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Badass, Motherfucker, and Meat-Eater: Kit Yan's Trans of Color Slammin' Critique and the Archives of Possibilities

Bo Luengsurawat

Abstract: *This article examines Badass, a spoken word performance by Chinese American female-to-male transgender slam poet Kit Yan. Performed live on stage across the country and disseminated online via YouTube, Yan's intense, fast-paced articulation of contradictory masculinities in Badass provides a powerful insight into the construction of gender, identity, and community through a trans of color perspective.*

...yo, i may not be a badass in this life
but last night, i fucking fucked the shit out of your mother

– Kit Yan, *Badass*

The clear understanding, then, that Asian American male subjectivity is the hybrid result of internalized ideals and lived material contradictions that were once external allows us a compelling qualification to historical debates about authenticity—realness and fakeness—in Asian American studies.

– David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*¹

Badass

At the height of the heat wave in early August 2009, I met Kit Yan and the Good Asian Drivers crew at the Café Club Fais Do Do in Los Angeles (Figure 1). As featured performers of the night, spoken word artist Yan, songwriter Melissa Li, and musician Ashley Bayer transformed the cozy space of the Café into a lively activist scene through their thought-provoking, radical queer-feminist lyrics and songs. Both Yan and Li, together in this performance group they co-founded in 2007, performed solo and collaborative pieces with the topics ranging from their cross-country road trip, to the politics of inclusion in the queer community, to a transfeminist take on women's issues. In their last set of performances that night, Yan slammed an intense solo piece that seemed to shatter his "nice-guy," feminist-ally façade. Among all of Yan's work, this piece stood out the most in terms of strong language, imagery, and sexually explicit content. Nevertheless, the feelings of anxiety, frustration, and anger that Yan expressed through his magnificent spoken word performance captivated me. This is precisely where I want to begin tracing the connections between rebellious adolescent masculinity, Asian American male body, and transgender identity.

Later on, I learned that it was the night of heartbreak when Yan whipped up this mother-fucking poem entitled *Badass*. Written with the feeling of angst, *Badass* marks the time when Yan came out as transgender, began expressing his masculinity through clothing and hairstyle, and experienced rejection from his former girlfriend as a consequence of his gender identity.² Soon after the poem was completed in 2005, Yan started performing it on stage across the country in various settings, from mainstream venues (i.e., college campuses) to subcultural spaces (i.e., queer events and bars). Along with Yan's masculinizing appearance and spirit, *Badass* is another route through which Yan expresses his transgender maleness.

Yan's expression of masculinity in *Badass* is, however, neither a simple reclamation of dominant maleness nor a straight-up resistance against it. Rather, the multiple, contradictory types of masculinity that Yan articulates throughout the piece point to the fact that masculinity is an idealized construction that is impossible to uphold. As a collage of multiple masculinities—such as rebellious adolescent, consumerist middle-class, racialized, mainstream gay, and punk-rock—*Badass* represents Yan's embodiment of male anxiety around the cultivation of normative masculinity due to the presence of contradictory masculine standards. Yan's performance of multiplicity thus brings to attention the impracticality for male-identified people, in general, and Asian American men, in particular, to simply conform to the norms of masculinity in order to be recognized as "male enough," since there is no such a thing as a singular, authentic masculine ideal in which one can easily draw upon. Moreover, most importantly, *Badass* is an incisive critique of Asian American nationalist and Asian settler colonialist attempts to recuperate Asian American male subjectivity through gender conformity and sexual disciplining. By attempting to embody all kinds of masculinities that exist in the American cultural landscape, Yan pokes fun at the meaning of assimilation. What does "assimilation" mean in the age of diversity? To what extent can one "claim" national and/or global citizenship?

Asian American Nationalism, Asian Settler Colonialism, and the Racialization of Masculinity

Born and raised in Hawai'i, Chinese American slam poet Kit Yan calls into question the promise of gender and sexual conformity as a prerequisite for cultural citizenship in Asian American nationalist and Asian settler colonialist imaginaries through his multilayered spoken word performance. As I illustrate in this article, *Badass* deals explicitly with the processes of racialization and gendering, particularly as they converge in the bodies of Asian American men. In order to better comprehend Yan's performance, it is necessary to understand his work in light of the history of Asian immigration to the United States, Asian settler colonialism in Hawai'i, and the racialization of Asian American men. In providing a conceptual ground specific to Yan's work, I will mainly focus on the ethnic Chinese immigrant population and examine the relationship between the construction of the Asian American subject on the continent and the production of Asian "local" subjectivity in the colonial context of Hawai'i.

Asian American male subjectivity has historically been constructed as feminine and queer. On the mainland United States, discriminatory immigration laws—particularly the Page Act of 1875, which barred the immigration of Chinese and other Asian women on the ground of prostitution; anti-miscegenation laws, which prohibited interracial marriage; and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which effectively curbed Chinese immigration on the basis of class and profession—simultaneously functioned to disallow working-class Chinese immigrant men, who constituted the majority of Chinese/Asian immigrants at the time, from forming normative nuclear households.³ Due to the absence of Chinese women, the prohibition of interracial marriage, racial segregation, and economic discrimination, Chinese immigrant men were obliged to live together under one roof, forming nonheteronormative households known as "bachelor society."⁴ Hence, in the eye of the American public, Chinese immigrant men were assumed to be sexually deviant due to their "queer" living arrangements.

Racial and economic discrimination also limited the opportunities for Chinese immigrant men on the mainland, forcing them into traditionally feminine occupations, such as laundromat service and domestic work, after decades of working on the transcontinental railroad.⁵ Up until the mid-20th century when the exclusion laws were still in effect, the feminization and queering of Chinese immigrant men further justified their exclusion from the American cultural sphere on the ground that their existence threatened American family norms. Although Asian immigrant labor had been vital to the construction of the nation, Asian immigrants had consistently been denied citizenship rights and constructed as "surplus" population. The denial of family wage to Chinese immigrant men not only made it difficult for them to build and sustain their families, but also forced Chinese women to work outside of home ("working women": non-male-dominant household) and oftentimes bring their work back to domestic spaces (the multi-usage of space: the immigrant home as a site of labor exploitation).⁶ Overall, these immigration and economic measures distanced mainland Asian immigrants from the idea of "good life"—in other words, constructing them as antithesis to the monogamous, heteronormative family ideal upon which the American national identity is based.

The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1944 and the passage of the Immigration

and Nationality Act in 1965, also known as the “immigration reform,” marked the transition in the perception of Asian immigrants as “undesirable aliens” to “respectable citizens.”⁷ In the Cold War era, the United States, deeply invested in its democratic political ideals and eagerly constituted itself as an anti-communist nation, lifted various race-based immigration measures and exclusion laws in order to demonstrate its commitment to social equality and present itself as the land of freedom, in contrast to the Soviet Union and its communist allies.⁸ One of the most profound shifts in U.S. immigration law during this period is the creation of the “family reunification” program, which permits immigration through blood ties and the formation of normative nuclear families. This immigration measure consequently helped the U.S. nation-state transform the image of immigrant communities of color, in general, and Asian immigrant communities, in particular, from “undesirable aliens,” who threaten the norms of gender, sexuality, and American national identity, into “respectable citizens,” who conform to the heteronormative family ideal and embody American cultural essence.⁹ Along with the creation of the family reunification program, the establishment of work visa requirements (i.e., H-1B visas), which allows for immigration on the basis of class and profession, profoundly affected the demographics of Asian immigrant communities and contributed to the post-1965 representation of Asian Americans as “model minorities.”

This transformation in U.S. immigration law did not merely coincide with globalization and the emergence of neoliberalism in the early 1970s. In fact, the changes in immigration law corresponded to the shifts in global economy and the flows of transnational labor. No longer did the poor and working-class population constitute the majority of Asian immigrants after the immigration reform in 1965. The emergence of the affluent, global professional class, on the other hand, was facilitated by the work visa requirements that cleverly curtail the immigrant population according to the demands of capital. Under neoliberal governmentality, the U.S. nation-state constantly deploys the image of hard-working, well-to-do Asian immigrants to justify the dismantling of the welfare state and the intense regulation of other immigrant populations, particularly Latino and black. The progressive narrative of immigrant success undeniably haunts Asian Americans and foregrounds their acceptance into American society. The formation of heteronormative nuclear households, which is predicated upon gender and sexual conformity, importantly serves in the Asian American nationalist imagination as a marker of one’s success in becoming American.

In the colonial context of Hawai’i, however, Asian immigrant family formation can be traced back beyond the 1965 immigration reform. Due to the rise of the sugar plantation industry in the mid-19th century, haole investors encouraged migration of Asian families to Hawai’i for the purposes of labor extraction.¹⁰ Unlike seasonal agricultural workers on the U.S. mainland who constituted an itinerant labor force, plantation workers in Hawai’i were conceived as a permanent labor force, since sugar plantation was a year-round activity.¹¹ Women and children, even though constituted a smaller portion of plantation labor, were crucial to the maintenance of the plantation system. Most haole planters preferred hiring families to single bachelors because, in that sense, they could better stabilize the workforce.¹² From the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, family cottages dominated the plantation landscape of Hawai’i. The long-term establishment of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Korean immigrant families on the islands through the plantation regime ultimately led to Asian settler colonialism.

According to Haunani-Kay Trask, Hawaiian nationalist scholar and activist, the history of colonization in Hawai'i is a "twice-told tale, first of discovery and settlement by European and American businessmen and missionaries, then of the plantation Japanese, Chinese and eventually Filipino rise to dominance in the islands."¹³ Trask highlights the often-overlooked fact that Asian immigrants also participate in the United States' colonization of Hawai'i. By reinforcing the immigrant hegemony, Asian settlers unwittingly obscure Native Hawaiians' claims to land and human rights. The belief that economic success, upward mobility, and the embodiment of middle-class virtues lead to the acceptance of Asian immigrants into American society relies precisely on the fundamental misrecognition of Hawai'i as part of the United States. In "Arguing that Asians, too, have a nation in Hawai'i," Trask continues, "the 'local' identity tag blurs the history of Hawai'i's only indigenous people while staking a settler claim. Any complicity in the subjugation of Hawaiians is denied by the assertion that Asians, too, constitute a 'nation.'"¹⁴ As Trask mentions, Asian settlers' claim of the "local" identity in Hawai'i violently replaces the concerns of Native dispossession with that of immigrant success, thus providing a further justification for the U.S. nation-state's inhumane treatment of indigenous people.

The United States' annexation of Hawai'i in 1898 signifies the official moment of Native dispossession.¹⁵ Up until the present moment, Native Hawaiians have severely suffered from the U.S. governmental regulation of their land and natural resources, the intensification of class stratification resulting from economic exploitation, the creation of a racialized system of incarceration, and the epistemological erasure of indigenous cultural identities and practices, many of which are the effects of Asian settlers' desire for upward mobility and immigrant success. The encounter between Native Hawaiians and Asian immigrants brings to attention the violence of settler colonialism and nationalism. The formation of heteronormative households, whether through the plantation regime (U.S. capitalization of indigenous resources) or the liberal immigration reform, serves as an important marker of success on part of Asian immigrants in developing a sense of belonging to the U.S. nation-state and hegemonic American culture. On the one hand, family formation through the plantation regime was a means to incorporate Asian immigrants into the operation of U.S. imperialist economy. On the other hand, family reunification in the post-1965 era functions to domesticate Asian immigrants as docile subjects of the nation. Here, gender and sexual conformity is where Asian settler colonialist and Asian American nationalist positionalities intersect. The immigrant hegemony unites Asian settlers in Hawai'i and Asian Americans on the mainland via the desire for recognition as American national subjects.¹⁶ This construction of Asian settler colonialist/ Asian American nationalist desire for cultural citizenship through gender and sexual conformity is precisely what Yan's work, *Badass*, critiques.

Yan's creative inhabitation of the prevailing standards of masculinity powerfully exaggerates the Asian American nationalist desire for recognition as legitimate subjects via gender and sexual conformity. Yan's work suggests that even though Asian Americans and immigrants nowadays are, in many respects, entitled to the rights that were once denied to their ancestors on this continent, they are nonetheless intensely regulated by the norms of gender and sexuality. As a collage of multiple, contradictory manifestations of masculinity, *Badass* not only illustrates a hysterical neoliberal landscape that contributes to Asian American men's feelings of alienation and loss, but also calls into question the existence of

an idealized construction of masculinity central to Asian American nationalist imaginations of belonging.

The Asian American literary canon is an appropriate site to examine the construction of Asian American nationalism and the version of masculinity it advocates. In the first chapter of *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*, David Eng briefly discusses the antagonistic tension between Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin over the representation of Asian American male identity and Asian American writers' responsibilities to their ethnic communities.¹⁷ Since her publication of *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* in 1976, Kingston has been the target of accusation by Chin due to her depiction of Chinese men as "publicly passive and effeminate, yet privately abusive and patriarchal."¹⁸ Chin and his fellow editors of *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*—Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong—all condemned Kingston for reinforcing the Orientalist stereotypes of Asian men: "The China and Chinese America portrayed in these works are the products of white racist imagination, not fact, not Chinese culture, and not Chinese American literature."¹⁹ These Chinese American and Japanese American male writers express an urgent need to recuperate their maleness that has been disavowed within the context of the U.S. mainstream culture. For them, gender authenticity is understood as a remedy for racism. Chin, in particular, has often been known to embody and promote the version of masculinity that is misogynistic and homophobic.²⁰ In *Badass*, this idealized construction of masculinity is flipped upside down, torn apart, and revealed to be a product of Asian American nationalist anxiety around identity and belonging.

In the climate of liberal multiculturalism and neoliberal globalization, where the multiplicity of identities and flexible accumulation are highly privileged, Asian Americans and immigrants are most likely to experience a significant transformation in the ideas of community, identity, and belonging. No longer can home be defined in terms of a fixed geographical location, nor community in terms of traditions and nostalgia. *Badass* highlights the very impossibility of forming a community through reclaiming gender authenticity, because the idealized construction of masculinity is merely a myth of origin.

Slam, Spoken Word, and the Performances of Identity

The notion of authenticity and the fantasy of idealized masculinity are fundamentally what the medium of Yan's performance seeks to challenge. Coming from the competitive slam background, a profession that is popularly associated with male braggadocios and performance of aggression, Yan delivers *Badass* with an aggressive, competitive impulse, typical of the genre. Formerly a Lizard Lounge National Slam Team member and an Individual World Poetry Slam winner, Yan is now a spoken word artist and poet whose work pays much homage to the genealogy of slam.²¹ As discussed below, Yan's performance of identity, particularly when it is construed as an articulation of difference in the context of slam, functions to disrupt and transform the dominant constructions of race, gender, and masculinity.

According to Susan Somers-Willett in *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, "Slams are places where all types of

marginalized identities are celebrated and expressed."²² Originally emerged within white working-class culture as an attempt to make poetry accessible to those outside of the academy, slam competitions encourage the articulations of identities that are marginalized within high literary traditions and dominant culture.²³ Building on Somers-Willett's understanding of slams as spaces that foster the articulations of difference, I contend that slam competitions are the sites where the meanings of masculinity are both produced and contested. Slam poets—youth and adult, white and of color, straight and queer, conventionally gendered and gender-variant alike—actively participate in the production of masculinities, thereby creating a web of heterogeneous gender expressions and identities. The diversity of masculinities within the competitive context of slam demonstrates that it is impossible to identify any articulation of masculinity as predominant. Yan's *Badass*, in this sense, contributes to the archive of multiple, contradictory masculinities that the slam genre provides a ground for.

The heterogeneity of gender expressions is also evident when comparing Yan's own performances of *Badass* in different contexts. Although spoken word performances, like slam competitions, allow for the willful production and articulation of identity, the essence of each performance depends largely on the setting and audience. The fact that every spoken word performance of the same poem is different implies that there is no original version, or a more "accurate" articulation, of *Badass*; every expression of masculinity is neither authentic nor derivative. Yan's performance of *Badass* at Swarthmore College in June 2008 is observably distinct from his performance at PhaseFest, an annual queer music and arts festival in Washington, D.C., in September of the same year. At Swarthmore, Yan dresses formally (a monotone sweater over a white buttoned up shirt and a pair of dark slacks), delivers the lines clearly in an almost non-sarcastic tone, and performs moderately descriptive gestures.²⁴ In contrast, at PhaseFest, Yan wears a casual outfit (a slightly unbuttoned black shirt, a pair of black jeans, and sneakers), dramatically stresses certain curse words and lines, performs highly graphic gestures, and playfully eyes the audience.²⁵ Yan's distinct, and almost contradictory, performances of *Badass* in these two contexts—a heteronormative educational setting and a queer subcultural space—suggest that environmental constraints have a significant impact on one's embodiment and articulation of identity. Gender expressions and identities are by all means relative; each person is capable of expressing their gender identity differently depending on the context. Therefore, any construction of masculinity, whether dominant or minoritarian, is an impossible ideal to achieve, because virtually nobody can articulate their gender identity in the exact same manner throughout all social contexts.

The inevitable inconsistency of the expressions of masculinity in *Badass* owes partly to the multiple interpretive possibilities of the piece. According to Yan, the audience's reading of his performance varies.²⁶ On the one hand, those who approach *Badass* with a strict gender binary framework have often read Yan's performance of "excessive" masculinity as an affirmation of heteropatriarchy and a further association of masculinity with violence. On the other hand, those who approach Yan's work with alternative visions of gender politics generally perceive violence and female objectification that Yan's piece addresses not as essential characteristics of masculinity and maleness, but as intrinsically part of the production of the gender binary that *Badass*, in turn, criticizes. That Yan's performance allows for multiple interpretations and is subject to different reading practices suggests that masculinity

is by no means a singular, coherent construction, but a malleable, inconsistent, and contradictory cultural sign. Yet, it is crucial to keep in mind that the enforcement of particular masculine norms has very concrete and violent effects.

Inhabiting Multiplicity

The concept of masculinity as a non-singular, inconsistent, and context-dependent articulation of identity underlies the entire narrative of *Badass*. Turning from the medium of performance to the content of the piece, I will provide a brief overview of *Badass'* narrative. *Badass* is a four-minute performance piece. In the first three minutes (three-quarters into the piece), Yan expresses his desire to embody masculinity, yet constantly articulates his inability to do so through the refrain "in my next life." In the alternate reality that he conceptualizes, Yan sees himself as a "bad boy" who is not only physically attractive and popular with girls, but also academically exceptional and unafraid of authorities. Yan goes on to express his wish to completely immerse himself in material culture, such as eating meat, driving a car, making a fashion statement, and becoming popular. A significant portion of *Badass* focuses on Yan's sexual desire. He paints himself as a sex god who aggressively fucks women and gives them "the best sex of [their lives]."

Towards the end of the poem, however, the tone drastically shifts when Yan realizes that he cannot, and does not necessarily have to, become something that he is not. In this portion of the piece, Yan at first seems to undermine the norms of masculinity that he previously tried to achieve and instead formulates his own version of maleness—his new gender subjectivity. He now perceives love, not sex, as an expression of masculinity; expresses empathy towards animals and embraces the vegan lifestyle; and acknowledges his insecurities around sexual inadequacy, rather than denying them. Nevertheless, Yan immediately subverts this humble, loving, vulnerable persona that he just took on and ends the poem with the last line that references the braggadocio in the first part of his performance. A series of reversals that Yan performs at the end of the piece effectively undermines the very idea of a stable, valorizable gender formation.

Subversion of Identities: The Uncertainty of Masculinity and the Inconsistency of Desire

Through the repetition of the phrase "in my next life," Yan begins his performance by framing his desire to become a "badass" as an impossibility. In so doing, Yan points to the myriad ways in which he is positioned as an outsider to adolescent male socialization, particularly as being female-assigned at birth and Asian American. In the post-1965 United States, Asian racialization has been organized around the Model Minority myth—the image of rule-abiding, hard-working individuals who successfully overcome racial, cultural, and economic barriers. Under this condition of racialization, Asian American youth are bound to negotiate with the dominant representation of themselves as studious, obedient, and dutiful immigrant subjects. In this sense, if "badness," "delinquency," and "disobedience" are coded as markers of the normative development of male gender identity within the American cultural sphere, then Asian American adolescent male subjectivity is discursively situated beyond the normative trajectory of masculine development.

While the discursive representation of Asian American adolescent male subjects as obe-

dient and hard-working renders them as deviant in the context of youth culture, academic success is still nonetheless understood as desirable and is, in fact, expected from Asian immigrant youth. A series of contradictory statements that Yan articulates here—to “[not] ever gonna go to class but...gonna pass with honors” and to “walk with [one’s] chest out at graduation and then streak”—demonstrates that Asian American adolescent male identity is rather an internally contradictory and unstable subject position. Yan’s brief embodiment of the “golden boy” persona—a young man who is both “socially competent” (meaning “cool” in the eye of other adolescents) and academically exceptional—is the performance of ambivalence that highlights the inconsistencies and conflicts underlying the production of racialized gendered subjectivity, in general, and Asian American male identity, in particular.

Besides youth culture and education, Asian American men also struggle to develop a sense of belonging to hegemonic American culture, and a transnational capitalist culture, through consumption and consumerism. The consumption of meat and the possession of a car, particularly a “black hummer SUV,” connote excessive masculinity. On the one hand, meat-eating metaphorically implies the meat market, or sexual consumption and participation in a heterosexist economy. On the other hand, the “black Hummer SUV”—a dark, slick, gigantic, tough-looking four-wheel drive vehicle—is a grand emblem of male potency; more precisely, it signifies a gigantic “oil-dependent” cock. As a military-converted vehicle, the Hummer primarily stands in for excessive, white, nationalist, militaristic masculinity and the occupying U.S. army in non-Western territories. The exaggerated consumption of meat and the possession of a “pimped-out” Hummer, hence, produce the consumerist subject as overtly nationalist, anxiously heteronormative, and excessively masculine.

When Yan says, “hell i wanna eat meat while driving my pimped out rimmed out black hummer suv,” he holds his left fist close to his mouth in the gesture of eating and stretches his right arm outward as if he is driving. While articulating this line, Yan moves his right fist slightly up and down in the gesture of masturbation, triggering audience laughter. In rendering himself a meat-eating driver of a black Hummer SUV, Yan temporarily embodies heteronormative white American masculinity. However, Yan’s performance of white masculinity is by no means a faithful mimicry, but an exaggeration of what appears to be natural. By simultaneously making the gestures of SUV-driving, meat-eating, and masturbation, in addition to his verbal articulation of male aggressiveness, Yan produces white masculinity as excess and surplus, transforming it into an object of ridicule.

Conversely, the “black Hummer SUV” can also be alternatively interpreted as a signifier of black masculinity. As a military-converted truck, the black Hummer SUV carries the connotation of the incorporation of black male subjects into the U.S. national culture, such as, quite literally, the recruitment of black men into the U.S. military. In a way, this black military-converted truck is not exclusively a symbol of racist white masculinity, but also a signifier of deviant masculinities—precisely the racialized, the hypermasculine, and the queer. The “über-macho” quality of the black Hummer SUV possibly invokes associations with black hip-hop artists, athletes, and down-low-ers. Yan’s embodiment of black masculinity on stage at this moment not only interrogates the process of racial signification, but also exaggerates the undesirability of brown “male” bodies by layering one set of racial stereotypes (verbal: black) over another (visual: Asian). Most importantly, the fact that Yan’s performance generates multiple possibilities of interpretation, even in one particular instance, suggests

that *Badass* is in and of itself a rich site for the production, contestation, and subversion of masculinity.

In certain moments, Yan explicitly combines multiple, conflicting images of masculinity together. For example, over the next few lines of the poem, he simultaneously renders himself as a “big-and-buff, 6-foot-2, 210-pound” man, a “fucking-pierced-up-tattooed” man, a man wearing “big bling diamond earrings and tight ass muscle tees,” and a man who is “on tv with a different celebrity each week.” Here, it is difficult for the audience to imagine all these divergent expressions of gender being embodied by the same person.²⁷ This collage of “mis-matched” masculinities points to the fact that it is impossible to embody the so-called “normative” masculinity at all, since all manifestations of maleness presented here are culturally valid and functioning as normalizing regimes. In the logic of Yan’s performance, if becoming assimilated means conforming to dominant masculine norms, then a successful assimilation implies internalizing a hodgepodge of contradictory masculinities. Even though the types of masculinity that a man wearing “big bling diamond earrings and tight ass muscle tees” and a man who is “fucking pierced up tattooed voodoo god knows what” embody are coded as marginal—the former possibly being a class-privileged gay man and the latter being a subcultural producer—they are nonetheless granted some degree of cultural currency, such that they do function as markers of subjectivity.

Sex undeniably functions as a marker of subjectivity in *Badass*, as a significant portion of the piece, the next minute and a half that follows, focuses on the expressions of hypersexuality. At the first glance, Yan’s expression of “bad boy” masculinity in this part of the performance might appear to debunk the myth of desexualized Asian American men through reinforcing the heteronormative social order. When taking a closer look, however, we can see that Yan expresses an incestuous desire and articulates the specificity of his transmale body by saying, “in my next life i wanna be a motherfucker/ literally/ i wanna bang a soccer mom who secretly has pussy sucking lips/ i wanna pull her hips into me as my strap-on hits her hard and deep.” Yan’s expression of incestuous desire here serves to undermine the institution of family that not only reproduces racial, class, and gender hierarchies, but also disciplines Asian immigrants in the post-1965 era into proper subjects of the U.S. nation-state and global transnational capital. Thus, the desire to “bang a soccer mom who secretly has pussy sucking lips” is an act of hierarchical reversal, whereby constructing white domesticity as fundamentally queer.

Furthermore, by setting up this intense sex scene as essentially queer and “motherfucking,” Yan encourages the audience to perceive the seemingly heteronormative actions that follow under the rhetoric of subversion. In this sense, we can come to understand that Yan values the moments of female agency (“i want female ejaculation”), denounces conventional heterosexual courting routines (“no more straight up flirting”), and seeks alternative modes of communication (“go to bars instead of talking”). Taken metaphorically, these endeavors—the subversion of sexism through acknowledging female sexual autonomy, the critical re-evaluation of heteronormative concepts of intimacy, and the creation of alternative systems of interpellation that allow for nuanced processes of subject formation to take place—are particularly important to the survival of trans and queer people of color in general.

In the last portion of *Badass*, Yan performs not just one, but a series of reversals. In the first set of reversals, Yan, realizing the impossibility of conforming to the prevailing norms

of masculinity and becoming something that he is not, opts instead to transform the qualities that he previously thought of as antithesis to the dominant articulations of maleness into part of his “new” male identity. He now chooses emotional intimacy over sexual gratification (“i’d rather have a big soul hug than a good fuck”), expresses kindness towards other living beings and leads a vegan lifestyle (“no thanks on the meat cuz dead baby chicks well they make me wanna cry”), and practices conscious consumerism and self-care (“if i had money, i’d rather buy organic, i have no interest in anything remotely satanic”). But then, Yan goes on to subvert and complicate the “sensitive” version of masculinity that he just articulated. In the second set of reversals, Yan insists that he is not always humble, loving, and considerate, “because everybody’s got that secret side hiding beneath the definition of other.” Exposing the mechanism of identification, Yan demonstrates that the self is constituted against *other* things, and these “other things” that serve as a backdrop against which the self constitutes itself are implicitly part of one’s identity. Noting that he might still “think about eating meat” and “cut off an old person in the street,” Yan undermines the possibility of formulating a coherent model of masculinity. Like other forms of masculinity that Yan articulates throughout the poem, this “sensitive” masculinity also functions as a regulatory ideal.

The power of any regulatory ideal lies in its unattainability. According to Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* the idea of “gender performativity” implies that gender is constituted through the repeated approximation of norms, the desire to identify with the bodily ideal that grants one’s entry into the realm of cultural intelligibility, to become a subject.²⁸ Performativity is the process of citing the conventions of authority, the compulsive reiteration of norms to the extent that it produces an appearance of substance—that gender is something that naturally exists. When Yan says, “but you know when nobody’s looking, i totally scratch my ass,” this moment of his performance reveals that gender expression is not simply an externalization of the “inner self,” or some kind of coherent substance, but is also, to a certain extent, shaped through disciplinary processes, whether by the self or society. In the absence of the disciplining gaze (“when nobody’s looking”), Yan relaxes (“i totally scratch my ass”). At this juncture in his performance of reversals, Yan points to the degree of effort it takes to uphold the version of masculinity that he desires to embody and the inevitable rupture in the compulsive repetition of norms. Revealing the impossibility of coherence of any type of masculinity, Yan holds out the “sensitive” masculinity as a possibility under the premise of inconsistency. He immediately undermines and reverses himself, too, so that this alternative form of masculinity does not then itself become a kind of normative and disciplining formation.

After Yan insightfully critiques the discourse of identity and conceptualizes an alternative method to embody masculinity, however, he ends the poem with the last two lines that brings back the braggadocio of the first three-fourths of the piece: “and yo, i may not be a badass in this life/ but last night, i fucking fucked the shit out of your mother.” Disrupting the critical tone of the previous few lines, this ending highlights an on-going tension between the conscious subversion of identity, or the critical interrogation of visibility, and the desire to be seen and recognized as subject. Taken altogether, these multiple reversals in the last part of Yan’s performance illustrate the lived contradictions inherent in the construction of gender and complicate the very meaning of resistance.

The Archives of Possibilities

Yan's spoken word performance compellingly suggests that there is no such a thing as an idealized construction of masculinity in which male-identified people, in general, and Asian American men, in particular, can simply conform to. As a collage of multiple, contradictory, and inconsistent manifestations of masculinity, *Badass* is a performance of possibilities—whether it be Yan's embodiment of a “fucking-pierced-up-tattooed” “big-and-buff, 6-foot-2, 210-pound” man wearing “big bling diamond earrings and tight ass muscle tees”; the multiple interpretive potentials of a “black Hummer SUV”; the production of heterogeneous masculinities through the medium of spoken word; or the ambivalent subversion of masculine norms at the end of the poem. Yan's creative articulation of possibilities most importantly illuminates the consequences of the dominant paradigm of identity, particularly as conveyed through the discourses of Asian American nationalism and Asian settler colonialism. The idea that social subjects must continuously perform and exhibit coherent markers of identity in order to prove their fitness for a particular social category—whether it be the U.S. nation-state, the Asian American community, or the male gender identity—is a disciplining act that violently eradicates expressions of difference and condemns inevitable moments of uncertainty.

In conceptualizing an alternative understanding of identity, it is crucial that we situate movements, changes, and unpredictable ruptures as central to the development of subjectivity. Let us, for the moment, consider Yan's changing body as he has begun performing *Badass* in 2005, prior to his hormonal transition.²⁹ From being read as a masculine female-bodied person on stage to passing as a man in real life, Yan's shifting physical embodiment, from then through the present, could have potentially affected the meaning of the performance itself and the audience's perception and reception of the piece. What does it mean for a transitioning Asian American transman to express uncertainty towards the embodiment of masculinity? Can Yan's changing body signify the impossibility of conceptualizing a coherent modality of maleness? By revealing the multiplicity of “being”—that is, the possibility of inhabiting multiple social locations—Yan's work precisely signals the need for such *badass*, motherfucking, meat-eating performance.

Kit Yan, Badass (2007)

in my next life, i'm gonna be a badass
i'm gonna lose my virginity at sweet 16 with the homecoming queen
2 years older than me, i'm gonna smoke weed and cigarettes in the bathroom
skip homeroom, flip off my high school teachers
and then make out with my college professors
and i ain't ever gonna go to class but i'm gonna pass with honors
cuz i'm gonna pay my way to summa cum laude
walk with my chest out at graduation and then streak
in my next life, i'm gonna eat meat
drive a pimped out rimmed out black hummer suv
hell i wanna eat meat while driving my pimped out rimmed out black hummer suv
you'll see my face on tv with a different celebrity each week
and i'm gonna be big and buff
6 foot 2, 210 pounds, and tougher than tough
wear big bling diamond earrings and tight ass muscle tees
hell i still don't think you understand me
i'm talking fucking pierced up tattooed voodoo god knows what
in my next life i wanna be a slut nugget
make every girl wet when i touch her
in my next life i wanna be a motherfucker
literally
i wanna bang a soccer mom who secretly has pussy sucking lips
i wanna pull her hips into me as my strap-on hits her hard and deep
and i wanna be a freak in bed
instead of making love, i wanna have sex
no, i wanna fuck
no more tucking myself in neatly, no more nuzzling necks discreetly
no more whispering in ears, i wanna have sex so hard i wanna taste tears
and slap ass all night long
i wanna try every position in kama sutra and then some
i wanna fuck from the back, fuck upside down, fuck you on your knees
face down on the ground and make you cum so many times that you lose count
i want masturbation, i want female ejaculation
in my reincarnation, i'm gonna be a porn star sensation
be dirty, no more straight up flirting
i'm just gonna command girls to bed, go to bars and instead of talking
i'm just gonna tell them that you'll be walking home with me tonight
and i'm gonna show you the best sex of your life
and in the morning i'm sorry but you gotta walk back
cuz i'm gonna be tired and i'm gonna wanna sleep in
and you can show yourself out, thank you

and oh, don't bother leaving me your number cuz i'll never call you back
in fact, what's the name of that cute girl you were with last night
yeah, why don't you tell her to give me a call
but that wouldn't be me at all
see, i ain't no badass, just a dumbass
trying to be something that i know i'm not, dreaming of ways to be hot
when hell, i'm already hot
because sometimes you get lost in that dream of anything but
and i'll never be a slut and i do believe in love
and if given a choice, i'd rather have a big soul hug than a good fuck
and no thanks on the meat cuz dead baby chicks well they make me wanna cry
and if i had money, i'd rather buy organic, i have no interest in anything remotely satanic
but you know when nobody's looking, i totally scratch my ass
i'll drink soy milk from the box
i might shop online for a bigger cock and then cut off an old person in the street
and yes, sometimes i still think about eating meat
because everybody's got that secret side hiding beneath the definition of other
and yo, i may not be a badass in this life
but last night, i fucking fucked the shit out of your mother



Figure 1. Kit Yan and the Good Asian Drivers at Café Club Fais Do Do, Los Angeles, 2009. Photograph by author.

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Notes

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16. See Robert M. Lee and Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Hawaii, eds., *The Chinese in Hawaii: A Historical Sketch* (Honolulu, HI: Advertiser Publishing Company, 1961).
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22. Susan B. A. Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 8.
23. Somers-Willett, 3-7.
24. Good Asian Drivers, "Badass – Kit Yan at Swarthmore," *YouTube*, June 25, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3d6Ovqqbl00>.
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27. However, a possible framework to consider in this instance is the concept of the dissociative identity disorder (also known as the multiple personality disorder), where "the presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states...recurrently takes control of [one's] behavior." See American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc., 2000), 526-529. Yan's performance of multiplicity astutely challenges the ableist discourses of normativity that rely on singular, recognizable expressions of identity for successful social circulation, as well as the notion of assimilation that subscribes to ability and cognitive privileges.
28. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 12-15.
29. Yan, telephone interview by author.