself as well. Online and through reality TV is where hELLA HUNG's largest presence is maintained to this day, where imprints from some of the more traditional media representations of hELLA HUNG that helped create who his is today, on network TV and DVD can still be found. The reach of context and understanding for his performances lags far behind the reach of the performances themselves, therefore to strip down and understand hELLA HUNG as a performer, a critical audience member might need to be inoculated with their own first visceral reaction to his work.



B-Boy hELLA HUNG vs. Nasty Ray, 2007.

BEST B-BOY BATTLE EVER: hELLA HUNG vs. NASTY RAY

"You know, they think they know themselves. But I'll face fear when everybody would rather run away, or wait for somebody else to face it. Cause usually when there's a big unknown territory, I'm the first to go ahead first, and I see the ugly truth. And everybody else is waiting for the result, of what they call my dumb, foolish behavior. Cause usually I uncover something that's worth seeing."

Hung's performing life is based on pushing through adversary, known and unknown - mostly unknown. He doesn't let doing things "the wrong way" stop him, just like he doesn't let people tell him he "can't." He pushes forward despite not knowing what that adversary is and that is no different in the YouTube video that essentially made him famous, "The Best B-Boy Battle Ever" posted by DJ Incognito on YouTube, a video with over 510,000 views from Jan 23,

2007 to Nov 11, 2011. The context of this video posting is one of comedy, as the author of the post includes in the information section, "This was comedy...Battle between Ray Headhunters crew and hELLA HUNG in Daly City CA." DJ incognito further sets up the context of this battle with text card stating "The Best B-Boy Battle Ever!!!! I am kidding...this is great" followed by Ray (Headhunters) vs. hELLA HUNG the crowd got wild in this battle. The poster makes it known, through his early disclaimers, that he does not consider this a serious B-Boy battle. Although DJ Incognito, as the video's editor and author, may not have realized it, he solidified hELLA HUNG as something worth watching. He provided a platform for the wonder created by hELLA HUNG and the resonance amplified by Internet apparatuses such as YouTube and Facebook.

DJ Incognito plays his part perfectly, showing Hung's explosive entrance into the cypher, or dance circle. Emulating the video game character Liu Kang from Mortal Combat, he executes a near perfect horizontal leap bicycle kick. Playing up the phenomenon of hELLA HUNG to the public, DJ Incognito cuts to the next title card reading: "What the heck was that???? Let's see that again in slow motion.." As he proceeds to run the scene back for a moment in half speed. We resume to see Hung swerve his way on the floor following the bicycle kick move, and rolls into a headstand. While doing a headstand, Hung points in the direction of the crowd, aiming right at a B-Boy, Raymond "Nasty Ray" Mora. Taking the pointed finger as a clear challenge to battle by Hung, Ray is up for the challenge following Hung's bicycle kick, headstand, and back flip.

In physics we call it the law of action/reaction, but in the world of superheroes, every superhero has their nemesis. In the M. Night Shyamalan film *Unbreakable*, Elijah Price, played by Samuel L. Jackson, was "Mr. Glass" to the invincible protagonist David Dunn, played by Bruce Willis. In the case of hELLA HUNG, he had Nasty Ray. For all the dance skill Hung lacked, Nasty Ray had. Each acrobatic and dynamic trick Ray had, Hung lacked. Hung was formless, while Ray was coming into his own as arguably, the textbook B-Boy. The beauty of their encounter the challenge to the unknown Hung broadcasted, and the response he received.

Nasty Ray, to his credit, stepped up to the challenge when he very easily could have passed on this opportunity and dismissed hELLA HUNG as something inconsequential. The resulting interaction and exchange was one that elevated each of them to the next level, creating a broader audience that alone, neither of whom has been able to achieve the same viewership in a YouTube video since.

This video as a document of Hung Van Lam's career as B-Boy hELLA HUNG demonstrates not only his mantra of stepping up to the challenge, facing the unknown as a general rule of life. However it also demonstrates his ongoing practice of challenging, becoming that antagonist himself. While he remains the hero in his own mind, not everything he does is heroic. To return to *Unbreakable*, Samuel L. Jackson's character of Elijah Price spends his adult life searching out the other half of his hero villain dichotomy by performing villainous deeds. He seeks meaning for his life. The same relationship is illustrated in the Batman comic's Dark Night series. Batman is our hero, our imperfect hero that is defined by Joker and Vice Versa. Without Batman there is no Joker, and no Joker without Batman. In this video there is no hELLA HUNG without Nasty Ray but there is no hELLA HUNG without adversary. Whether it is hELLA HUNG vs. a person or it is hELLA HUNG vs. the world, his lifelong difficulty of relating to others defines his actions and his art.

Hung operates in a very solitary fashion, against the world, however his battle with Nasty Ray demonstrates how powerful Hung's ideologies and willpower can be in a social context. It may appear Hung searches for adversaries, however in fact these lunges into the dark and unknown represent his quest to be understood. Hung as hELLA HUNG has over the years learned to seek out what he lacks, whether it is dance form or the social tact he lacks, possibly relying on a basic instinct to fulfill his entire potential. In meeting Hung's challenges as not just adversaries, but collaborators, we are serving as his social connections, translating the power of his performances to audiences that might not understand.



HELLA HUNG fights the Poison Clan Ninjas in Hung Dynasty: The Movie, 2008.

HUNG DYNASTY: THE MOVIE

And then hELLA HUNG's popularity multiplied in the San Francisco Bay Area B-Boy scene, his growth a product of not only the vast spectacle of his performances, but also the frequency of his appearances at its events. He was a staple of Bay Area B-Boy events, no longer an unknown weirdo, he had become one of the scene's idiosyncrasies. Again hELLA HUNG the B-Boy presented a challenge to the San Francisco B-Boy community - he proved that he was not going away any time soon. For those who might be unhappy with hELLA HUNG as formless and unskilled, who might have been unhappy with hELLA HUNG as a representative of the greater San Francisco Bay Area's B-Boy scene, join him, teach him and guide him. Or leave him to his own devices. Proving more threatening to their sense of selves as a formless and wild hELLA HUNG, the Hung Dynasty formed around him to not only mentor him, but also to share his challenges. hELLA HUNG and the B-Boy share their essence, the ideas of "challenge" and "the battle" that epitomizes them.

HELLA HUNG may in many ways "be" the Hung Dynasty, however the Hung Dynasty was drawn to him. A group of outcasts themselves in many ways, they were all talented B-boys in the scene really looking for their due. All had credibility in the San Francisco B-Boy scene and all had ambition to be more. Further, while they all had their own crews they were a part of, such as the all star Bay Area crews "Rock Force" and "Renegades", they all were some form of outcast or underdog. The Hung Dynasty presented the opportunity to take risks under a new and separate banner while simultaneously allowing these B-Boys to reinforce their existing identities with their crews. Each member adopted a new name and character to play out in this new fantasy world with hELLA HUNG. Each imagined new boundaries for themselves in an exchange of values - hELLA HUNG would learn the craft of B-Boying, the form, and the other B-Boys got to lose themselves with Hung in their own version of Never Neverland.

Hung Dynasty the Movie: The Return of Animal Chin came together as an experiment in figuring out the best and worst ways of utilizing hELLA HUNG's unique powers. After years of hanging out with Hung Van Lam, his main collaborator Robert "Rob-Nasty" Creer decided that despite debating the ugliness that often is Hung's lack of boundaries manifesting as graphic and sexual comments or "ugly truths", that his charisma was meant for a bigger stage.⁴ Rob Nasty's ambition originally intended *Hung Dynasty the Movie* to be this great masterpiece of a low budget cult classic, a world of his and Hung's childhood fantasies come to life. Because of budget constraints and inexperience, Rob compromised his ambition with the realities of his endeavor, and ended up with a cross between a sketch comedy DVD and Hung's greatest hits. Whatever the result might be considered, it produced the first map on how to translate Hung's "magic" into something tangible.

⁴ This account is provided as a firsthand witness and participant. In fact, Rob's experiences and work with Hung, although it wasn't a perfect relationship between them, the groundwork he laid enabled myself to be able to have a better relationship with Hung. Having seen the emotional responses to Hung's ideas, actions and behaviors, helped prepare me as well as anything could have, to be a roommate with Hung. By the time Hung came to Los Angeles, he had grown a lot as a person. Still frustrating, but he had grown. Further, I think having Rob as someone who can relate to some of the frustrations I had provided a sounding board for ideas and strategies on how to not only be a better mentor, but better friend to Hung.

"Hung Van Lam knew that sometimes, to get what you want, you gotta do what you don't want. You know? And sometimes you gotta be able to uh... learn that new surrounding, that new system in order to defeat it and conquer it. That's why the whole... when I became Hung Dynasty! It's like ok, hELLA HUNG is successful. Now we're stamping a bigger cause, Hung Dynasty. I don't know if you know it Chris, but when Rob and Ron jumped on and Miles jumped on, and decided to promote Hung Dynasty? The pressure of expectations just skyrocketed for me. And it wasn't pressure that I was putting on myself. It was pressure that hELLA HUNG foresaw that was gonna come. Because he know that Rob and Ron and all these people that are jumpin' on the ship wanted something out of it. And if Hung wasn't going to provide, hELLA HUNG was going to die trying?"⁵

Ch. 1, The Return of Animal Chin:

The opening sequence, named for the film's title builds the mythology of hELLA HUNG through the context of a classic Kung Fu film. A narrated distress letter sets the context of the heroic quest being asked of Hung Dynasty member Animal Chin. A wandering Animal Chin evokes ideas of the wandering Ronin such as Akira Kurosawa's *Sanjuro*, played by Toshiro Mifune. The music itself is sampled taken from the intermission of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*. In this Samurai film world, Chin finds himself surrounded by the enemy Poison Clan ninjas. As their leader "Gorko," played by Hung's younger brother Jason (aka Golden Arms), exclaims, "Prepare to meet your doom," Chin calls upon our hero hELLA HUNG. Hung then teleports from his meditation session in the middle of a pond, to save the day against the Poison Clan. This opening scene is an important one in building the and presenting the ideas of what hELLA HUNG sees himself to be as his interrupted meditation scene establishes the Zen master who is such a dominant hero that he literally saves other heroes.

Once the depth of hELLA HUNG the hero is established, the remainder of the opening section thrusts this character into legitimacy socially, through those who back him. This section

⁵ Lam, Hung Van. 2011. Interview. 013.wav

acts as a roll call listing off Hung Dynasty members, as a 70's television introduction, complete with the show SWAT's theme song. This montage shows each member dressed in costume, an eye-patch wearing spy, a Bruce Lee double, a smooth Miami Vice styled ex-cop, each with a vest and affirmation of both their memberships in the Hung Dynasty, and the support of him in this new world as the conquering hero. The epic nature of this introduction is boosted by scene's of hELLA HUNG in combat with ninja's from the Poison Clan (played by other local B-Boys) and battling villains such as "Lord Brutalis the Oakland Viking." hELLA HUNG's mythology is quickly built and qualified in seven and a half minutes.

Ch. 2., The Rise of Hung Van Lam:

"Rob and Ron, they make all these predictions of why I'm flawed. And in the end... they all end up. Out of all the shit that Ron and Rob were saying I'm such a horrible guy, I'm such a wack B-Boy... but what was the end product? They ended up making a DVD about me and promoting my ass. And now ... at one point Rob was like, 'you're my hero, Hung. Whatever you can overcome, it inspires me to overcome my things.'"

⁶If the movie's opening chapter established the mythology and qualification of hELLA HUNG as a hero, "The Rise" imagines and builds that world in which he exists. "Hung mania's sweeping the nation!" the opening narration exclaims, in a parody of longtime *American Top 40* radio host Casey Kasem, the movie also evokes shows such as *E! True Hollywood Story*. In order to allow the world to imagine hELLA HUNG as one of the world's biggest stars, the movie presents facsimiles of popular magazines such as Newsweek, Vanity Fair, and Muscle, bearing his likeness on their covers. The announcer continues, "Movies, TV, Billboards and Magazines, hELLA HUNG is Hollywood's newest and brightest star." The next clip however show's a very awkward, unskilled Hung dancing in an audition tape to the *Red Bull Beat Rider Academy*, dance camp. The contrasting presentation of Hung as the ironic superhero could be used to cancel out the mythology and qualification built up in the first section with each off beat kick,

⁶ Lam, Hung Van. 2011 Interview. STE 00.wav

step, and "worm" wiggle move Hung shows. However, Hung's superstardom prevails despite (and paradoxically due to) his ironic performance, clearly allowing the audience to come to the conclusion that Hung's own rules apply and the movie presents the viewer with a choice: buy into Hung the superstar and imagine along with us, or turn the TV off.

The narration continues by declaring, "Was it his flair for style? His intoxicating moves? Or maybe it was his raw sexuality! Whatever it was, it convinced the judges and the world, that he was meant for superstardom." Rather than push this conclusion to the audience, the film produces "evidence" of superstardom in mock television shows. Consisting of a few *MTV Jackass* styled stunts and even a faux pornographic movie, the evidence in the mainstream television world does not evoke superstardom in the normal sense, but it is so wildly entertaining that it is hard to turn off. The idea of stardom presents a metaphorical "wink" to the audience as a shared joke, however the true joke is by hELLA HUNG because he has convinced not only his own crew, but also the audience to play along with him in this his world.



Performers from left to right: B-Boy Thesis, B-Boy Flexum, and B-Boy hELLA HUNG

HUNG DYNASTY VS. THE BUCHO BROTHERS

hELLA HUNG has neither won a competition, nor has ever been considered an elite skilled dancer, yet has endeared himself to the B-Boy community. Hung achieved the enviable status as a sought after exhibition battle b-boy. Many skilled, battle tested b-boys only taste of center stage comes in an organized b-boy tournament, and Hung accomplished his feat without the champion title that other b-boys have to accrue to create the same desire to be seen. More celebrity than prizefighter, more *WWE* than boxing, his resume is consists of the "views" on his web videos, surely evidence the people are behind him. As Hung's showmanship advanced far beyond his dance skills, the B-Boy community came to expect a show that could only be described as epic. Epic clearly describes the series of battles that were created from the "Best B-Boy Battle Ever," a three part series between hELLA HUNG and Nasty Ray involving first ninjas and giant swords, then other professional back flippers and B-girls joining the fray, and finally an entire Chinese lion dance troupe to complete the circus-like atmosphere. Hung's

exhibition battles not only a reimagined of what it means to breakdance, but went further by also introducing costumes and props to create their entire world for the audience.

The desire for hELLA HUNG exhibition battles came into full bloom at the event known as "Jean Claude Van Jam 2" in Arcadia. The previous year had seen the first in a surprise battle as B-Boy Gordy "Flexum" Lopez, actually another Hung Dynasty member, came to battle hELLA HUNG in a long curly wig and leopard print speedo as "Bullet Proof Bucho," a character based on 70's disco, drugs, and porn films. hELLA HUNG was unprepared for his opponent, but they put on an entertaining enough show that they were asked to resume their battle, this time as a 2 on 2.

During this second battle, hELLA HUNG would team up with fellow Hung Dynasty member Ronald "Profo Won" Creer. With proper preparation, they devised routines around a Bruce Lee movie theme. They would not only reenact their favorite fight scene moments from Bruce Lee movies, such as ripping out Chuck Norris' chest hairs in Game of Death, but also came up with Bruce Lee outfits - Hung, with a white tank top, Bruce Lee wig, aviator shades and nunchucks, and Profo Won wearing a full yellow Game of Death jumpsuit. Not to be outdone, Flexum teamed with Thias "Thesis" Lopez to form the duo, the matching long curly wig and leopard speedo shorts wearing "Bucho Brothers." Together they formed one of the highest viewed (if not THE highest viewed) organized B-Boy exhibition video on YouTube.

Not only did this battle rival Hung's best battles against Nasty Ray, it represented the draw and attraction that hELLA HUNG and the Hung Dynasty created within the B-Boy community with three very internationally high caliber B-Boys in Profo Won, Flexum and Thesis, who have gone on to win B-Boy competitions internationally. Their attraction is a testament to the fact that for pure entertainment value, hELLA HUNG's involvement had become the gold standard for B-Boy exhibition battles. hELLA HUNG's presence in this battle not only allowed these world famous b-boys to remove their boundaries what would be acceptable for them to perform, but also literally removed their clothes. The Bucho Brothers danced barefoot in their

speedos and wigs, changing their dance movements and tricks to match their characters. However picked "wedgies" and crotch grabs they added paled in comparison to the boundary pushing homoerotic moves they concocted for this battle, including a headspin move by one Bucho Brother (Flexum) on the buttocks of the other (Thesis) Bucho. hELLA HUNG's effect upon battle of characters and imagining are a direct product of his mission, to push boundaries, to invent a new you. Although it wasn't permanent, each of these b-boys got to act beyond themselves. The power of hELLA HUNG's performances in the B-Boy world illustrates the possibilities of the success he can have when a group of his peers lend their social intelligibility.



B-Boy hELLA HUNG (left) and Cat Deeley (right) on SYTYCD Season 7

SO YOU THINK YOU CAN DANCE

The social power the Hung Dynasty lent to hELLA HUNG enabled him to make an impression on the B-Boy community with a larger platform than he could imagine. This success emboldened Hung to seek a larger stage for his performance ambitions, eventually bringing him to the decision to "make it in Hollywood." During his first year living in Los Angeles, Hung auditioned the reality dance show "So You Think You Can Dance" (SYTYCD) to provide the

larger stage that he craved. Although he had auditions for the shows "America's Got Talent" and "Last Comic Standing," featured on television, SYTYCD was crafted carefully and through his own means. Everything from his "Fu Manchu" mustache with its long catfish like whiskers, his "Kung Fu hero" back story, and his over the top antics provided the editing crew and show producers ample material to dedicate almost five minutes of their show to him. His performance on the show reveals itself to be both powerful and exploitative, yet for as broad his character and art had been disseminated, the reality show format also exhibits limits on the depth of his character, hELLA HUNG.

The critics and the judges often like to disparage his audition performance, during which he came up short. However the success of his segment was not in his audition, but in the willingness of SYTYCD and Fox Television to provide a platform for his character. His segment opens with Hung lifting show host Cat Deeley in the air, while simultaneously carrying this episode exclaiming, "Five-one, but lots of fun!" SYTYCD couldn't have asked for anything more, as "Many years ago, an Asian brother wanted to see breakdancing. Five years later, a legend was born," Hung provides a narration in a made up Chinese accent and exclaims, "Hella HUUUUUUUUUNG!" To which Hung runs toward the camera with a full speed jump kick; the editor freezes him in the air with the title "The Legend of hELLA HUNG." The SYTYCD production crew did their best to exploit hELLA HUNG's act in a Fu Manchu/Kung-Fu/Yellow Peril-esque, manner made for reality television. However they were in many ways complicit in making hELLA HUNG's antics socially intelligible for the audience through a mainly balanced use of his backstory. However their desire for the sensationalism inherent in the reality TV format limits their abilities as social translators for the ideas of hELLA HUNG.

The Kung Fu angled character building SYTYCD introduces hELLA HUNG with undoubtedly orientalizes him in ways that might induce Asians and non-Asians alike cringe with the perception of exploitation by the show's editors and producers. However his combination of raw spectacle and endearing honesty prove impossible to separate, as Hung further explains,

"I'm a fighter, you know?" Hung is then depicted throwing a series of punches with sound effects along with the sound bite: "I been fighting since I was in middle school. So if you're gonna challenge me, you better bring it, son. I don't play, this is my dance!" The continued setup of the hELLA HUNG character contains both spectacle and honesty, hELLA HUNG, "what he wants to do more than anything in the world, is to amaze the crowd." Although he throws the audience off with such lines as "all the sexy ladies in the house say hell yeah," and referring to his sweat as "the manly juice, the passion that flows," the producers also offer a vulnerable side of Hung espousing that "before Hung was hELLA HUNG, he was just Hung Van Lam: the artist, the poet, the romantic."

And yet the moment you think you have hELLA HUNG pinned down, he does something even more audacious and even more violating, as he serenades host Cat Deeley, trying to seduce her on camera. Beginning with a kiss on the neck, Cat Deeley points out the obvious, "That was my neck." Following the second kiss she unwittingly sets up hELLA HUNG by saying, "don't go any lower," to which he promptly placed her hand on his crotch (to which she just as promptly pulled it away). When asked about his behavior in this segment, Hung says of the show's producers, "When they called me to do my segment, they said they wanted the full hELLA HUNG experience and I said, 'You really want the whole thing?' And they did, so I gave it to them... and when I put her hand there, they just all smiled and kept on rolling."⁷ Through these moments, the producers prove to be exploitative, but within their own limits. As with many reality TV shows, the more outrageous, the better; but this does not exclude the humanistic side of Hung Van Lam, because the more compelling the better TV program produced, period. hELLA HUNG and the producers of SYTYCD were each able to in this case exploit each other for their own gain. Who was more exploitative of who is debatable.

⁷ This section taken from my collection of post interview notes. This revelatory detail actually came much later, having assumed the entire time that Hung was purely presenting himself as he wanted to. Ironically I had assumed that the simple availability of camera time and Hung's own will produced his behavior, and it was indeed welcomed by the show's producers (which shouldn't have been surprising). However I doubt they knew exactly what they were going to get.

Hung also accomplishes in some sense his goal of "doing everything the shy Asian male wishes he could do but doesn't," by overcompensating and hypersexualizing himself by violating Cat Deeley. Whereas traditionally Asian males on American television are viewed as passive and sexless, hELLA HUNG's aggression pushes his sexuality to the forefront - not only aggressive, but also dangerous. However, his failure to dispel any of the ideas of Asian male sexual deviance represents a continued shortcoming in his performances. In the end Hung had accomplished the feat of presenting the essence of hELLA HUNG, but in the format of reality TV, it comes at a cost.

Although to Hung himself this occasion was a complete success, as hELLA HUNG has imparted in his largest audience yet, his self perceived hero status, he cannot win in this competition. His involvement with any mainstream entity such as SYTYCD will always cast him as a social outsider, and his continued outlandish behavior and boundary pushing will ensure he remains there. In this video clip the viewer is allowed to see some of the ways he charismatically wins over the rest of the contestants in the audience with his fun antics, his boundary pushing behavior by itself is seen interpreted as reprehensible by many bloggers and commenters of this SYTYCD episode. Despite his charisma and the achievement of his sympathetic and gentle backstory, hELLA HUNG's progress must be sacrificed; he must martyr himself to his cause. For SYTYCD to advance him beyond in their competition would be to put value into him as a character. By the time hELLA HUNG's dance audition segment played in the episode, we had already been in tune with his ways of being different. However right on cue, the judges scoffed, ridiculed and provided veiled insults to hELLA HUNG's dancing. While they were correct in rejecting him for his lack of technicality and lack of a prototypical dancer body, the implications that they did not approve of his appearance and difference, despite whatever skill he had, could not be ignored. Therefore he is martyred to maintain his ideology.

Left to his own devices, hELLA HUNG's efforts for stardom, time and time again run through a cycle of extreme ups and downs. Breakthroughs are followed by setbacks. hELLA

HUNG's strengths and skill sets do not fall within the traditional bounds of society. Although he desperately wants to be a star and "make it" in Hollywood, he also refuses to conform. The desire for social acceptance and fame in the form of a monetary reward and making a living, conflicts with his desire to remain unique and push boundaries. Without the social awareness of his own, to truly achieve what he wants he must continue to find collaborators such as the Hung Dynasty. Just as every sacrifice needs meaning or else it is just a loss, the continued self martyrdom of hELLA HUNG the hero means nothing without those to tell the world what makes him so great.



"DM" and hELLA HUNG at a B-Boy Jam in Inglewood, CA, 2011

ARCHETYPES

B-Boy hELLA HUNG as an artist pushes boundaries as any good artist does. Never one to put his attention in one place, hELLA HUNG has explored illustration, graphic design, print work and singing, yet it is his dance and performance art that stand above all else. Through his performance art, hELLA HUNG has integrated his art and life, destroying the boundaries of each until he has become more than art imitating life and life imitating art. With hELLA HUNG, there is very little difference between his personal life and his personal art.

The personal art that is hELLA HUNG, combines the social, historical and cultural settings that he grew up in. Each archetype, the Reality Show Contestant, Superhero (and Super Villain), Schizotypal/Delusional/Autistic personality, Refugee family member, B-boy/Hip

Hoppa, Professional Wrestler, Minstrel, and Trickster are all things that have influenced or describe hELLA HUNG the performer and person. Because of the way he pushes boundaries, even if one could describe him, it could not describe him for long. He is a performer who has been deemed limited physically, intellectually, and limited by his talent (whatever talent is), time and time again. He shifts through boundaries the way he shifts through life and the dance floor. Whether his audience or companions push him out or he pushes through the boundaries of that particular circle. Even though he can never be seen as all of these archetypes, he cannot be viewed or understood without their context.

This first section I label an academic montage. The first act of the story, providing the necessary conflict and backstory: the ideas and histories of past performance and of Hung sequenced with intention and precision. Each section stands alone in some regards, yet complement and flow into each other. The idea of hELLA HUNG is viewed as the entirety of these sequences, yet each paragraph, each section represents a series of movie shots strung together for to show this whole.

REALITY SHOW CONTESTANT

Up until his appearance as hELLA HUNG on the seventh season of the Fox TV show *So You Think You Can Dance* (SYTYCD), Hung Van Lam had found the fame and notoriety of reality TV contests to be incomplete – he hadn't quite "made it" yet. Following audition appearances on the shows *America's Got Talent* and *Last Comic Standing*, the third time was a charm, even if not *charming*. Hung finally captivated his audience with part wonder, part repulsion, and always all spectacle, as the show's producers went out of their way to let him project himself as a sex crazed Kung Fu master who nobody wants to watch dance, yet cannot let themselves look away. Mainstream entertainment pundits voraciously denounced hELLA HUNG, and in doing so, created a pop cultural phenomenon. Andrew Genser, of *The Soup Blog E! Online* declares, "Until last night, hELLA HUNG was something a woman might keep

hidden in a large shoebox in the back of her closet.⁸" And although Abbey Simmons of the online BuddyTV declares Hung to be, "Part Karate Kid and part Long Duck Dong," she also declares of hELLA HUNG, "we'll never forget, no matter how hard we try!"⁹

Hung's participation in reality shows demonstrates a desire to be seen. They are golden opportunities to broadcast his skills, character and persona on a broader scale. After receiving exposure, getting his auditions broadcast on national television, Hung speaks of these performances. These reality shows present two main things about Hung - his desire (and even desperation) to be recognized as a dancer/performer, and the ways hELLA HUNG has been made out to be a public figure. He has reached notoriety to be featured as a dancer and mentioned in many online blogs regarding his performance in SYTYCD. While the reviews in those blogs were hardly flattering, they reflected the lasting impression he had on people, and the feedback he would receive by customers coming into his workplace, *Trader Joe's* was a piece of additional evidence of his entry into a greater national consciousness. However getting recognized for being entertaining, just for a moment, is far from being recognized for your skill. Hung's performances are as increasingly surprising each time, as they are increasingly powerful through additional repetition and context.

The lasting impression of hELLA HUNG on the popular imagination can be thought of through the ways in which society interacts with the ideas hELLA HUNG represents and communicates. Reality TV relies on presentations of reality, though unscripted, that are carefully constructed in the editing room. The power of reality TV's draw towards the "freak show," the oddities and outliers of society, presents the conditions for powerful disruptions of the ideas and stereotypes created by society. A prime example is when a contestant is expected because of who they are or what they appear to be, to be lacking in talent moves

⁸ Genser, Andrew. www.eonline.com. E!, 6/3/2010. blog. http://www.eonline.com/on/ca/shows/chelsea/chuy/hella_hung_makes_you_feel_hella_awkward/184046

⁹ Simmons, Abbey. www.buddytv.com. Buddy TV, 6/2/2010. blog. <http://www.buddytv.com/articles/so-you-think-you-can-dance/so-you-think-you-can-dance-rec-36957.aspx>

beyond society's expectations and typecast, such as contestant performance such as Paul Potts' on *Britain's Got Talent*. Mr. Potts reveals those disruptions in ideas about those people. The platform of reality television and the re-appropriation of racial stereotypes combines to present hELLA HUNG's performances with a sense of agency against the hegemony of gendered and racial ideology that viewers begin viewing with. Although the judges are not blown away on the level of Potts, hELLA HUNG won over many TV viewers, fellow dancers and audience members with his charisma and spirit, as evidenced by customers who excitedly ask for pictures in the Trader Joe's store he works at.

SUPERHERO

Despite many negative reactions, his performances hold an odd sense of agency as they disrupt spectator ideas of normativity. However, the genius of Hung's performance as hELLA HUNG cannot be read through the lens of the mainstream – to fully appreciate the effects of this character, hELLA HUNG must be seen through the superhero paradigm in which he exists. Peter Coogan has defined essential elements of a superhero requiring these three main conventions: Mission, Powers and Identity (costume and codename), or MPI¹⁰. They are essential to not only decide upon a character as falling within the superhero genre, but the superhero story itself is an indication of how Hung has constructed his world around himself. An important distinction for "ruling in and ruling out" comics as to whether they truly fit into the superhero genre is in relation to his or her environment. Superhero generic distinction is as much defined by the superpowers and tights, as by the cultural knowledge of the audience.¹¹

First of all, hELLA HUNG's superhero claims are an act of creation, the manifestation of his desires, "I drew me being a superhero. I have documents from middle

¹⁰ Coogan, P. 2009. "The Definition of the Superhero". *A comics studies reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. p 86

¹¹ Coogan, P. 2009. "The Definition of the Superhero". *A comics studies reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. p 86

school of who Hung Van Lam was going to become. The physique and everything. And (yeah, it kinda did) And just create what you want, put it on paper."¹² Creating a greater purpose for hELLA HUNG, he imposed on himself a mission to "do what the shy Asian American male wishes he could do but doesn't." His superpower would be his lack of limits on himself, and the character hELLA HUNG as a separate costumed identity from Hung Van Lam, are at the heart of what places him into the genre. Coogan cites Northrop Frye's classification to support his superhero classifications, "in myth the hero is 'superior in kind both to other men and to the environment' and is a divine being."¹³ Hung's vocabulary regarding not only his performance exploits, but his life in general, supports his desire to be as the "divine being" in his world; words such "immaculate," "dominate," and "master".

His desire combined with the previously stated conditions help construct the basis for Hung's superhero mode, an existence where the only choice he felt he had, was to become someone more than himself, he must become "hELLA HUNG". In order to face a world constantly trying to bend him to its will, whether it be by illness, bullies, family members, or social construct, the only solution that made sense to him, was to be able to transcend himself. However, Hung does not act alone in the creation of his superhero paradigm, as such forces and concepts as Hip Hop, history, media, the autistic behaviors, and his circle of friends, help to initiate and reinforce these realities. Nor does he act alone in creating his costume pieces, his superhero costume pieces consisting of tasseled arm bands, bright yellow embroidered puff vests, neon sunglasses and countless hats that mark hELLA HUNG as a distinctly separate entity than Hung Van Lam.

The superhero costume's function is to delineate the separation between Hung Van Lam and hELLA HUNG as distinct identities. The alter ego provides a boundary in the life

¹² Van Lam, Hung. Interview 2011. STE 013.wav

¹³ Coogan, P. 2009. "The Definition of the Superhero". *A comics studies reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. p 87

of Hung Van Lam, to allow him a separate mode of acting. Hung Van Lam often refers to himself as the "shy momma's boy", whereas in the mode of hELLA HUNG he is the opposite, acting above and beyond himself. The traditional idea of the Clark Kent and Superman dichotomy is to providing two modes of acting in the world. Clark Kent is the mild mannered reporter that allows Superman to create the physical boundaries that blend him into the social world around him, the costume of Superman provides a visual cue for society around him for his powers and behavior that obviously are not normal: flying, super strength and speed, heat and x-ray vision.¹⁴ The physical costumes of hELLA HUNG also provide a visual cue for a separate person/character. Cues such as his neon tassels that might be worn during a regular stroll in the shopping mall provide a primer to any other person walking in the vicinity: expect the unexpected.

Although the superhero and alter ego identities prove to be very functional for hELLA HUNG, the social reality of his behavior his far more complex create ripples past the ideas he holds for himself. "hELLA HUNG is the super elite guy, you know? Kinda like if you're superman you can look like Clark Kent, but like in the next minute take everything off, I'm fuckin' superman."¹⁵ However as much as he wishes to manifest Superman, his reality might be more likened to the Batman as the Dark Knight, himself a boundary breaker who bends and breaks morals in pursuit of his vigilante justice. Yet the closest superhero model might be Marvel Comics' Incredible Hulk¹⁶, a far more complex character than the even and perfect Superman whose destructive nature often disrupts not only the villains he seeks to battle but also those whom he wishes to save¹⁷.

¹⁴ Greenberger, Robert, Martin Pasko, Jerry Siegel, and Joe Shuster. 2010. The essential Superman encyclopedia. New York: Del Rey/Ballantine Books.

¹⁵ Lam, Hung Van. 2011. Interview. STE 013.wav.

¹⁶ DeFalco, Tom. 2003. Hulk: the incredible guide. New York: DK Pub.

¹⁷ Pak, Greg, and Carlo Pagulayan. 2008. Planet Hulk. New York: Marvel.

Hulk actually is banished to a distant planet and manages to be the savior and the bringer of the Planet's demise although indirectly. This graphic novel epitomizes how Hung lives and manifests things. Often his pure will



Hung posing for a photo at the top of Baldwin Hills Recreation, Los Angeles, CA 2011.

DISORDERED

In the social world, Hung's superhero powers are nonexistent, especially to those who do not understand or participate in Hung's superhero world. Taken at face value by strangers, or audience members of his reality contest performances, the character of HELLA HUNG might be characterized as an ironic superhero. Coogan returns to Frye again to describe "the ironic mode- the hero is 'inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves,'"¹⁸ as often Hung's claims of fine artistry seem outrageous to the point of delusion. What ideas of prowess, "immaculate" ability and the "mastery" of his realms are not immediately accessible to the "real"

and determination will allow him to persevere until good things happen around him. Note how I didn't say that he HIMSELF accomplishes these tasks. But his determination leads him there.

¹⁸ Coogan, P. 2009. "The Definition of the Superhero". *A comics studies reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. p 87.

or socially connected world around him. In any superhero world the assumption of identities is a fairly normative, if not essential course of action. It is a functional mode, if not protective, to the worlds the superhero inhabits. To the all seeing eye of the comic reader we would call this a "no brainer" however hELLA HUNG, to the rest of the world operates, in an autistic or schizophrenic mode because the lens of the comic book is absent. The function and protection the alter ego provides to hELLA HUNG's worlds cannot be seen by those observing his bright yellow vest with neon tassels out in public. They do not understand that the switch to an alter ego protects the world he inhabits, especially the world in his mind. The audience or casual viewer of hELLA HUNG needs context for his split; this context provides hELLA HUNG's anchors to the "real world" that are necessary for understanding how he uses his modes of performance function in his day to day life. hELLA HUNG's mission statement - "I am the guy that does what every shy Asian male wishes he could do,"¹⁹ is a way for Hung to be able to navigate the world without being paralyzed by its constraints. To the rest of the social world, he stands at 5 feet 1 inches tall, below the 5th percentile of adult American male expectations. "I say what's on my mind, I get all the attention, I am the guy that dances with the girls other Asian guys are afraid to." When Hung sets his mind on something, the last person who would stop him, is himself. If his real life strengths were framed in terms of superhero powers, he is the man with no boundaries. He has no boundaries, simply because he is not often attuned to them. Autism and schizophrenia are two neurological disorders that have been used to describe Hung, although he has never had a diagnosis from a medical professional. Because Hung exists in his own world, and often within his own rules, the lay person might be tempted to provide a casual diagnosis of an autistic or schizotypal personality, however the symptoms and behaviors Hung exhibits while unconventional, provide a clue as to how

¹⁹ Woon, Christopher. Project notes. This is a quote that I have heard so many times I want to say a zillion, and maybe that still wouldn't equate how much I feel like Hung repeats this.

On one hand, the Asperger/autistic spectrum adult model is extremely productive in understanding hELLA HUNG. In the most basic definition of autism, "a tendency to view life in terms of one's own needs and desires,"²⁰ and without any diagnosis this can be said about Hung Van Lam, and "hELLA HUNG" with certainty. His difficulty empathizing with others, in day-to-day actions is consistent with an autistic/Asperger syndrome point framework. It is not that he does not desire things such as the well being or happiness of others, but rather, has a difficulty figuring out what other people need or desire socially, and acts according to the logic that he sees. However, Hung also is symptomatic of a schizophrenic type, or schizotypal personality disorders "A disorder characterized by eccentric behaviour and anomalies of thinking and affect which resemble those seen in schizophrenia, though no definite and characteristic schizophrenic anomalies have occurred at any stage."²¹ His "behavior that is odd, eccentric or peculiar" is one such symptom, however his tendencies towards "depersonalization," and "Poor rapport with others" and "Vague, circumstantial, metaphorical, overelaborate, or stereotyped thinking, manifested by odd speech or in other ways, without gross incoherence"²² are all descriptions consistent with Hung's personality. Rather than autistically removed, Hung is consistent with a tendency for "interpersonal relatedness as problematic and (sometimes) uncomfortable relating to other people. Although they may express unhappiness about their lack of relationships, their behavior suggests a decreased desire for intimate contacts."²³ He is someone who collects odd things, does not like to do things "the normal way," and simplifies thought by consistently speaking stereotypes as truths. All shape his ideas about how to be

²⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autism>.

Because of the trickiness and technicality of the DSM IV TR and Hung's lack of official diagnosis of any type of psychological disorder, the use of terms such as autistic, later schizotypal. Because it makes describing how he is, earlier. While the objective is not to diagnose Hung, but to provide terminology that could evoke his behavior. Continuing the documentary theme, these are descriptions used to create an easily understandable and palatable view of Hung and his performance.

²¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schizotypal_personality_disorder

²² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schizotypal_personality_disorder

²³ American Psychiatric Association. 2000. Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-IV-TR. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association. p 698.

"hELLA HUNG" because Hung invented hELLA HUNG in to navigate the hostile world around him.

These modes of behavior construct significant roadblocks to many aspects of his wider social integration, yet prove to be productive towards his performance and accomplishing some goals in his personal life. On one hand his inability to empathize, through his lack of social awareness, is mostly a liability. However, the lack of social inhibition also creates opportunities for him. Often experiences run the risk of playing out disastrously, or becoming wildly successful. However even at the age of 31, with Hung's lack of limits he finds himself running into difficult situations because his lack of personal and social boundaries. Yet his lack of boundaries in the form of social and physical limits, have allowed hELLA HUNG to not only perform "out of the box," but also enables him to meet people without reservations. The ability to meet people without regard to the social status others ascribe to them, such as celebrities and perceived people of importance is often a breath of fresh air for those he encounters; his lack of awareness or naiveté is endearing to those he engages. At least, it is to those who aren't repulsed initially by his behavior. In order to create wider social understanding of hELLA HUNG, it is up to those who meet Hung or those who shape his family and friends, to be empathic and to reject or accept not only Hung's mode of performance but his mode of being. Perhaps it is more helpful to rather than create a description manual for diagnosis, to create a description manual for translation and communication for those who fit the same modes as Hung. The use of these terminology might carry the connotation of purely negative qualities, yet contextualizing these modes of being from disorders and illnesses needing treatment as productive forces. Perhaps a famous proverb that has been appropriately passed around virally through the internet²⁴, might shed more light on this, "Be who you are and say what you feel because those

²⁴ Appropriately, just as the videos of hELLA HUNG are passed virally.

who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind"²⁵ The fact is rather than just viewed as disorder measured by society, his modes need to be viewed in terms with how they allow him to function and continue towards his goals in life. What is important is not any genetic, neurological, or mental syndrome diagnosis, but how these modes of behavior and disconnection from greater social reality are performed not only on television reality shows and nightclub dance floors, but also performed in his life.

²⁵ Although often attributed without citation to Theodor Seuss Geisel, better known as "Dr. Seuss" this is a proverb supports the right to maintain differences and individuality people have, and challenging us to examine who we hold ourselves socially accountable to.



Hung's parents in San Francisco, CA 2012

REFUGEE FAMILY

The origin story is essential to any superhero, in order to provide the context, the essence, for said hero's core characteristics and motivations for being such a superhero. It is a means of linking the ordinary to the extraordinary - a historical construction Hung's life has been nothing short of an epic journey since the beginning. Hung recalls that "people are always amazed, that I always have a story for everything in my life," meaning that any monumental event in his life, every lesson learned is a parable to be retold. Even the story of his birth was one filled with adversity as his mother a story of difficult pregnancy and long labor, he entered

the world to a hero's welcome, literally, as Hung 鴻 means literally "hero" in Cantonese and his own Chiu Chow dialect.

Hung's status as a refugee, a "boat person" from Vietnam, and a "survivor" further informs his ideas of his superhero mission and bringing it from fantasy to (his own) reality. The retelling of the refugee journey is a mode of Hung's parents and Hung's family's remembering of their journey and the importance of his survival and ability to live beyond adversity. These stories provide a testament to his very existence and his nature as a survivor. As Hung can recall the stories of his birth, of childhood illness and even the events in his parents' lives leading up to his birth. He knows the stories of his origin so well that he can immediately retell the events of his journey on a refugee boat to the Philippines, of the things not only *he* went through, but also what *his parents* had to do for him to ensure his survival, his parents searching for drinking water, surviving pirates, and his father even saving their sinking ship. The construction of Hung's superhero origin story draws upon the common form and narratives of a refugee story a mode of remembering and sharing (sharing that many other children of refugees might be envious of) that has been transformed by the fantasy narratives of the superheroes of Hung's childhood, into a form of agency.

Hung's origin story helps provide the seeds to his hero identity, however it was his childhood experiences that constructed his greater mission. As a 31 year old who never grew past his 5'1" stature, he's had to live his life with a lot of imagination – this issue has been a tall obstacle for him like few others. After surviving his journey as a "boat person" refugee fleeing from Vietnam, Hung Van Lam grew up in San Francisco constantly bullied by larger kids. Having the stories of his perseverance constantly recanted helped craft his response to these situations. To imagine the hardship he overcame became a source of strength for HELLA HUNG as either adversity sought him out or he bashed his way through as he recalls, "I became known

as 'the bully beater' for some time"²⁶. His refugee background provided that context to eventually be his own form of agency. He was defiant, but was constantly challenged, and his response required nothing short of the extraordinary.

B-BOY/BREAKDANCER

One central performance stage for hELLA HUNG is the dance floor. The term dance floor applies liberally, because at any time hELLA HUNG might turn any public or communal space into a dance floor at any time. At any moment there might be a performance of dancing, handstands, or what Hung calls "sexy dance", especially if there is music that he likes, playing. One of the central modes of expressing his character hELLA HUNG, is on the dance floor. Joe Schloss writes in his groundbreaking study *Foundation: b-boys and b-girls, and hip-hop culture in New York*, of the way B-Boys and B-Girls refine identities through the traditions of Hip Hop and breaking. In the B-Boy/B-Girl world is where hELLA HUNG gained his initial notoriety and eventually his name.

The distinction between B-Boying, what most consider the proper terminology of "breaking", and "breakdancing" is important to make, especially in relation to hELLA HUNG's dance performances. The appeal of breakdancing for Hung is rooted in what is known as the 1980's era of "breaksploitation" whereas the national media discovered B-boying/breaking and created a national fad, conflating any type of "street dance" such as b-boying/breaking, with other dances such as popping, locking, the robot, and boogaloo, labeling it all as "breakdancing"²⁷. Hung was attracted to this media conflation because it was construed by him as "being able to be free, and dance however you want, there was no limit to expression," exactly the qualities he desired for his own life. Without understanding that there really was a foundation and structure to this dance, Hung continued to represent the B-boy scene as he

²⁶ Lam, Hung Van. 2011. Post Interview notes.

²⁷ Scholes, Joseph Glenn. 2009. *Foundation: b-boys, b-girls, and hip-hop culture in New York*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

knew it. The attention first brought criticism and "all the negativity," as Hung would say it. Although they criticized him repeatedly and called him "wack", he would not be bullied into giving up and quitting. Hung admittedly knew nothing about Hip Hop culture, however he liked performing and practicing what he understood of breakdancing.

The scene tried its best to ignore him, however he never went away. His persistence was at the very least, his foot jammed in the door, begging for the other B-Boys to relieve their pressure and letting him enter. They eventually realized this happy-go-lucky breakdancer would not be dissuaded and rather than allow him to continue to disrupt their lives, they learned to work with him and let hELLA HUNG play in their world. That started with B-boy and West Coast uprock dance guru, Danny "Rock Bandit" Ayala, then known as "Bug I'd Bandit".

He was encouraged by Bug I'd Bandit to explore the idea of creating his own character, after seeing Bug I'd integrate "Popeye" into a dance routine. What Hung did, was create an identity "hELLA HUNG" as an expression of agency by Hung Van Lam, who felt the forces of constraint from society as an Asian American man. Hung saw the stereotypes of the shy, sexless Asian male in American society, to be constraining of first himself and his friends, and then other young Asian American adolescent males coming of age. The introduction of "character" and identity creation in B-boying created the perfect conditions to enact this budding desire to be a hero – not just for himself, but for the Asian American man.

This initial mentorship would serve as Hung's entry point into the rest of the B-Boy community. Hung would eventually meet his friend and first B-Boy, B-boy and Uprock Dancer Robert "Rob Nasty" Creer. Through Rob and his twin brother Ron "Profowon" Creer, he learned about B-Boy fashion, etiquette, and dance form. And although he did not master any of these aspects, he developed his own unique sense of style in a very resourceful way. He was known for his wild costumes, colors, and hand drawn shirt lettering as a unique D.I.Y. fashioned B-Boy, as only a B-Boy with a refugee history could. Joe Schloss in his seminal work

Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls and Hip-Hop Culture in New York City exclaims that, "Overall, B-Boying may be the last element of Hip-Hop fashion in which creativity is valued more than cost... on a deeper level this is about learning to confidently express one's identity in a variety of circumstances." Hung had in fact crafted his own style, character, and most importantly, created a complete identity for himself in the true B-Boy mode.

PROFESSIONAL WRESTLER

The explanatory power of the "Professional Wrestler" archetype is of "Hung the Showman". Hung's desire for attention to his art through charisma and spectacle is fueled by growing up watching professional wrestling's "The Ultimate Warrior", Terry "Hulk" Hogan, and Duane "The Rock" Johnson. These wrestlers provided a model for gaining the love and adoration Hung craves through superhero-type highflying antics. They are one of the closest things to comic book superheroes you can get in real life. Professional wrestlers play the roles of the hero or "face"²⁸ and the villain "heel"²⁹. Wikipedia credits the 1990s WWF/WWE "Attitude Era" for a change in face characters, as "wrestlers like [Stone Cold Steve Austin](#) and [Sting](#) used tactics traditionally associated with heels but remained popular with the fans."³⁰

Hung's wrestling heroes like Duane "The Rock" Johnson represent the newer vein of unscrupulous heroes that are wildly popular, yet often break the rules to accomplish their goals. This archetype strongly resonates with the type of hero Hung developed in his character "hELLA HUNG". hELLA HUNG someone who "doesn't do things the straight, normal way." hELLA HUNG draws from "The Rock" not only in his manner of speech, but also through pauses and the creation of dramatic moments, and the physical posturing and performance of someone who is oozing confidence in himself.

²⁸ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Face_\(professional_wrestling\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Face_(professional_wrestling))

²⁹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heel_\(professional_wrestling\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heel_(professional_wrestling))

³⁰ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Face_\(professional_wrestling\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Face_(professional_wrestling))

Where the concept of the wrestling hero finds its limitations however, are in its applicability to the real world. The character of hELLA HUNG wants to make everything into a spectacle, make every occasion about bringing attention to hELLA HUNG, not realizing the need for tact or even finding better timing. By living as "hELLA HUNG" all the time, even while acknowledging that hELLA HUNG and Hung Van Lam are not the same, he risks pushing people away and turning them "off" with his spectacle. Hung Van Lam, no hELLA HUNG is always "on" and ready for the right moments, and so many more "wrong" ones. The contradiction here is that although hELLA HUNG is limited by his ability to recognize limits, however the full nature of his spectacle very much has precedence with performers such as Andy Kaufman as an archetype of a performer who went all out in wrestling women, going out is the only way to truly sell his performances and character where you didn't know where the character began and ended.³¹ The conclusion, that this extreme mode is the only way Hung believes people will even pay attention. Just as in reality television, whether "good" television or "bad" television, the drawing power in his spectacle makes hELLA HUNG "good" TV.

MINSTREL

The explanatory power of the archetype of a version of the Black minstrel, a racialized boundary defying version of the folk "trickster" character provides a model for how the images Hung uses as hELLA HUNG, combat racist tropes from the hegemonic discourse of Asian-ness. Traveling minstrels in the 19th century United States were popular as a form of entertainment in the post antebellum South as a way to focus lingering feelings of hate against Blacks in the South. Whites performed with faces darkened with burnt cork and red lipstick, playing out racist tropes of buffoonery to a willing audience. Although this form was used by the White south to reinforce ideas of race, it was also one of the only forms Blacks were publicly allowed to perform

³¹ Drash, Wayne. cnn.com. CNN, 4/7/2012. <http://www.cnn.com/2012/04/07/us/kaufman-lawler-wrestling-match/index.html?iref=allsearch>
Even cited by Hung himself. In interviews.

in. Stereotypes to fight stereotypes has precedence in black minstrelsy, with performers such as Bert Williams who used the images ascribed with racist tropes of African Americans to "disrupt" those ideas by performing with those images, but creating ways of being and acting while wearing "blackface" that were different than those stereotypes - and in the process transforming them.

Hung uses and wears those images of Asian Americans, representing the cartoonized yellow horde characterizations, sporting a long haired "rat tail" evoking the old Chinese queue hairstyle, the "Fu Manchu" mustache, doing Kung Fu sets and accents with his dance performances. He characterizes the absurd and even the grotesque, as if you expect him to be a clown. However Hung breaks free of that mold with his spirit of positive energy until he eventually gained a high degree of B-Boy skill. Further, the repetition of these performances in public spaces including Los Angeles nightclubs, community and B-Boy spaces, and reality television, provides the double-sided attraction/disruption of Hung's racialized character.

Hung Van Lam created "hELLA HUNG" as a character, a superhero, who could and would do "everything a shy Asian America male wants to do, but can't or won't. Hung's performances as hELLA HUNG are a disruption of dominant "racial and gender ideologies" paralleling Black performers of the late 19th-early 20th century. Daphne Brooks writes of the way these performers:

... rehearsed 'off-center' identity formations to disrupt the ways in which they were perceived by audiences and to enact their own 'freedom dreams.' Each figure developed a means to move more freely and to be culturally 'odd,' to turn the tables on normativity and to employ their own bodies as canvasses of dissent in popular performance culture. Restoring movement and history to individuals in the cultural margins, their unpredictable performances cut through the tyranny of stillness evolving out of the Atlantic world's dominant racial and gender narratives. Suturing together hybrid and sometimes profane cultural materials to rewrite categories of self-representation, these path breaking individuals experimented with ways to express their dissonant relationship to dominant culture and plotted ways to subvert that dissonance *Bodies in Dissent*.

Hung, like the performers Brooks writes about, uses a sense of empowered "oddness" in his performance in order to "turn the tables on normativity and to employ [his] own [body] as a canvas of dissent in popular performance culture."ⁱⁱ He employs the use of characters such as "Fu Manchu," Tony Starks and Iron Man's arch nemesis "The Mandarin", and yellow peril/horde imagery of the exclusion era comics, and in embodying these stereotypes his performances as the high flying, dancing, hyper sexualized and irresistible hELLA HUNG is "able to confound and disrupt conventional constructions of the racialized and gendered body" as expected by the spectating audience.

Just as the Black Minstrel covers his dark skin with black cork and makeup, as a mode of enabling himself to speak in ways he otherwise wouldn't be able to, so does hELLA HUNG choose to wear the color yellow, grow the Fu Manchu mustache, and grow wild sideburns/chops. Hung presents a conflict to the images of Asian males in Western society, conflict to the desexualized, effeminate male that works in tandem with the diabolical, perverse, and sexually threatening "most evil man the world has ever known!" as shown in a poster for *The Face of Fu Manchu*³². Although he is visually threatening in the manner of Fu Manchu and an embodiment of Yellow Peril ideology, hELLA HUNG is a character meant to wow and amaze, to empower Asian American males, especially himself.

The black performers Brooks writes about draw upon the embedded history and social structures produced through transatlantic African slavery trade, subverting their positions of race and objectification through their performance. As characters set in the realities of 19th century America, performance and poking fun at the structures and situations Black performers such as Bert Williams presented, was a way of reenacting boundaries and through humor and play, imagining ways that they could be pushed and transformed. Similarly, hELLA HUNG's performances produce a subversion of American relation to the Pacific theater stage, the history

³² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Faceoffumanchu.jpg>

of trade and labor relations, and orientalism embedded in the social structures of Asian Americans in the United States.

The character of hELLA HUNG plays on the fears of the masses, as a means of reclamation of all images and ideas of the Asian body, and his subversion defies the hegemonic powers through his acts of noncompliance to the audience's expectations. All the archetypes to this point, the B-Boy and the superhero and the professional wrestler, all work towards a hyper-emasculated projection that hELLA HUNG plays to his audience. Hung's brand of Asian American empowered minstrelsy specifically aims to take down what David Eng has titled "Racial Castration" from his reading of David Henry Hwang's 1988 Tony-award-winning drama M.Butterfly. Eng in his book "analyzes the various ways in which the Asian American male is both materially and psychically feminized within the context of a larger U.S. cultural imaginary." In order to arrive to this intersection of race and gender, Eng recalls Freud's essay "Fetishism" to interpret it as "a psychic process whereby the man attempts to obviate trauma of sexual difference by seeing at the site of the female body a penis that is not there to see." Whereas through his psychoanalytic reading of M. Butterfly, Gallimard, the white diplomat "refuses to see at the site of the Asian male body (of Song the Asian spy posing as a woman) a penis that is there to see. The white diplomat's "racial castration" of Song thus suggests that the trauma being negotiated in this particular scenario is not just sexual but racial difference... Through this racial castration, Gallimard need not see Song as anything other than a woman. Through this distinct refashioning of fetishism, an Oriental 'could never be completely a man.'"

Just as white hegemony who feminizes the Asian American and refuses to see "a penis that is there to see," the Asian American B-Boy, uses the hyper masculinity and gesturing of Hip Hop, the "cock serve," a gestured imaginary penis aimed at a B-Boy's opponent that underscore for their opponent what already is biologically present, is the perfect summary of his resistance. Although the cock serve is not a move that epitomizes B-boy and breakdance artistically, it is in the spirit of the gender code embedded in the dance's origins. The assumption

of B-Boy aesthetics and culture melded with the threatening figure of the Fu Manchu character by hELLA HUNG in his performances looks to reemphasize the idea of the Asian American penis on the body of the hyper oriental Fu Manchu character to disrupt the ideas set forth by the ideas of race and sexuality produced by white hegemony.

There is a fear that his character does more harm in perpetuating these characters, than the good it does. The reactions to hELLA HUNG within any community he occupies whether B-Boy or Asian American communities, there are both positive and negative reactions to his existence. The biggest questions - what if this character takes off with success, and is re-appropriated by the media or television shows? The danger in hELLA HUNG's portrayal and reclamation of these stereotypes exists in the potential to simply multiply and project this in simplified imagery without the expression of agency within the written and verbal artistic statements. Much as director Spike Lee expresses this fear in his film "Bamboozled", depicting the desperate pitch of [Damon Wayans' executive character] return of Black Minstrelsy to his television network, resulting in an unexpected success, there is a fear that this image of hELLA HUNG could be simplified and broadcast without context.

Often the assumption of alternate identities whether a character or a mask, represents a danger in being able to think you are so different that you are accountable in different ways than when you are this other person. Accountability is needed for hELLA HUNG's brand of performance especially because hELLA HUNG is a superhero in his world, and powerful, at that. As a superhero with powers that are ultimately corruptible, he needs real life accountability. As repeated in the great Marvel Comics franchise, *The Amazing Spiderman*, "with great power comes great responsibility."³³ In the wrong hands such as the editors and producers of the show *So You Think You Can Dance (SYTYCD)*, hELLA HUNG runs that real danger of being exploited and Bamboozled in the same manner that Spike Lee's character "Mantan" is. hELLA HUNG is an idea as much as he is embodied in a person, Hung Van Lam,

³³ Lee, Stan, and Steve Ditko. 2007. *Amazing fantasy omnibus*. New York: Marvel. *Amazing Fantasy* #15.

and requires constant dialogue by those who understand him and what he is trying to accomplish and the audiences for his performances.

TRICKSTER

HELLA HUNG as a "trickster" archetype enables him to occupy all of the aforementioned archetypes, yet defies them without occupying any of them (or being accepted as them) at all. The ideas he fancies himself as: superhero, B-boy, hero of his refugee family inform the functionality of hELLA HUNG as a real life trickster figure as well as the behaviors that cast him as an eccentric or even schizotypal or autistic spectrum personality. Lewis Hyde begins his introduction to *Trickster Makes This World* with a traditional line, "The first story I have to tell you is not exactly true, but it isn't exactly false either."³⁴ Hyde affirms the trickster as "a boundary crosser. Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, at the gates of the city and the gates of life, making sure there is commerce."³⁵ Towing the line between the imaginary and mystical vs. the concrete and the real, the way hELLA HUNG pushes boundaries is both a conscious decision and a compulsion. His functionality as a trickster in the lives of those who know him, might be the most real and true quality he possesses. On the conscious level, Hung as the underdog superhero does not always observe boundaries the boundaries of others because doing so would paralyze him in action. Unable to decipher a lot of life's shades of grey, Hung's general tendency to act through his impulses are consistent with the trickster being "ridden by lust" and "opportunistic sexuality"³⁶

³⁴ Hyde, Lewis. 2010. *Trickster makes this world: mischief, myth, and art*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. ebook p 9.

³⁵ Hyde, Lewis. 2010. *Trickster makes this world: mischief, myth, and art*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. ebook p 12.

³⁶ Hyde, Lewis. 2010. *Trickster makes this world: mischief, myth, and art*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. ebook p 14.

Hung's Asian American minstrelsy crosses group boundaries between the juxtaposition of Asian Americanness and Whiteness, yet also within Asian Americanness itself, "he also attends the internal boundaries We constantly distinguish - right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead - and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction. Where someone's sense of honorable behavior has left him unable to act, trickster will appear to suggest an amoral action, something right/wrong that will get life going again. Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox.³⁷" Literally and figuratively dancing between worlds, he provides a precautionary tale to those who wish to follow the model minority path of the Asian American professional. His tale provides the "look what you might become" if you chase your dreams and follow your passions and desires.

However, conversely, he provides another paradigm in fulfillment that the model minority does not provide. His mantra of dream following provides us with the desire to fulfill the other side of being Asian American, the "American dream" that we as Asian Americans are often instilled with. Rather than settling for the desires of security our immigrant and refugee ancestry might urge upon us. hELLA HUNG provides those boundaries between the worlds, and as all tricksters provide, he is the cautionary tale that the road to the other sort of fulfillment is one that requires you to be bold, and may be a path of poverty and hardship on the road to the nonguaranteed fulfillment of your dreams.

Much as the hybrid "Monkey King" and "Cousin Chinkee" in Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* declares "Harro Amellica!"³⁸ with his buckteeth, peasant gown and braided queue. As intentionally as the Cousin Chinkee makes his cousin "Danny" squeamish with his advances toward "such pletty Amellican girl wiff bountiful Amellican

³⁷ Hyde, Lewis. 2010. Trickster makes this world: mischief, myth, and art. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. ebook p 12

³⁸ Yang, Gene Luen, and Lark Pien. 2009. American born Chinese. New York, NY: Square Fish. ebook p 17.

bosom!"³⁹ as a deviantly desperate sex crazed Asian male, the trickster hELLA HUNG puts the ideas, the contradictions, the racial paradoxes and abject state of inbetweenness of the being Asian American right in our faces and forces a decision of whether to be hamstrung by our conditions or be more. The story of the Monkey King, a monkey deity who desires to be considered a god in the same vein as those in the court of the Jade Emperor, who causes destruction when not accepted into their world, has been told for centuries as one who tore down the boundaries of the heavens. In Yang's *American Born Chinese*, the Monkey King it turns out has destroyed boundaries not only as himself, but also disguised as Cousin Chinkee. The trickster using multiple forms, Yang's Monkey King used his characters to challenge the self images of the protagonist, Danny. It is quite appropriate that Hung Van Lam/hELLA HUNG has on occasion listed the Monkey King as a figure he can identify with. Perhaps it is not coincidental that Yang's costume bearing, archetype shifting version of the Monkey King parallels hELLA HUNG's use of characterization as a functioning trickster in the modern world.

Hung Van Lam has some difficulty outside of his art, fitting into society as just like his character hELLA HUNG, he is not bound by specific morals; he refuses to be bound completely by society, rather than paralyzed by what is right and wrong according to social standards. He often chooses what works for him. Forever in between he is forever on the road, able to hold a job but not able to maintain long-term security. It is to be seen whether he can find more than shelter, but the sanctuary he desires. Los Angeles being a city of peoples' whims and dreams, it is the epitome of a city full of transients and in-betweens where he can attempt to pursue everything and anything he fancies. He is no more controllable by Hung Van Lam himself than you or I. hELLA HUNG, the trickster dares to imagine himself more than what society has prescribed to him, and wants the same and more for those whom he associates with. Forever in the margins and forever slipping between boundaries, hELLA HUNG allows Hung Van Lam to endure.

³⁹ Yang, Gene Luen, and Lark Pien. 2009. *American born Chinese*. New York, NY: Square Fish. ebook p 17.

ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY INTERVIEW MATERIAL

Just as the study of 19th century Black minstrelsy brings forth conclusions about the performances that are both racist and offensive, and powerful and subversive, depending on the performer, the same goes with the performances of hELLA HUNG. Hung is both offensive and powerful, oscillating between worlds and definitions of what we might think he is. Because hELLA HUNG often defies and pushes the limits of social boundaries, a researcher needs to be properly bounded by their research method. Although many of the findings come from my regular interactions with Hung Van Lam/hELLA HUNG, a clear data set not only strengthens the theoretical framework of the previous literature review, but also provides a means to measure the scholarly acumen contained within this work.

The primary interviews were set to consist of 5 interviews of 1-2 hours each. They ended up totaling a little over 8.5 hours and at times had the potential to push further, were it not for the bounds of this study. The extensive digitally recorded interviews and subsequent transcriptions serve as a snapshot of the life and performance of hELLA HUNG in the year 2011. A running log of notes had been taken up until our final days as apartment mates through March 2012 following up on various ideas from past interviews. Over the course of this study, it must be noted that many of these ideas were ones that had been repeated over and over.



Hung Van Lam in Los Angeles, CA 2012.

HOW HUNG THINKS

"hELLA HUNG, to me, it's not even a human being. It's just an identity, a free spirit. He has nothing to do with Hung Van Lam. Because Hung Van Lam is no one, doesn't even exist in the eyes of people... No one knows who Hung Van Lam is... The world only knows hELLA HUNG."

The frameworks of "reality show contestant," "Superhero," "Autistic/Delusional," "Refugee," "B-Boy," "Professional Wrestling Spectacle," and "Minstrel," all provide outer socio-historical references to understand hELLA HUNG, however how he presents his creation in his interviews, how he acts/interacts plays out just as prominently in the action of his character. He is an actor in the world, playing a character built upon his life's perspectives. Rather, Hung

builds multiple characters using varying levels of each archetype to suit his needs, like the paradoxical trickster, he is all of these and none.

At the center of these characters is his autistic-like personality, the drive and compulsion that is so strong that he finds it difficult to empathize experiences outside of his own.

Conversely, Hung finds it very easy to talk about himself - especially in the 3rd person. Seeking roughly 3 hours or so of in depth interview time, it turned into about 8 hours of not just interview time, but discussions and debates and explanations over how behavior operates, or what in his behavior that he is not conscious of. He lives in his own world but is also very eager to be understood. Lacking societal boundaries that suit him, he seeks to define himself under his terms.

In addition to Hung's difficulty thinking outside of his own experience, he also often reacts emotionally and over simplifies information - discarding details that overburden him. Understanding the nuances about Hung's stories is important, to figure out what facts can be gleaned from someone who doesn't believe in the importance of recanting facts - they don't always match up with other witnesses or participants in the stories. The onus is then on us, those on the outside to decipher what it is about Hung that is communicated in his stories.

The first story of our interview sessions, about a repeated school experience provides a great introduction to Hung's social issues.

Hung: I guess, when you're young, you can just list everything that happens. But when you get... I remember when I got to a certain age, the teacher was like, take these points and identify your life. I wanna hear what's important to you. Because I want to know about you. So after that teacher, I think it was high school, that told me that. From now on, I stop listening to what the book was writing about. I stopped using book examples. I would always plug my own life examples, you know. And in the UC system,⁴⁰ because I was doing that, no, no, we want

⁴⁰ Hung actually never attended a UC/University of California school, he dreamed of it, however he did spend 10 years at the City College of San Francisco.

proof that you actually read the book. We want you to go grab... paraphrase, you know grab phrases from each essay and back up the statement. And I was like damn, that's kind of wack, you know. So I gotta give you my experience and on top of that, give you citations on top of that?"

Chris: What you're missing is that not every class is the same.

Hung: Well this is the only class that I...

Chris: Or is it the same class every time?

Hung: Yeah, I repeated this class 8 times.

Chris: The same teacher though?

Hung: Yeah. But different book each time. He would always assign different books every semester.

HUNG: But that's the tricky part, because those things... the teachers would always go, "Well Hung, you've taken the text too literal. There's a bigger meaning." So I hit them with the bigger meaning and they say, "That's not the bigger meaning." Well it is to fuckin' me! That's that bigger meaning. From what I gather from these facts, I interpret these facts thinking, with this meaning. Well, if you don't think that's the meaning, what is the meaning?

The inability of Hung to contextualize and adapt to his situation is demonstrated in detail. The inability to pass this class 8 times reflects his intelligence not in depth of thought, but his ability to process his surroundings and adapt to the needs of the situation outside his own desires. Whether it is an attention/interest issue, or whether it is a simple egotistical drive that creates the lack of complete adaptability is unimportant. Some of his friends speculate it to be a physical learning disability, but quite simply he is unable to think abstractly about what the ideas of his anything outside his own experience is unimportant unless he has been through it himself. He can't weave other experiences together, think in an abstract and collective way. Gone are the lessons of others, the experiences linked together in abstraction, of those who have come before him. The lack of applicability leaves him with only one path, to act. His action, whether ill

advised or not, leads him to break those boundaries and precedents set before him - both powerful and constricting at the same time. Hung Van Lam, and by extension, hELLA HUNG, is tenacious, he is a survivor. He proceeds on and pushes through because he has no other choice.

This tenacity has led Hung to a place where he has created a psychology enabling him to act on his deepest desires, leading him to his desire to perform. Despite his inability to quickly understand others, he does have a desire to be understood - tenacious as any other desire he holds.

HUNG: Okay, first thing you must understand about my world is: In my world, nothing's given to you, and everything is against you. And how you're going to deal with it, defines you as a human being.

hELLA HUNG, he just is, and people respect him for it. If he feels a certain way, he'll just express it. And if you know, if he thinks you're bullshitting, he'll call you out on it. He'll test your limits. that's just, you know... well, hELLA HUNG is like THE shit, he's like THEE man. He's the rudest, crudest, I don't give a fuck individual.

Those boundaries and the "I don't give a fuck" attributes are seen as he produces his live "performances" in every day life situations. His performances as hELLA HUNG exist first as a form of agency to combat the forces he found constricting to his desires. Unable to understand the rules that bound peoples' social actions and the tasks we take to maintain them, such as doing our homework according to our teachers' instructions, hELLA HUNG was created to push through in ways that he couldn't in his everyday life as Hung Van Lam. By acting out his ambition and desire in the form of a character, he creates and embodies an idea greater than himself.

"Cause you know, hELLA HUNG is a nobody, that became a somebody. He pretty much, his reputation is he tramples over everything that comes in his way. Whether it's a person, whether it's a girl, whether it's a big obstacle."

The use of characterization is so strong that Hung attributes credit and blame to hELLA HUNG as if hELLA HUNG were his own person, after bold accomplishments and offensive behavior. As a person who finds it difficult to read other peoples' social cues and adapt to situations, Hung finds it difficult to navigate or create expectations for how people will react. New situations present a constricting environment, not knowing what behaviors will be reprimanded in what he presents as a figurative "spanking". Meeting new women presents the need to not only charm and joke, but also seduce, touch, and test; he presents these women with mainly two options: to see him as a quirky, weird yet overall harmless guy that just lacks a few boundaries, or they see him as a creepy threat. Therefore the paradigm presented is one of "all or nothing," "liberation or confinement" for Hung and those who encounter him. However, this dissociation of hELLA HUNG from Hung Van Lam creates a new set of rules that are effective in detaching the fears, reservations, and boundaries from Hung Van Lam. hELLA HUNG is the "all" to Hung Van Lam's nothing. Social cues and boundaries will not reveal themselves, his presence and actions create them. For example, a room where people feel socially insecure about dancing because no one else is doing so, hELLA HUNG gets the party started.

Thus hELLA HUNG's superhero world works as his real world does, in simplicity. Yes vs. no. Good vs. Bad. It is or it isn't. Those shades of grey, abstraction, are difficult to conceptualize, so Hung needs symbols and models to represent these ideas. Whether they are ideas on how to act in different situations, like "Blue Collar Worker Hung" or "Hung Van Lam, Shy Mama's Boy" or "hELLA HUNG", he simplifies the ideas of being "Asian American" into the color yellow. Like the black in the blackface of the 19th Century Black minstrel, hELLA HUNG wears the armor of the yellow man in any literally yellow way possible. Yellow is purchased and worn to the point of compulsion: vests, pants, jackets, shirts, hELLA HUNG cannot walk by a bright yellow garment without feeling the urge to purchase it.

EPIC: THERE'S A STORY FOR EVERYTHING

Hung is not only the hero of his epic tale, he is his own bard. He recalls, "When I was younger, there was this quote that said, 'Cherish these precious moments.' So, because my mind only remembers... I only recall things that affect me dramatically, you know. If it was something really good, I'll cherish these moments literally. I'll drill it into my brain. And because I have a visual mind and I can see things. I can replay the instance over and over and over again. And so you know, I have a reference like a movie in my head.... " ⁴¹

Raised in the 1980's Hung spent a large portion of his childhood sitting in front of the television with his grandmother, while his working class parents were off earning to support their family. Such characters as He-Man, Superman, Bruce Lee and Michael Jackson were burned photonically through his eyes into the soft grey matter in his skull. All the while he was fluffed up by the aesthetics of a cheesy idealism - Hung developed an affinity for the 1980's world of sitcom and Disney movie fantasy - convenient and simplified love, positive energy, and happy endings. These conditions helped construct the basis for Hung's superhero mode, an existence where the only choice he felt like he had, was to become someone more than himself, he must become "hELLA HUNG". In order to face a world constantly trying to bend him to its will, whether it be illness, bullies, family members, or social rules, the only solution that made sense to him, was to be able to transcend himself. Hung Van Lam, as the "shy mama's boy" ⁴² tried as best as he could to achieve all those ideals of how things were supposed to be, but Hung Van Lam was never enough. As a lover of art and expression, Hung came to believe that in order to get what he wanted and where he wanted to be, in life, he must find other ways to captivate peoples' minds, because his physical stature was not able to. The masculinity of He Man, the

⁴¹ Lam, Hung Van. 2011 Interview. STE 001.wav

⁴² I later found out his mannerisms in this way he sees rooted in a character from a Chinese series "The Heaven Sword and the Dragon Sabre".

heroic nobility of Superman, the strength and stoic integrity of Bruce Lee, and the presence and showmanship of Michael Jackson would combine to create Hung's ideal hero.

Bruce Lee was Hung's first realization that the hero could come in human form. He saw a man who was Chinese, just like him, and was very much the epitome of human peak perfection, physically. On the screen, he flew across the screen, kicking and punching, and this translated very well to the playground, as equal parts instinct and inspiration. However it wasn't until his forays into Hip Hop, performance, and identity creation that he was able to explore the significance of Bruce Lee in his life.⁴³

One of the most fittingly epic characters that Hung Van Lam feels an affinity with, is the Chinese tale of the Immortal Monkey King, in his journey to guide a monk in the Journey to the West. In many of our casual conversations Hung has evoked his comparison to the Monkey King because of their common love for mischief, and the trials and tribulations they had to go through, and further, the idea of not only being an immortal but a defiant one, appealed to Hung. I would often refuse to acknowledge the commonalities between hELLA HUNG and the Monkey King, refusing to fuel his ego, however through the framework of the trickster. As a mischievous trickster figure who wreaked havoc in the immortal world of the heavens, he was immortal and a god, yet never fully accepted being a monkey. Hung Van Lam as hELLA HUNG seems to have a sense of affinity for the Monkey King, as a master of mischief who makes those around him "see their truths" as Hung would say. Fancying himself a hero, Hung however, does not realize that as the Monkey King, the achievement and reward is not in any kind of prize or material fame, at least in the way that he seeks. Rather than a place alongside the Daoist immortals, like the Hollywood stardom hELLA HUNG desires, it seems is not in his future in his current trajectory. Like the Monkey King, the glory is in his journey and the reward is in his

⁴³ Lam, Hung Van. Post Interview notes 2012.

Judging from his large collection of Bruce Lee DVDs, and his love of quoting Bruce Lee his many philosophical sayings, Hung's love for the Jeet Kune Do master flows from his very essence. He also has a Bruce Lee costume he wore twice in a B-Boy exhibition performance as a tribute to his hero.

redemption and enlightenment after this process. hELLA HUNG like the Monkey King engages in the epic tale as a facilitator of change. The day hELLA HUNG changes is the day the Monkey King's epic journey ends. On that day he will cease to be a trickster, his accomplishment will be the great journey and his reward will be the peace he attains. He will cease to test boundaries because either he has accepted our boundaries or the more likely scenario, we have accepted his.

THE FIVE YEAR PLAN

In October 2009, after hELLA HUNG "ran away" from home following a dispute with his family. For a week many of his friends and family remained in the dark as to his whereabouts, with a close friend only letting his family know he was ok. After emerging from the hiding place of his friend's basement, he decided it was time for him to leave San Francisco to embark upon what he labeled a "spiritual journey" to Los Angeles.

Hung was unhappy with his life in San Francisco, he felt the restrictions of working everyday, he felt the restrictions of other peoples' expectations of him. On the other hand, once he landed in Los Angeles things were different, "I'm happier. I wake up, I feel productive. I feel wanted. You know, everybody adores me at work. And every day I get up, I get to work out, AND I get to go to work. You know, Trader Joe's down here gives me more hours than the one in San Francisco. You know, and San Francisco, I gotta deal with a lot of bickering in the family and you know, every day I come home, I just feel like there's nothing for me to... to use my talents with." ⁴⁴He felt his personal ambitions for fame and recognition outgrowing the local San Francisco breakdancing scene and the collection of freedom and talent of Los Angeles could help him towards his goals.

⁴⁴ Lam, Hung Van. 2011. Interview. STE 004.wav.

Inoculated with the desire for the fairytale happy endings of 1980's movies, Hung believed since an early age that anything can happen if you want it badly enough. Consequently he carries in his heart the desire for more - a desire for greatness. The desire to be something "more" aligns with his superhero ideologies, however it also conflicts with his ability to handle details and communicate finer concepts. It is not a matter of laziness nor ability, rather than applicability. The lack of applicability outside his own desires, is the same root issue as his inability to pass his English course after eight (8) times. Hung applies his own organizational system to his life and tasks that make sense to him. But his desire is for simplification reigns supreme in this organizational scheme he employs on his life and characters. It is a difficulty or resistance to anything other than his urges.

The plan right now is for me to transition between being a normal guy, and being a superstar. And how does that path happen? Does it happen overnight? Is someone going to randomly come into trader Joe's one day and say, you know what? You've been a great service to me. I like you, I see you singing and dancing all the time. I want to make a movie about you. Then boom, it happens! And I make my first million off it. Or my first hundred thousand dollars. It's that hopeful feeling that, you know...⁴⁵

His desire for superstardom and subsequent plan to achieve it spans a plan 5 years. However, this plan, rather than a set of steps to achieve a goal, consisting of subsets of steps and detailed steps, they are more allotted sections of time reserved for assumed or desired progressions toward his goal. The details, Hung leaves for others to fill out. A superpower defined broadly, is an ability that allows our hero to exceed beyond the realm of expectations as a human being. Superpowers allow us to create, change, or even destroy in terms of size and scale greater than other human beings. Hung's superpower is more abstract than a comic book superhero's strength, speed, telepathy or kinetic energy blasts. It is a social superpower. His lack of boundaries allows him to exceed beyond anyone's expectations, even his own. However the superpowers lack control, definition, and intention. He wants to do, and he wants to achieve,

⁴⁵ Lam, Hung Van. 2011. Interview. STE 004.wav

and just throws himself out to the world. He meets celebrities, freelances his way into parties, and finds people who share a similar ambition to his. The lack of details however, demonstrates that these superpowers are not for hELLA HUNG himself to control.

So you know, that old saying. Who you are, who you surround themselves with. So if I'm down here with elite people who are professionals, it forces me to force my game up. I think that's a benefit that's worth more than money, right? I'm surrounding myself with these people. And I'm kind of learning it at my own will. I'm still doing it my way. But I think the resources are more down here than the resources are in San Francisco. And there's definitely more events down here that I can attend.⁴⁶

The world has placed physical limitations on Hung Van Lam in terms of his physical stature, and he has not only exceeded them, but also shattered them. Whether through his bodybuilding, martial arts, his breaking (breakdancing), or his backflips, he has fallen on his face many times yet created many more "oohs" and "aahs". The limitations also exist on Hung Van Lam's ability to intellectually process as evidenced in his school difficulties. However hELLA HUNG was created through his unlimited imagination. It is the power of imagination, his ability to imagine himself beyond the borders and limitations he exists within according to the rest of society. Part determination and part blind luck appears to empower his naivety into something more special, and kept him alive. It is his imagination that pushes him into bigger and better situations, however it is his lack of knowing that often keeps him alive as well as his different appearance.

His friends often view his ideas and desires as pure fantasy because he doesn't know how he is to accomplish these tasks he sets out to do. Further, it is not as if he is asking for *real* superpowers, he is simply imagining beyond how others see him. What makes his imaginings powerful in fact is his lack of details and "knowing". His lack of knowing exactly how he will accomplish his tasks, his lack of knowing (or desire to not know) his deficits is productive towards his 5-year plan. "Plan," in this sense as a misnomer and 5 year allotment, he is

⁴⁶ Lam, Hung Van. 2011. Interview. STE 004.wav

freestyling with a directive to "put himself out there" by any means possible. All these things he knows are in the realm of human possibility, but by not knowing (or caring about) the odds of accomplishing said tasks of superstardom, or not knowing how many tasks it might take, it still keeps what could be said to be his imagination existing still in the realm of possibility. hELLA HUNG the Asian American trickster is here to instill the realm of possibility.



Christopher Woon (left) and Hung Van Lam (right) in Inglewood, CA, 2011.

REFLECTION

The difficulties of performing objective research about a subject as close as I am to Hung Van Lam/hELLA HUNG cannot be overstated, actually it is near impossible. It is arguable whether objectivity in qualitative research is even possible, the question might be whether a methodology that approaches the limits of objective research can be achieved for someone as involved as I am in the life of hELLA HUNG in the roles previously stated: mentor, student, crewmate, and roommate. What I can offer in the place of objectivity however, is distance. Distance through a role I had not mentioned in the introduction, that of a part time parent. I say parent because that is the best analogy to the types of trials I have been through with Hung.

Trials for example, as a caretaker who needs to enforce personal space limits on a person who hoards his belongings. Least I forget the fact that I had to teach a "man" who is nearly a year older than me, how to do laundry and wash dishes. That I am the first person to really trust him cooking by himself in the kitchen, and that I constantly have to remind him to take showers. Or that it took for me to ask him to evict him informally from the apartment once, in order to let him know that it's important he gets a job and pays rent. There is also the time I had to admonish him for being naive (and reckless) enough to take an alcoholic former housemate to a bar, and lastly to deal with the time he brought a mentally ill homeless woman to the house: all with the best of intentions, of course.

I say parent with simultaneous hesitation and conviction because I am not attached unconditionally to Hung. However I have his well being in mind and have stood by him far longer and more meaningful ways than many of his oldest friends. In fact, in this type of study, I feel the concern for protecting a party in this study should fall with the researcher, myself. The times were numerous, when I listened to my interviews and source materials, feeling frustrated, wanting to reply to hELLA HUNG's answers and getting frustrated over the ideas and behaviors he expressed. Yet I currently stand by Hung not in the parental role I mentioned earlier, but more as a brother. I joke about the need to take care of a teenage child at times, however the relationship is not one sided. Hung Van Lam, aka hELLA HUNG has in fact brought endless fun to my life and challenged my own personal limits in ways that have forced me to grow in ways I might not have by creating new boundaries I needed for myself to focus in the areas I needed.

To compare, it was as if I was so engrossed in the story of my subject, that as a filmmaker I had to be in my own film, which is not without precedence.⁴⁷ The focus I learned to maintain as a filmmaker was essential in being able to walk away and create for myself the space to act, think, and plot my next move in this document, a major juggling act. In the end, the

⁴⁷ James, Steve, Adam D. Singer, Gordon Quinn, Brenda Hickam, Stephen Dale Fielding, Verna Hagler, Bernice Hagler, et al. 2003. Stevie. [United States]: Studio Home Entertainment.

workflow was as follows: the source material of interviews is my principal footage, the experience of living with Hung is the B-roll, the visual story, the scholarly references and archetypes I use are my homages to past cinematic classics, evoking more powerful social connections. As a film editor, I have juxtaposed images and ideas together, each section being a montage building towards the entirety of this documentary character study and analysis of this "performer on the margins". If properly edited, it is in our nature as hELLA HUNG's theater and his audience, to then extract and give power to each boundary he breaks and be able to imagine the meaning produce from it.

He simultaneously pushed me to be more than myself, and holding me back with his irresponsibility and lifestyle, it is just like as Jay Z dubbed his album *Blue Print 2: The Gift and the Curse*, hELLA HUNG exists in a space that is neither here nor there. To return to hELLA HUNG the trickster exists in the context of those around him. As Hyde writes of the great Greek trickster "Hermes cannot be rightly imagined without the more serious Apollo whose cattle he steals, or the grieving Demeter whose daughter he retrieves from the underworld" ... "he needs at least a relationship to other powers, to people and institutions and traditions that can manage the odd double attitude of both insisting that their boundaries be respected and recognizing that in the long run their liveliness depends on having those boundaries regularly disturbed."⁴⁸ His gift is to stimulate the imagination that allows the rest of to create in ways he cannot. The world needs the trickster just like my life needed hELLA HUNG.

⁴⁸ Hyde, Lewis. 2010. *Trickster makes this world: mischief, myth, and art*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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