

From Racial Exclusion to Racial Melancholia: The Demands of a Performative Citizenship

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It has been over 70 years since the United States government implemented Executive Order 9066. The executive order was responsible for the internment of Japanese and Japanese Americans over the course of World War II, and in doing so, effectively overrode the rights of an entire population. The internees included Japanese Americans who had legal American citizenship, a status which should have prevented their involuntary internment without due process yet, despite their citizenship status, Japanese Americans had no means to enforce citizenship's protections against coercive internment. The internment is now understood as one of the most embarrassing and disgraceful chapters in American history because members of an ethnic group were legally stripped of their rights as citizens based on their group identity. According to today's ethnocentric script, it is inexcusable that the American citizenry could act in such an ethnocentric manner.

Yet we witness an all too familiar pattern in 2020. The outbreak of COVID-19 accompanied a wave of anti-Asian violence and stigmatization. The xenophobia of 2020 did not rise to the same level as World War II, but it nonetheless repeated a phenomenon in which Asian Americans' citizenship did not translate to protection against external violence from other Americans.

From explicit ethnocentric citizenship practices to today's ethnocentric ones, we see the U.S. perpetuating violence against particular bodies under the cause of maintaining unity via the values and patriotism that comprise respectability. Ranging from accounts of racial uplift that necessitated "moral" and "value" assimilation, patriotic whitewashing, class-based normativity,

or buying into U.S. norms of imperialism and capitalism, extant scholarship pinpoints the various ways citizenship today remains ethnocentric through race-neutral or color-blind ties. Building on these critiques, I now demonstrate how racially abject individuals remain conditionally accepted or entirely rejected by American citizenship today, but specifically through the disciplining that results from a *performative citizenship*.¹

For performative citizenship, uniformity no longer relies on pure ethnocentrism, and instead relies on respectability. Performative citizenship therefore claims to create a less exclusive and less ethnocentric type of citizenship because it is theoretically open to everybody. So long as they believe in and demonstrate commitment to the national values and ideology shared by a citizenry, all individuals can theoretically be citizens themselves. Performative citizenship, particularly on its surface, is consequently less violent than traditional forms of citizenship, yet it furtively excludes like its ethnocentric predecessor by demanding extraordinary performances from abject individuals. When there is no longer an ethnocentric basis to unite citizenries, citizenries' unity today relies upon the performance of respectability. Citizenries today therefore require a performative citizenship that encourages such performance from all its members, but *demand*s it from the abject. In the United States, one may be Black, Kurdish, Buddhist, or transgender, but above these identities one must present as American if they are to be eligible for citizenship: Individuals' differences, inequities, and foreignness are homogenized

¹ In using the term, abject, follow after past works that describe the exclusion of particular bodies, and specifically build from Judith Butler's concept of abjectivity as a marker for "lives that are not considered to be lives and whose materiality is understood not to matter" (see Meijer et al, 1998, p. 281). While abjectivity refers to all non-normative bodies, for the purpose of my dissertation, I use it as a way to highlight the disposability of non-white bodies according to ethnocentric practices. Irene Costera Meijer and Baukje Prins, "How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23, no. 2 (1998): 275-286.

under respectability.² By excluding and accepting citizens on the basis of performance, rather than blatant ethnicity, today's citizenries maintain their legitimacy, even when performances are adjudicated through ethnocentrically informed notions of deviance and respectability.

This paper offers an explanation as to why we saw and still therefore see such examples of ethnic and racial maltreatment in an American citizenry that is ostensibly ethnoblind. By analyzing Asian Americans' positionality in the United States, I present the operation of performative citizenship in the United States, and how notions of respectability and deviance are used to justify violence within the American citizenry. I categorize these two forms of violence as deviant violence, the external disciplining of individuals who present as deviant; and respectable violence, the internal self-disciplining of individuals to present themselves as respectable.

I first refer to these specific World War II and COVID case studies in order to illustrate how deviant violence can result in the ethnocentric disciplining of non-white individuals. The internment of Japanese and Japanese Americans and assaults against Asian-Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic could both be called pure ethnocentric practices, but such an understanding frames these case studies as aberrances in American ethnoblind citizenship rather than interrelated practices of performative citizenship. Such a lens casts COVID xenophobia and Japanese internment as anomalies within American citizenship's otherwise ethnoblind success.

Instead of labelling systematic ethnic maltreatment as accidents that happen to repeat themselves, performative citizenship explains how these cases go beyond simple acts of racism and are in fact consistent practices of deviant violence. In both instances, the conceptualizations

² For examples, see Reddy and Singh. Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence* (Duke, 2011), p. 14; Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country* (Harvard, 2004), p. 35.

of respectability and deviance legitimized the revocation of citizenship for Asian Americans and the appropriate deployment of violence in the form of internment or assault.

While certainly laced with ethnic and racial prejudice, the narratives that condoned or criticized xenophobic violence relied on performative narratives of deviance rather than on race or ethnicity explicitly. For example, even though Asian Americans were subject to inordinate questioning, loyalty and civility were framed as legitimate reasons to intern and discipline them. Violence against non-white individuals became scrutinized, but violence against deviance became a logical practice of citizenship. In times of national crises, Asian Americans' racial abjectivity marked them as potentially deviant and eligible for deviant violence until they proved themselves to be respectable citizens. This paper therefore depicts how the turn to a performative citizenship that disciplines deviance, instead of ethnicity, can remain ethnocentric in practice.

Collapsing COVID and the Japanese internment camps as having been mere ethnocentrism also obscures a secondary harm within performative citizenship: respectable violence. Japanese Americans did have some means to contest their internment during WWII by proving their respectability. The internment camps specifically cited deviance as the grounds for violent external disciplining, meaning that Japanese Americans with vetted respectability could be released, and indeed were. Just as select Japanese Americans successfully navigated various tests of respectability, many Asian Americans took the actions to present themselves as respectable over the course of the pandemic in order to avoid being targets of violence. The internment of and assaults against Asian Americans only represents the deviant violence that stems from performative citizenship. In both cases, Asian Americans also experienced the demand to internally discipline themselves, or risk being coded as deviant and eligible for

deviant violence. By only focusing on the punishment of deviance, we fail to recognize how individuals who successfully avoid deviance are still subject to a violent self-disciplining.

Respectable violence aims to capture the internal disciplining carried out by non-white individuals to avoid associations with deviance. In naming respectable violence, I demonstrate how non-white individuals may undergo a violent process self-disciplining themselves as means to be read as respectable in accordance with the demands of a performative citizenship.

A number of theorists have offered frameworks for understanding how respectability and its subsequent norms are disciplining forces. Among the most notable examples is Michel Foucault's analysis of how individuals self-modulate their sexuality in response to norms. For Foucault, sexuality became a disciplining identity that pressured individuals to abide by heteronormativity in the public sphere, leading individuals to discipline their bodies and behavior to fit this normative identity.³ Evelyn Higginbotham was the first to specifically analyze how individuals self-modulated themselves in direct response to respectability as a concept. Her labelling of "a politics of respectability" was in response to the ways Black women would appeal to notions of white and feminine respectability in order to avoid racial and gender maltreatment.⁴ In effect, both these authors describe a phenomenon in which individuals may experience pressure to modulate their identity and behavior to fit into notions of respectability.

I purposely label the pressure to perform respectability as respectable violence because of the psychological toll of having to continually prove one's respectability. I actively use the language of violence in order to argue that non-white individuals experience harm under a

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (Vintage, 1990), p. 93.

⁴ See Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* (Harvard, 1994).

performative citizenship, even if they manage to successfully circumvent deviant violence by presenting themselves as sufficiently respectable.

I show how the expected responses to the Japanese internment camps and COVID xenophobia were ones of taking “the high road,” in which Asian Americans adhered to the narrative of having to prove their respectability. This model minority rhetoric was of course present before the pandemic, but it gained renewed national attention when Andrew Yang released his infamous op-ed during the height of the pandemic. Acting as a spokesperson for Asian Americans, Yang, a business leader and presidential hopeful, called on Asian Americans to prove their Americanness and respectability at large. Building on Yang’s op-ed, I present the prevalence of this logic and how it feeds into the legitimacy of performative citizenship. While performing respectability to avoid deviant violence can offer immediate protection and contingent citizenship, I explain how conceding to performative citizenship’s expectations results in its own punishment, which should be recognized as its own form of respectable violence. I use the psychoanalytic theories of Franz Fanon, Shinhee Han, and David Eng, to depict how demands for respectable performance are forms of violence against one’s psychological wellbeing. Using the framework of deviant violence and respectable violence, I therefore demonstrate how abject individuals undergo violence within today’s performative citizenship, regardless of their decision to perform.

While performative citizenship works to discipline all non-white bodies, understanding its violence in regard to Asian Americans has a unique purpose. Asian American scholarship details how Asian Americans play a unique role in American colorblind narratives due to the way they are triangulated between white and Black populations.⁵ This is not to say of course that

⁵ The description by Helen Heran Jun explains Asians’ triangulation: “Asians were not white

Asian Americans were the only ones to have experienced maltreatment that contradict their promised rights as citizens (far from that). African Americans, for example, continued to experience higher levels of hate crimes than Asian Americans throughout the pandemic.⁶

However, comparing the WWII internment of Asian Americans to COVID xenophobia offers unique insight into how the logic of performative citizenship began and reified itself over the following century. The cases serve as two conspicuous instances in which we see American citizenship reaching an ethnocentric outcome through a logic of performative expectations, particularly against a “model minority” population that has been used as proof of the United States’ ethnoblind success. Asian American scholars call Asian American’s model minority position as “no-win position” between pursuing respectability or accepting deviance.

[Asian-Americans] are always caught in a no-win position between whites and Black Americans. They are thought to be ‘white adjacent,’ but of course they can never belong to the club. They are persistently racialized, yet they often don’t count in the American racial equation. The central, though often unspoken, question underlying all of this is: Are Asian-Americans injured, or injured enough, to deserve our national attention?⁷

during prewar exclusion and the yellow peril, but certainly not black.” Helen Heran Jun, *The Race for Citizenship* (NYU, 2011), p. 41). See Claire Jean Kim (1999) for more on triangulation. Jun, *Race for Citizenship*; Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105-138.

⁶ 55% of all hate crimes in the United States during 2020 were anti-Black. See “Raising Awareness of Hate Crimes and Hate Incidents During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” U.S. Department of Justice, Accessed February 23, 2023, p. 10, <https://www.justice.gov/file/1507346/download>.

⁷ Anne Anlin Cheng, “What This Wave of Anti-Asian Violence Reveals about America,” *New York Times*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/21/opinion/anti-asian-violence.html>.

For these scholars, Asian Americans often serve as a “solution” or a salve that shores up American citizenship’s ethnoblind credence. Precisely because some Asian Americans have successfully accumulated capital and advanced into positions of power, they have been used as evidence to support American citizenship’s ethnoblind achievement.

the model minority myth identifies the academic success of second-generation Asian American immigrant children as dispositive of the United States as a land of equal opportunity free of racial discrimination or distress. Thereby, it functions as a national tool that manages and erases a long history of institutionalized exclusion by characterizing Asian American success precisely as the result – rather than something that occurred despite the lack – of equal opportunity in the United States.⁸

The goal of this paper is therefore to show how Asian Americans have been violently used as proof of performative citizenship’s success by solidifying the performative expectation that non-whites should merely assimilate and that such a demand is both justified and appropriate. Although performative citizenship may offer a choice compared to past forms of ethnocentric citizenship, it is a choice between deviant and respectable violence rather than meaningful equality. By documenting how “model minorities” still experience performative citizenship’s violence, I demonstrate how performative citizenship perpetuates an ethnocentric outcome against non-white bodies regardless of whether they attempt and succeed in meeting demands of respectability.

Performative Deviant Violence

⁸ David Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia* (Duke, 2019), p. 40-41.

When justifying its decision to establish the WWII Japanese internment camps, the United States government most often cited questions of loyalty and respectability. President Roosevelt did this in his original executive order, claiming that military run camps were necessary for “protection against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material, national-defense premises, and national-defense utilities.”⁹ There was no mention of any particular identity, ethnicity, or race in the executive order. Instead, President Roosevelt deployed a wartime language of combatants and enemy sympathizers. The Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of Japanese and Japanese American internment in *Korematsu v. United States* using the same logic. Stating the court’s opposition to racial maltreatment, Justice Hugo Black began the court’s decision with the following line:

that all legal restrictions which curtail the civil rights of a single racial group are immediately suspect. That is not to say that all such restrictions are unconstitutional. It is to say that courts must subject them to the most rigid scrutiny. Pressing public necessity may sometimes justify the existence of such restrictions; racial antagonism never can.¹⁰

If we look at the logic behind Japanese and Japanese Americans’ internment during the course of World War II, it may appear obvious that their detainment was simply racist. Yet, if their detainment was to be understood as the result of mere bigotry, we fail to see how such ethnocentric and racist outcomes continue to persist through the enforcement of respectability.

The boundaries of American citizenship existed off pure ethnocentric reasons for centuries. Justification for these ethnocentric parameters were primarily based on ethnic

⁹ U.S. National Park Service, “Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Executive Order No. 9066,” Park Museum Management Program, Accessed February 23, 2023, https://www.nps.gov/museum/tmc/manz/handouts/Beads_Executive_Order_9066.pdf.

¹⁰ Cornell Law School, *Toyosaburo Korematsu v. United States*, 140 F.2d 289 (9th Cir. 1943), Legal Information Institute, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/323/214>.

superiority and difference. In the words of historian Mae Ngai, “in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ‘race’ and ‘nation’ were loosely conflated in intellectual discourse and in the public imagination....*Race, people, and nation* often referred to the same idea.”¹¹

However, by the 20th century, we begin to see a turn in which the American public, its politicians, and laws reflect a move to performative citizenship. Ngai casts this in terms of national homogeneity, writing that “the nativism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century comprised a cultural nationalism in which cultural homogeneity more than racial superiority was the principal concern.”¹² One could call this a turning point in American citizenship’s commitment to a more meaningful ethnoblind vision, in which non-white bodies could potentially be accepted as citizens. Such acceptance was contingent, though, on questions of assimilation to ensure that a greater diversity of bodies would not disrupt the cultural and civic uniformity that existed beforehand.

As exemplified in Justice Black’s opinion, the American public began to embrace more meaningful ideas of pluralism by the mid-20th century, in which pure racism and bigotry was no longer seen as a legitimate basis to exclude individuals. Pure ethnocentric and racist logic was further challenged by increasingly unstable racial categories. As Cheryl Harris notes, the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* court decision essentially conceded that the state had no way of consistently and accurately sorting race, even as the court concluded with its ruling that protected whiteness as a form of property.¹³ This time period also confronted new identities that had

¹¹ Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects* (Princeton, 2014), p. 23.

¹² Ngai, p. 23.

¹³ Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* (1993): p. 1745.

questionable claims to Whiteness, such as Mexicans who had legal but not social claims to white citizenship.¹⁴

As ethnocentrism became insufficient, parameters of respectability maintained their currency, and in fact, became more important than ever as non-white migration to the United States increased. The 1924 creation of an immigration quota system precisely balanced these concerns by contingently accepting some non-white migrants based on questions of culture and likelihood to assimilate.

Some Congressmen surely held racist beliefs as Congress inaugurated the immigration quota system. The logic debated on the floor, though, did not center around pure bigotry.¹⁵ Instead, questions of respectability dominated discussion and grounded the logic which eventually resulted in the quota system's passage. With it, migrants from Algeria, for example, were no longer excluded for their ethnicity, but were excluded because they were deemed to pose a threat to national unity. Individuals from India were excluded because of their likelihood to disrupt American culture, not because of their non-white positionality. The immigration quota system was based on past census data in the United States. The United States' existing demographic distribution would determine the number of migrants that would be allowed from each country into the United States going forward. This resulted in an immigration policy that favored future migration from Western European (particularly Anglo-Saxon) countries. The quota system's reasoning was that the country's demographic distribution must be maintained in order to preserve the country's overall essence. The American citizenry could only maintain its

¹⁴ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, p. 38, 53-54.

¹⁵ Ngai cites the concerns of congressmen at the time who supported notions of a multicultural melting pot, but nonetheless quoted a threat of "alien indigestion" if it proceeds too drastically (p. 23).

political, cultural, and civic homogeneity by managing the bodies that would join its citizenry. The logic behind the quota system noticeably departed from previous forms of racist logic and it exhibited a greater reliance on parameters of respectability in establishing what would unite the American citizenry moving forward.

The move to performative citizenship cemented itself by the time WWII Japanese and Japanese American internment began. Critics of the detainment highlighted the racism and ethnocentrism that surrounded the executive action, which contradicted the supposed ethnoblind commitments of 20th century American citizenship. President Roosevelt's administration, however, deflected criticism that the act was blatantly bigoted and instead argued that the decision was based on questions of respectability. According to the administration, the Japanese and Japanese Americans were not detained because of their foreignness, but because their foreignness made their commitments to American citizenship suspect in a time of war against Japan. The Supreme Court's deciding opinion reiterated this:

Exclusion of those of Japanese origin was deemed necessary because of the presence of an unascertained number of disloyal members of the group, most of whom we have no doubt were loyal to this country. It was because we could not reject the finding of the military authorities that it was impossible to bring about an immediate segregation of the disloyal from the loyal that we sustained the validity of the curfew order as applying to the whole group...Our task would be simple, our duty clear, were this a case involving the imprisonment of a loyal citizen in a concentration camp because of racial prejudice....Korematsu was not excluded from the Military Area because of hostility to him or his race. He was excluded because we are at war with the Japanese Empire, because the properly constituted military authorities feared an invasion of our West Coast

and felt constrained to take proper security measures, because they decided that the military urgency of the situation demanded that all citizens of Japanese ancestry be segregated from the West Coast.¹⁶

What we see with the internment of Japanese Americans is how performance justified an ethnocentric outcome but under a more polished logic than simple racism. The court suggested that national identity, patriotism, and security would be compromised if Japanese Americans were allowed to roam free. According to the Supreme Court's decision, Japanese Americans could not be stripped of their rights as citizens simply because they were non-white; that logic would be unacceptable under a growing and more established notion of ethnoblind citizenship. However, the potential to act treasonous made Japanese Americans deviant individuals. The onus was then on Japanese Americans to prove their respectability and allegiance to the American citizenry.

The three Supreme Court Justices who dissented in *Korematsu v. United States* all also focused attention on questions of respectability and loyalty. Each of the dissenting Justices made arguments that there was insufficient evidence to determine that neither Korematsu nor the Japanese and Japanese American populations were prone to disloyalty. In his dissenting opinion, Justice Roberts stated that Korematsu "is a native of the United States of Japanese ancestry who, according to the uncontradicted evidence, is a loyal citizen of the nation."¹⁷ In each dissent, the Justices held that the internment camps could have been legitimate had there been enough doubt to question the internee's loyalty, a level which they did not believe was reached in regard to Japanese and Japanese Americans during WWII. This led the Justices to believe that the decision

¹⁶ Cornell Law School, *Toyosaburo Korematsu v. United States*, 140 F.2d 289 (9th Cir. 1943), Legal Information Institute, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/323/214>.

¹⁷ Cornell Law School, *Toyosaburo Korematsu v. United States*.

was the result of pure racist maltreatment. As Justice Murphy rightfully noted, Italy and Germany were also wartime combatants, but Italians, Italian Americans, Germans, and German Americans were not subject to the same incarceration.¹⁸ Based on these differences, Justice Murphy could only call the court's decision an "ugly abyss of racism."¹⁹

Even as the three Justices were progressive enough to realize how Japanese Americans had been unjustly associated with deviance, the deliberations surrounding Japanese and Japanese American internment shored up the premises of performative citizenship. The dissenting Justices correctly noted that Japanese and Japanese Americans should not be assumed to be deviant as an entire group. They believed that such a practice would probably be tainted with racism. However, the Justices nonetheless reified the belief that should a group's respectability be sufficiently in question, then their rights as citizens may be rightfully revoked. Race and ethnicity could not be legitimate reasons to demarcate citizenship, but respectability could be. Violent practices like internment could be legitimate means of disciplining or punishing deviance going forward.

This emphasis on respectability becomes even more clear once analyzing practices within the internment camps. The U.S. government established the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to carry out the process of Japanese and Japanese American internment. One might expect the WRA to have been overly cruel, but the WRA leadership rejected the notion that Japanese and Japanese Americans were prone to disloyalty.²⁰ Like the Justices prescribed, the WRA's primary goal was to filter loyal internees from disloyal ones by using tactics of assimilation. By all

¹⁸ The FBI arrested many Germans, Italians, and Japanese following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Most of the first two groups were released soon after, but no Japanese were. See Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, p. 175-176.

¹⁹ Cornell Law School, *Toyosaburo Korematsu v. United States*.

²⁰ Ngai, p. 177.

accounts, the WRA had the intent to release internees who were able to prove their respectability. The camps presented the opportunity for an “Americanizing project” to accomplish this.²¹ More than internment, the WRA set out to educate and acculturate Japanese and Japanese Americans by creating formal educational activities that spanned from classes in citizenship to Christmas tree cutting.²²

The intent to filter and release “loyal” internees culminated in the “Application for Leave Clearance” tests. The WRA required all adult internees (18 or older) to complete these tests in order to collect data on the internees’ loyalty and formulate policies for gradual and selective release.²³ In the words of one WRA official, the tests gave “a basis for forming judgements as to an individual person’s loyalty that may be reasonably sound.”²⁴

The questions on the test attempted to evaluate aspects of respectability both subtly and explicitly. Questions included: “Will you conform to the customs and dress of your new home?,” “Do you think you are ‘losing face’ by cooperating with the U.S. government?,” and “What would you do if you found a shortwave [radio] set ... in your neighbor’s apartment?”²⁵

Two questions in particular, though, demonstrated the onus on internees to prove they were respectable citizens. Male internees were asked, “are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?.” All were asked, “Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance

²¹ Ngai, p. 177.

²² John Provins and Solon Kimball, “Building New Communities During War Time,” *American Sociological Review* 11, no. 4 (August 1946).

²³ Ngai, p. 182.

²⁴ Ngai, p. 183.

²⁵ Ngai, p. 183.

or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power or organization?"²⁶

In some ways, these questions do not stray far from other questions that many Americans are continually asked. American men over the age of 17 are required to register for the draft, and many patriotic ceremonies and legal questions ask similar questions about devotion to the United States as part of a citizen's responsibility to prove their respectability. Yet, the Japanese and Japanese Americans were being asked these questions while being actively held captive in camps and with the full knowledge that the majority of the country did not believe that they were American nor wanted them as part of the American citizenry.

Ngai documents how many Japanese and Japanese Americans did not even want to leave the internment camps towards the end of the war because they realized the xenophobic reality of what they would be returning to: the inability to legally reclaim their property, the challenges of finding a willing employer, and the potential to be harassed or assaulted.²⁷ As a result, most internees did not end up leaving the camps until they were forced to once the camps closed down.

The Japanese American internees who did have legal citizenship were also caught in a bind. The establishment of internment camps already demonstrated that legal citizenship would not prevent Japanese Americans from effectively losing their rights and that their place in the citizenry was contingent. If Japanese Americans committed to the American citizenry at the expense of erasing their Japanese identity, they would be doing so with the expectation of having to continually prove their loyalty and right to belong in the American citizenry. The Japanese

²⁶ Ngai, p. 183.

²⁷ Ngai, p. 188-189.

internees were therefore being asked to not only abandon their Japanese identity, but to do so without any guarantees of American citizenship (both legally and holistically).

In reality, most internees had attachments to both their Japanese and American identities, in which they had no intention to disobey American laws, but also did not wish to entirely erase their and their ancestors' Japanese identity. The WRA nonetheless sorted the internees into a false binary of those who would "wish to be American" and those who would "desire to follow the Japanese way of life."²⁸ Even though this bifurcation was not formally disseminated, it was widely understood by the internees, leading them to ultimately pursue a strategy of pragmatism when it came to these respectability tests. One internee encapsulated this sentiment: "if you're a Jap and nobody believes your loyalty in this country anyway, you'll think about your future and your family."²⁹

Japanese and Japanese Americans were put into a corner that necessitated pragmatism, and the pragmatic refusal to show jingoist devotion to the American citizenry became grounds for proving that they were indeed deviant. Even though the patriotism tests did not deploy racist language proper, it still achieved the same effect of Othering Japanese Americans on the basis of respectability and deviance.

The WRA's strategies attempted to corroborate that Japanese and Japanese Americans were mostly loyal deserving citizens, but their strategies to cultivate and enforce this expectation ended up cementing their suspected deviance. For example, the WRA anticipated that at least 5000 Japanese American internees would volunteer for U.S. military service, but only found 1200 volunteers. Simultaneously, over 3000 applied for repatriation to Japan.³⁰ At one

²⁸ Ngai, p. 185.

²⁹ Ngai, p. 190.

³⁰ Ngai, p. 184.

internment camp, only 42 out of a total of 1700 eligible males agreed to military service.³¹ Yet, the pragmatic reluctance to volunteer for U.S. military service confirmed the very deviance that was suspected of Japanese Americans.

Towards the end of the internment camps, Congress broke constitutional precedent in passing the 1944 Denationalization Act that would pave the way for disloyal Japanese Americans to exit the citizenry.³² One internee who applied for denationalization following the act lamented

They got me! The American government threw me into a concentration camp, labeled me dangerous because I wouldn't declare my loyalty, intimidated me, and subjected me to extreme mental and physical stress. In fact, the government did such a good job of manipulating me that I just gave up my United States citizenship – voluntarily! Now they could deport me to Japan without any trouble at all, I realized.³³

The logic of performative citizenship therefore gave “legitimate” ethnoblind means to excluding Japanese and Japanese Americans from the citizenry. The violence to intern, exclude, and nearly deport an entire population was entirely justified on the basis of deviance. Racist and ethnocentric bias surely pervaded the process, but questions of respectability and deviance ultimately upheld such maltreatment. Even if the United States now clearly frames the internment camps as an example of wrongful racial and ethnic maltreatment, justification for sorting and excluding non-respectable bodies reappears up to this day.

“Just Stop Being Deviant”

³¹ Ngai, p. 184.

³² Ngai, p. 187.

³³ Ngai, p. 192.

Asian American populations were subject to a performative expectation in 1945 but continued to face performative expectations in 2020. In both scenarios, we see a consistency in which violence is considered either legitimate or illegitimate depending on an abject individual's performance.

Over the course of 2020, the outbreak of COVID-19 became more and more a politicized issue. Whether it was the fact that COVID was first found in China, conspiracy theories that it was released intentionally, or President Trump's attempt to connect COVID with Chinese populations, we saw an increase in anti-Asian xenophobia, both in terms of attitudes and behaviors. What followed was a wave in both hate crimes against Asian Americans and a growing fear among Asian Americans of being attacked.

President Trump noticeably used charged language when addressing the COVID virus, that included phrasing like "the Wuhan Virus," the "Chinese Virus," and "Kung Fu Virus."³⁴ The language tapped into a long practice of associating East Asian populations with uncleanness and disease since the establishment of Chinatowns.³⁵ President Trump conceded that Asian Americans did not deserve to be harassed, but continued using the same rhetoric despite reports that connected the language to greater xenophobic behavior.³⁶ A number of GOP politicians also imitated Trump by associating COVID with the country of China and Asian populations at

³⁴ The Guardian Staff, "Donald Trump Calls Covid-19 'Kung Flu' at Tulsa Rally," *The Guardian*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/20/trump-covid-19-kung-flu-racist-language>.

³⁵ Jun cites reports by white public health officials describing Chinatown as infested with Asiatic diseases, as well as reconstructions of opium addicted Chinese men who were sexual predators of young white women. See Jun, *Race for Citizenship*, p. 20.

³⁶ The Guardian Staff, "Not Racist at All': Donald Trump Defends Calling Coronavirus the 'Chinese Virus' - Video," *The Guardian*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/mar/18/not-racist-at-all-donald-trump-defends-calling-coronavirus-the-chinese-virus-video>.

large.³⁷ What a single politician says does not translate to systemic maltreatment, yet the activation of xenophobic attitudes, paired with a national crisis, culminated in a measurable shift in thinking towards Asian Americans.

News media began reporting on a number of high-profile cases of anti-Asian assaults over the spring of 2020. As organizations began collecting data, a growing trend of anti-Asian harassment and assault began to take shape. The Federal Bureau of Investigation documented that anti-Asian hate crimes increased by over 70% during the early course of the pandemic compared to the year prior.³⁸ The Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism reported a 339% rise in anti-Asian hate crimes between 2020 to 2021.³⁹ The group STOP AAPI Hate recorded a total of 10,905 hate crime incidents against Asian Americans between March 2020 and the end of 2021.⁴⁰

These organizations also suspect that these numbers are undercounted. While some of this data was self-reported, evidence suggests that these overall numbers were likely suppressed due to the likelihood that individuals who experienced discrimination are hesitant to report it.⁴¹ AAPI Data conducted more recent surveys of AAPI populations, in which between 1 in 6 and 1 in 8 respondents had said they experienced a hate crime between 2020 and 2021. 1 in 3 of their

³⁷ Kimmy Yam, “GOP Lawmakers Continue to Use ‘Wuhan virus’ or ‘Chinese Coronavirus,’” *NBC News*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/cdc-chief-spurns-term-chinese-coronavirus-used-gop-lawmakers-n1156656>.

³⁸ “Raising Awareness of Hate Crimes and Hate Incidents During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” U.S. Department of Justice.

³⁹ Eveline Chao, “‘The Fear Is Very Real’: How Asian Americans Are Fighting Rising Hate Crime,” *The Guardian*, April 23, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/apr/23/asian-american-fighting-rising-hate-crime>.

⁴⁰ “Stop AAPI Hate National Report: 3/19/20 – 12/31/21,” STOP AAPI HATE, Accessed February 23, 2023, <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/22-SAH-NationalReport-3.1.22-v9.pdf>.

⁴¹ “Stop AAPI Hate National Report: 3/19/20 – 12/31/21,” STOP AAPI HATE.”

respondents reported they had experienced either a “hate crime” or “hate incident” since the pandemic. The measure of “hate incident” asked respondents about more ambiguous harassment that respondents may not have interpreted as a hate crime, such as being told to “go back to your country.”⁴² Treatment that does not rise to the clear level of a prosecutable crime often goes unreported by victims, meaning that the statistics shared by the FBI and Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism are likely only accounting for the most severe instances of assault and harassment.

The data suggests that Asian Americans experienced widespread maltreatment following the outbreak of COVID. We see another instance where supposed American citizens are denied basic protections that ought to be guaranteed by citizenship. There may be discrepancies as to its severity, but there is a clear trajectory that Asian Americans’ rights and belonging have become contested since the outbreak of COVID. According to the 2022 STAATUS Index, 1 in 5 Americans believe that “Asian Americans are at least partly responsible for COVID-19” and that 1 in 3 Americans believe that “Asian Americans are more loyal to their country of origin than to the U.S.”⁴³ There was a demand for Asian Americans to prove their loyalty as citizens and to compensate for COVID in some way. Some Asian Americans would internalize and embrace this performative expectation, as exemplified by Andrew Yang.

In response to the rise in anti-Asian violence, Yang published what would become a notorious op-ed. It was addressed to Asian Americans and titled, “We Asian Americans are not

⁴² Frances Kai-Hwa Wang, “How Violence Against Asian Americans Has Grown and How to Stop It, According to Activists,” *PBS*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/a-year-after-atlanta-and-indianapolis-shootings-targeting-asian-americans-activists-say-we-cant-lose-momentum>.

⁴³ Jennifer Lee, “Confronting the Invisibility of Anti-Asian Racism,” *Brookings*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-werise/2022/05/18/confronting-the-invisibility-of-anti-asian-racism>.

the virus, but we can be part of the cure.” In it, Yang admits moments where he attempted to suppress his Asian identity when growing up because it outed him as different from his white social circles. Yet despite this performative suppression, Yang describes the success he experienced in carving out a lucrative career, which allowed him to conquer this fear and turn it into a sense of pride: “My place in this country felt assured. I have it better than the vast majority of Americans of any background.”⁴⁴

Yang’s successful assimilation, however, was disrupted by the pandemic. He recounts a moment when grocery shopping in 2020 when he received stares from a group of white men, a stare that reminded him of the foreignness that he believed he had shed years ago. “I felt self-conscious — even a bit ashamed — of being Asian.”⁴⁵ Yang was frustrated because he knew he did not deserve such treatment, but laments that “saying ‘Don’t be racist toward Asians’ won’t work.”⁴⁶ The solution for Yang is to lean further into respectability.

Yang cites Natalie Chou, a basketball player for UCLA, as a positive example of how to deal with racism. Chou found security in wearing her school gear as a way to communicate that she belonged as an American. He goes on to cite the Japanese Americans who volunteered to fight during WWII as an example of successful patriotism.

We Asian Americans need to embrace and show our American-ness in ways we never have before. We need to step up, help our neighbors, donate gear, vote, wear red white and blue, volunteer, fund aid organizations, and do everything in our power to accelerate

⁴⁴ Andrew Yang, “Andrew Yang: We Asian Americans Are Not the Virus, but We Can Be Part of the Cure,” *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/01/andrew-yang-coronavirus-discrimination/>.

⁴⁵ Yang, “Andrew Yang: We Asian Americans.”

⁴⁶ Yang, “Andrew Yang: We Asian Americans.”

the end of this crisis. We should show without a shadow of a doubt that we are Americans who will do our part for our country in this time of need...Demonstrate that we are part of the solution. We are not the virus, but we can be part of the cure.⁴⁷

The similarities between Yang's prescription of respectability and the evaluations of respectability in the Japanese WWII internment camps are stark. In both cases, the mistreatment of Asian Americans is not framed as an instance of pure racism, but instead seen as an inadvertent consequence of maldisciplining. Yang and other Asian Americans collectively know that Asian Americans should not be targeted, but Yang argues that this is solely a matter of miscommunication. Yang seems to know in his heart that Asian Americans are respectable and that the issue is the inability to effectively prove this respectability to the larger population. However, the need for respectability represents a continual foreignness that is cast upon Asian American populations. What is consequently espoused is a normalized expectation that Asian American present themselves as respectable. If deviance is punishable, the natural solution for Yang is to continually show yourself as respectable.

Yet these instances demonstrate how continuous displays of respectability are never quite enough. The most respectable of Japanese Americans were interned, even if their release was expedited relative to deviant internees.

Yang's comments were provocative, and though they received some praise, they were also criticized. The Washington Post ran another op-ed shortly after that responded to Yang. The author, Canwen Xu, accused Yang of assuming the role of a "white-people pleaser." Xu claims that "he further entrenched the decades-old myth of the model minority: that Asian Americans

⁴⁷ Yang, "Andrew Yang: We Asian Americans."

are the obedient people of color, the ones who are willing to uphold a system that is rigged against us by submissively working within.”⁴⁸

Critics such as Xu accused Yang of essentially pardoning racist behavior, and indeed much of the public agreed that racist attacks should not be victims’ fault. Xu and other critics were correct to note how Yang embraces a politics of respectability and uplift that does not solve racial and ethnic maltreatment, but merely quells it. The critics, however, fail to acknowledge how this performative expectation of respectability has become entrenched in contemporary citizenship and extends to other non-white identities, and not only “model minority” Asian Americans.

Shortly upon taking office, President Biden came out with a statement that Asian Americans were not to be blamed for COVID and that they do not deserve to be harassed or assaulted. The following memorandum went on to say

The Federal Government must recognize that it has played a role in furthering these xenophobic sentiments through the actions of political leaders, including references to the COVID-19 pandemic by the geographic location of its origin. Such statements have stoked unfounded fears and perpetuated stigma about Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and have contributed to increasing rates of bullying, harassment, and hate crimes against AAPI persons. These actions defied the best practices and guidelines of

⁴⁸ Canwen Xu, “Andrew Yang Was Wrong. Showing Our ‘Americanness’ Is Not How Asian-Americans Stop Racism,” *The Washington Post*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/03/andrew-yang-was-wrong-showing-our-american-ness-is-not-how-asian-americans-stop-racism/>.

public health officials and have caused significant harm to AAPI families and communities that must be addressed.⁴⁹

Yet after calling out the racist and ethnocentric maltreatment of Asian Americans, President Biden predictably moved to point out the respectability of Asian Americans.

Despite these increasing acts of intolerance, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have made our Nation more secure during the COVID-19 pandemic and throughout our history. An estimated 2 million Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have served on the front lines of this crisis as healthcare providers, as first responders, and in other essential roles. The Federal Government should combat racism, xenophobia, and intolerance against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.⁵⁰

There is widespread acceptance that xenophobia against Asian Americans in the wake of COVID was unjust, however, these critiques frame such xenophobia as the result of isolated acts of racism. Unlike Yang, Biden was not victim blaming Asian Americans for not acting respectable enough, but at the same time continued to uphold the performative expectations of citizenship. Instead, performative logic was further deployed to oppose the victim blaming narrative, contending that Asian Americans are every bit as American as white Americans, indicating that there is still a figure of the good citizen and corresponding bad citizen.

⁴⁹ White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Memorandum Condemning and Combating Racism, Xenophobia, and Intolerance Against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States,” January 26, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/26/memorandum-condemning-and-combating-racism-xenophobia-and-intolerance-against-asian-americans-and-pacific-islanders-in-the-united-states/>.

⁵⁰ White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Memorandum Condemning and Combating Racism, Xenophobia, and Intolerance Against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States.”

Instead of only perceiving Yang as allowing for and continuing racism, Yang's ideology should be understood as only one mere instance of a continuing practice of performative citizenship that allows for deviant violence. In the world of performative citizenship, racist violence is not tolerable, but deviant violence that disciplines non-white bodies remains legitimate. The legitimacy of violence against non-whites now translates to the appropriateness of violence against deviant individuals, who happen to also be non-white.

The move to protect certain ethnic groups via respectability relies upon a continual Othering of other non-whites. When non-white individuals associate themselves with respectability, they often distance themselves from deviant members of their own group or from other non-white groups in their entirety.

The infamous dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* by Justice Harlan foreshadowed this eventual reliance on respectability as a way to arbitrate citizenship. Justice Harlan is commemorated by the American public to this day for attacking the legitimacy of segregation between Blacks and whites in the 20th century. Few people, though, note how his celebrated argument relied on a similar premise that respectability should replace racial phenotype. Justice Harlan suggested that racial identities that had assimilated and proven their worth to American society should be given equal standing. This was demonstrated in his opinion comparing the treatment of Asian, Black, and white Americans.

There is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those belonging to it to become citizens of the United States...But by the statute in question, a Chinaman can ride in the same passenger coach with white citizens of the United States, while citizens of the black race in Louisiana, many of whom perhaps risked their lives for the preservation of the Union, who are entitled by laws, to participate in the political control

of the state and nation, who are not excluded, by law or by reason of their race, from public stations of any kind, and who have all the legal rights that belong to white citizens, are yet to be declared criminals, liable to imprisonment, if they ride in a public coach occupied by citizens of the white race.⁵¹

Jun specifically notes how Black populations picked up on the potential to leverage their respectability against other non-white populations. For example, Black newspapers advocated performative strategies for showcasing Blacks' respectability in contrast to Asians' deviance. Such newspapers would highlight Asian foreignness by emphasizing Asians' filthy foods, appearances, and immorality in order to demonstrate how Asians were not as fit for citizenship as Blacks.⁵² Rather than promoting inclusion, performative citizenship's embrace of respectability creates a hierarchy of difference that pits differently racialized groups in negotiation with one another to determine which is the most deviant and deserving of exclusion.⁵³

Although most of the American citizenry better acknowledges and criticizes blatant ethnocentric practices now than it did during the WWII internment camps, it continually reaffirms the appropriateness of violence against deviance to this day. However, deviant violence is not the only harm individuals face within a performative citizenship. The continual need to perform respectability operates as its own form of respectable violence.

Performative Respectable Violence

⁵¹ Via Jun, *Race for Citizenship*, p. 16.

⁵² Jun, *Race for Citizenship*, p. 26.

⁵³ See Jun, p. 17.

The previous section highlighted the external threats that performative citizenship poses to abject individuals who do not adequately perform respectability. Performative expectations, though, can also produce an internal form of violence in which abject individuals self-discipline themselves in response to external pressures and threats of deviant violence. Although performances of respectability can offer moments of legible citizenship to abject individuals, respectable violence captures the harm that results from this contingent recognition.

The refusal to recognize the humanity of certain racial identities has been long understood to be a violent practice. Franz Fanon illustrated this in his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, by claiming how the existence of non-white bodies has been historically contingent on the white gaze. When describing the lived experience of the Black individual, Fanon explicated the pain of going unrecognized – the refusal to recognize a Black man’s humanity leaves the man as an object.⁵⁴ Fanon believed that non-white bodies relied upon the white gaze to offer them existence, leading non-white individuals to lactify themselves and remake themselves according to expectations of Whiteness.⁵⁵ While the strategy of lactification offers means to recognition, Fanon argued that it nonetheless is at the cost of significant psychological harm. If lactification is a necessary prerequisite to recognition, one’s innate self remains unrecognized: the recognition of a performance is not recognition of the person. While these harms are perhaps not as visible, they all reflect the respectable violence that individuals experience when attempting to engage respectability.

Fanon’s framework speaks to the larger dynamics in which non-white individuals have been conditioned (and actively condition themselves) to evaluate themselves in relation to

⁵⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove, 2008), p. 95.

⁵⁵ Fanon, p. 12.

(White) respectability. In their psychological analysis of Asian American youth, scholars David Eng and Shinhee Han clinically illustrate Fanon's argument by tracing a pattern of psychological trauma across Asian American patients whose identities have been unrecognized or misrecognized by their fellow Americans.⁵⁶

Eng and Han's book, *Racial Melancholia*, was motivated by an alarming number of suicides by Asian American students on their university campus. Han, a clinical psychologist, paired with Eng to theorize the patterns among the Asian American students suffering from mental illness. Their book revolves around Han's various patients who serve as case studies for theorizing what they term racial melancholia: a pathological mourning without end, in which the significance of a lost object remains "unconscious and opaque."⁵⁷ Drawing on Freud's definition of melancholia, racial melancholia refers to racial identity as the lost object that an individual might continually mourn.

Eng and Han treat racial identity itself as a verb rather than an object that can be clearly lost. It is "a continuous modulating relation between object and subject, a coexisting and coextensive formation, a dynamic movement of sociality and causality."⁵⁸ Racial identities exist in relation to others and are therefore subject to others' recognition. For Eng and Han, race itself is a relation in which subjects continually assert and leverage their identity in the context of others.⁵⁹ At various points, Han's Asian American patients recognize their racial difference, but ultimately internalize the belief that their racial identity either does not or should not matter.

⁵⁶ Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, p. 17.

⁵⁷ Eng and Han, p. 3.

⁵⁸ Eng and Han, p. 12.

⁵⁹ Eng and Han write, "race is a relation: a continuous modulating historical relationship among subjects mediated by socio-legal processes of social inclusion and exclusion." See Eng and Han, p. 9.

Even if it is contingent upon performances of respectability, an abject individual may no longer see themselves as abject if there is no active threat of deviant violence. The patients therefore voice that their various psychological issues of depression, self-esteem, and belonging are their own or their family's fault. Eng and Han, however, trace a pattern among them, in which patients refuse to recognize the existence and/or significance of their racial identities, and thereby facilitate their loss.

Eng and Han attempt to situate their patients' experiences in the context of racial history rather than mere personal or familial dynamics. In the context of model minority triangulation, they claim that Asian Americans inhabit a unique space that results in this racial melancholia.⁶⁰ Eng and Han believe that melancholia has specific significance to their Asian American patients because their patients often do not consider their psychological issues to have any direct relevance to their racial identity. Rather, their patients are often convinced that their Asian identity has been effectively included into mainstream American society. In other words, beyond appearances, these Asian Americans do not believe they have to find a reason to stick out or feel that they are any different than their white counterparts in the United States. Under performative citizenship, they ostensibly have the same status and privilege as white Americans, should they successfully fulfill model minority expectations of respectability.

These Asian Americans are therefore espousing some form of a model minority assumption, in which abject individuals believe themselves to be undeserving until they have sufficiently met model expectations of respectability. They believe that their issues and trauma are their own responsibility because they have either insufficiently assimilated or insufficiently tried to maintain their Asian identity. Their inabilities to fit in or thrive are due to a lack of effort;

⁶⁰ Eng and Han, p. 16.

they have not adequately performed or achieved. It is one's individual fault that they either feel out of place or unfairly treated. The individuals are therefore unable to name and label their racial difference precisely because they want to believe that their racial difference does not have any bearing on their condition. Eng and Han argue that their patients therefore experience racial melancholia as a result of continually mourning a racial difference they have suppressed but have not fully let go:

melancholia describes an unresolved process that might usefully describe the compromised immigration and assimilation of Asian Americans into the national fabric. The suspended assimilation, the inability to blend into the American melting pot, suggests that for Asian Americans ideals of whiteness are perpetually strained, continually estranged. They remain at an unattainable distance, at once a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal.⁶¹

Racial melancholia, in essence, represents a continual inability to commit to one's identity. On one end, the promise of assimilation and belonging through respectability leads their patients to perform (White) respectability. On the other end, though, the process of respectability requires Asian Americans to forfeit their real differences. The belief in potential assimilation demands that individuals no longer recognize the differences in their identity. One's culture, language, tradition, family, and heritage can no longer have salience in the process of assimilation. Assimilation is an unfinished process between mourning an Othered identity that has to be abandoned and refusing to believe that one is any different.⁶²

⁶¹ Eng and Han, p. 36.

⁶² Eng and Han, p. 60.

Eng and Han observe their patients therefore straddling a relationship between assimilation and refusal, White or Other. This inability to fully reject or commit to assimilation, though, produces this melancholia, in which patients are unable to let go of either, and to great harm.⁶³ For Eng and Han, “the melancholic assumes the emptiness of the lost object or ideal, identifies with this emptiness, and thus participates in his or her own self-denigration and ruination of self-esteem.”⁶⁴ The pressure to perform and embrace respectability directly conflicts with one’s ability to exist as anything but White. Individuals who therefore buy into the notion that respectability will reap rewards must engage in a form of identity suicide: “the psychological erasure of one’s identity – a self-imposed exile and exclusion.”⁶⁵

The individual who is suffering from racial melancholia is therefore suffering from a split psyche: one that is simultaneously persuaded that performed respectability can lead to belonging and emancipation, just as they know that respectability requires the abandonment of their identity.

Assimilation into the national fabric demands a psychic splitting on the part of Asian American subject who knows and does not know, at once, that she or he is part of the larger social body....[it is] difficult to admit widespread racism since to do so would be to say that he aspires to join a racist society.⁶⁶

Han’s patients all strive for and embody White respectability at some level. Some patients succeed in its performance better than others, but all seek or are referred to counselling with Dr. Han for various issues regarding depression. Two of the patients, Min and Nelson, were

⁶³ Eng and Han, p. 37.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Eng and Han, p. 37-38.

⁶⁶ Eng and Han, p. 42-43.

referred to therapy with Dr. Han to deal with issues revolving around self-esteem, vocational and academic performance, and romantic relationships. These symptoms can be understood as being the result of respectable violence in which abject individuals self-discipline themselves in response to external expectations of (White) respectability.

When digging into the possible reasons that underlie Nelson's struggle with self-esteem, Nelson recounts his first social interactions as a child. Nelson was raised by his Japanese mother in the United States, where he grew up after moving from Japan as an infant. Prior to formal schooling, Nelson predominantly spoke Japanese at home with his mother and experienced an overall Japanese upbringing with her.

Nelson did not have many particular social problems once he began school, but could recall a specific interaction with his teacher and class after pronouncing the word "crooked" as "crookd." The teacher reprimanded his pronunciation and forced him to divulge he had learned the error through his mother.

Dr. Han observes this as a moment of failed mimicry – a deviance of assimilation. From this point onward, Han describes Nelson as holding skepticism of his mother and her value towards successfully navigating American life. In the words of Dr. Han,

Although acquiring a new language (English) should be perceived as a positive cognitive development, what is often not acknowledged sufficiently is the concomitant psychic trauma triggered by the loss of what had once been a safe, nurturing, and familiar language to the young child (Japanese).⁶⁷

It is at this point that Nelson begins to develop a split psyche mired in melancholia. Nelson desires peer acceptance and realizes that it can be potentially achieved by successfully

⁶⁷ Eng and Han, p. 55.

embodying respectability. However, the path towards assimilation begins to conflict with his own identity as well as his mother's identity.

“Through the shaming of his mother and mother tongue and, in turn, his attempts to repair them, Nelson's own Japanese identity becomes alienated and dissociated from him, transformed into a persecuting and bad object.”⁶⁸

Nelson's racial difference becomes a source of shame and his racial identity is something that must be killed off if he is to assimilate performative expectations of respectability. As much as he identifies with being Japanese, Nelson understands that he can only be legibly respectable if he adequately subordinates it, leading him to self-discipline himself to appease these pressures.⁶⁹ Nelson is enveloped in a melancholia because he is committed to retaining aspects of his Japanese identity even when he knows that it is hampering his ability to be interpreted as respectable in the United States. He is entangled within respectable violence because this internal struggle is prompted by the performative expectations which surround him and tell him that without performance, his identity does not belong in the American citizenry.

Han observes similarities between Nelson and with another patient, Mina. Mina is a transnational adoptee who was born to Korean parents and was adopted by white Americans in the United States as an infant. Mina navigated life in the United States well and became a successful dancer in a renowned New York City ballet company. Throughout her upbringing, Mina's racial differences went unacknowledged by her parents, leading her to describe herself as American and essentially white despite her “Asian face.”⁷⁰ She distances herself from “true”

⁶⁸ Eng and Han, p. 59.

⁶⁹ Eng and Han, p. 56-57.

⁷⁰ Eng and Han, p. 77.

Koreans and Korean Americans, who she repudiates as “ugly,” “garish,” and “slutty.”⁷¹ However, she distances herself from other non-white groups even further, expressing stigmas that Latin Americans, African Americans, and Jewish Americans all had various deficits in morality and intelligence. Mina suggests that “at least Asian Americans are academically successful and work hard and don’t bother anyone.”⁷² Even though Mina separates herself from the negative attributes that she casts on “true” Asian Americans and other non-white groups, Mina shows patterns of self-deprecation and also struggles with her self-esteem, culminating in her depression.

Mina knows that she is Korean at some level, even if she has been inculcated with the belief that her Korean background does not matter. She recognizes that she is not a “true” Korean, but also acknowledges the “Asian face” asterisk to her otherwise whiteness. For Han, this ambiguity results in a similar melancholia in which Mina is unable to commit or belong to either Korean or White identity. In the words of Han, “Mina knows that she has lost her Korean birth mother, but she does not know exactly what she had lost in her.”⁷³ Mina by all accounts should be able to assert her white identity, however, her phenotypical difference serves as a reminder that she may lose something by wholeheartedly embracing Whiteness. Mina does not even know why her racial abjectivity should matter if she has successfully embodied White respectability, but the loss of difference complicates her satisfaction with comprehensive assimilation. Mina herself eventually confides her frustration with her parents for her white

⁷¹ Eng and Han, p. 70.

⁷² Eng and Han, p. 73.

⁷³ Eng and Han, p. 79.

upbringing: “I’m so angry at them for not exposing me to Korean things. I told my mom maybe I’m screwed up because I didn’t have anything Korean when I was growing up.”⁷⁴

As an Asian American who has effectively “made it,” it would appear odd that Mina would feel frustrated with belonging in the United States. She was the only one in her graduating class to be invited to join the ballet company, she does not doubt her attractiveness and value in social circles, and she largely feels that she belongs among white circles. She explicitly states that she feels most comfortable among white people than any other groups.⁷⁵ Mina is therefore not threatened by deviant violence and should have full belonging in the American citizenry based on her ability to meet its performative expectations of respectability.

However, it is precisely because Mina’s racial difference is unacknowledged that respectability relates to her differently than to her white counterparts. By ignoring Mina’s difference and only recognizing her as white, Mina’s family and social surroundings solely recognize her respectability. Her more holistic and more complex identity does not receive recognition, and she experiences the psychological toll of respectable violence as a result. According to her upbringing, Mina literally feels that she can only exist (and have her existence recognized) as White.

None of Han’s patients, again, were ever subject to, much less threatened by, deviant violence. The pressure to perform respectability and desire to be respectable are nonetheless psychologically damaging to them. We therefore see the chronic results of attempting to abide by or satisfy these expectations of respectability. Their patients did not experience these physiological symptoms from outright direct violence, but instead from the continuous

⁷⁴ Eng and Han, p. 78.

⁷⁵ Eng and Han, p. 73.

respectable violence that accompanied their expectations to outperform or ignore their racialized deviance. Even if this respectable violence was internal, and partially self-driven, it was nonetheless in response to the performative expectations and pressures that surrounded Mina and Nelson.

Nelson understood that there was an expectation to perform and that existing as a non-white body was not enough to guarantee his belonging in the United States. While adequate performances of respectability allow non-white individuals to pass into a citizenry, this belonging is of course contingent. The absence of certainty results in its own form of respectable violence in which the individual is unable to psychologically rest assured that they will be recognized if they let their guard down. Nelson simultaneously fears that his racial difference will be “found out” if he does not continually prove his respectability all while he becomes painfully alienated from his Japanese identity.

According to a performative script of respectability, model minority Asian Americans are offered a path to recognition. However, this recognition is contingent on hyper expectations of respectability and therefore limited if an individual must perform and mold themselves to a citizenry’s expectations before being recognized: “Asian Americans are forced to mimic the model minority stereotype in order to be recognized by mainstream society – in order to be, in order to be seen at all.”⁷⁶

Nelson internalizes this model minority logic by mimicking performative expectations of respectability as a means towards recognition. Such a form of recognition is of course limited, though, if the recognized identity consequently homogenizes respectable non-white Asians and erases the Asian Americans that do not fit its script. Those who buy into the model minority

⁷⁶ Eng and Han, p. 45.

trope will therefore “opt for ‘safe’ professional and upwardly mobile careers – doctor, engineer, lawyer – often at the expense of individual desire and psychic well-being – ‘doing well versus feeling well,’” even if adhering to these expectations will cause individuals to more likely psychological and metabolically “choke.”⁷⁷

Other studies have also found that the continual pressure to display respectability results in physiological harm. One study asked Black adults across Chicago whether they engaged in performative expectations of respectability (what they term as “vigilance”), such as “adapting presentation of self (including style of dress and ways of speaking) to reduce the likelihood of experiencing discrimination in social settings.”⁷⁸ Other examples of “vigilance” measured whether respondents made deliberate efforts to avoid social situations where the “likelihood of discrimination may be higher” and whether respondents often prepared themselves to appropriately respond to potential prejudice and discrimination.⁷⁹ The researchers compared responses to these questions with respondent’s stress levels and found that greater vigilance corresponded with greater “deterioration in physical and mental health via the stress response pathway.”⁸⁰ The higher levels of stress were significant because they explained discrepancies in the respondents’ health symptoms, including respondents’ dispositions to hypertension and obesity.⁸¹ The demands to satisfy performative expectations therefore go beyond psychological harm and extends to individuals’ physiological health.

⁷⁷ Eng and Han, p. 45-46; Sapna Cheryan and Galen V. Bodenhausen, “When Positive Stereotypes Threaten Intellectual Performance: The Psychological Hazards of ‘Model Minority’ Status.” *Psychological Science* 11, no. 5 (2000): 399-402.

⁷⁸ Hedwig Lee and Margaret Takako Hicken, “Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Health Implications of Black Respectability Politics,” *Souls* 18, no. 2-4 (2016): p. 424.

⁷⁹ Lee and Hicken, “Death by a Thousand Cuts,” p. 424.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Lee and Hicken, “Death by a Thousand Cuts,” p. 433.

Eng and Han show that individuals undergo respectable violence even if they do not consciously pursue paths of respectability. Unlike Nelson and others who consciously attempt to and struggle to embody respectability, Mina does not feel a need to outperform or hide her racial deviance. She has instead been instilled with the belief that her racial identity does not matter. Yet even though Mina has excelled in her display of respectability, the refusal to recognize her difference results in its own form of identity washing. While Mina does not struggle to embrace Whiteness in the way that Nelson does, the recognition she receives from her surroundings also inflicts respectable violence.

Mina's desire to join white social circles and effectively assimilate is complicated by her surroundings' assumption that she can *only* be white. Her racial difference is not allowed to exist if she is to be accepted within Whiteness. Mina is therefore forced to dissociate herself from her racial difference even though she never had a deep attachment to it beyond her "Asian face." Mina did not even have an interest in developing her Asian identity, but by not having the choice to recognize her Asian difference, she dissociates herself from portions of her identity and experiences psychological damage as a result. Together, Nelson and Mina demonstrate how non-white individuals undergo respectable violence when faced with performative expectations of respectability regardless of whether or not they deliberately chose to engage its expectations.

While the model minority has particular application to Asian Americans, respectable violence is not limited to them and affects other non-white individuals who engage performative citizenship's script. Studies within psychology have shown how exposure to racial stereotypes correlates with damage to non-white individuals' self-esteem and mental well-being. Racial stereotypes inherently reflect performative expectations because they serve as mediums for instructing non-white groups how to or not to act.

One study found that American Indians are often portrayed in mass media predominantly as spiritual (Disney's Pocahontas), combative (Atlanta Braves), alcoholic, delinquent (likely to drop out of school), impoverished, and/or overly deviant to the American dream.⁸² In contrast, American Indians are seldom shown as contemporary people in everyday roles like as "students, teachers, doctors, lawyers, housewives, cab drivers, plumbers or firemen."⁸³ Stephanie Fryberg found that American Indian students who were familiar with these American Indian stereotypes were more likely to struggle with self-esteem and less likely to succeed academically in their studies. According to Fryberg, this is because these stereotypes led American Indians to see themselves as different from "normal" people, meaning that their identity limited their possibilities in life. Not all the stereotypes listed above are necessarily negative, however, they all remind American Indians that they are abnormal to conventional respectability.

Social representation theory suggests that even if American Indian mascots are viewed positively, these representations are likely to have negative consequences because they underscore the constrained variability of American Indian representations, constraining individual potential and limiting what American Indians see as possible for themselves in the future.⁸⁴

Even if individuals are exposed to positive stereotypes of their identity, like the model minority trope, the very presence of performative expectations (positive or negative) limits the recognition a non-white individual can have. Performative expectations for non-white

⁸² See Stephanie A. Fryberg and Hazel Rose Markus, "On Being American Indian: Current and Possible Selves," *Self and Identity* 2, no. 4 (2003): 325-344.

⁸³ Stephanie A. Fryberg, Hazel Rose Markus, Daphna Oyserman, and Joseph M. Stone, "Of Warrior Chiefs and Indian Princesses: The Psychological Consequences of American Indian Mascots," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 30, no. 3 (2008): p. 211.

⁸⁴ Fryberg et al., "Of Warrior Chiefs and Indian Princesses," p. 210.

individuals in effect limit the existence non-white individuals can have in the American citizenry.

These conclusions all relate back to Fanon's original claim that non-white individual live according to the white gaze.⁸⁵ One's recognition cannot be fully achieved if it requires pandering to an external gaze. Despite avoiding deviant violence, non-white individuals experience respectable violence by way of performative expectations. Even though non-white individuals have means to belonging and subjecthood in today's performative citizenship by appealing to respectability, this path can be psychologically damaging and anything but a simple matter of acting respectable.

The New Ethnocentrism

This paper has demonstrated that we still see ethnocentric violence in today's performative citizenship against both deviant and respectable non-white bodies. By understanding how abject individuals have been marked by notions of deviance, we see how they are scrutinized at a higher standard than non-white individuals. Despite this, ethnocentric disciplining in performative citizenship avoids scrutiny. Performative citizenship maintains its ethnoblind legitimacy because it disciplines deviance rather than phenotype.

In *Korematsu*, the court recited that Japanese people should not be treated differently because of their identity, however, both the dissenting and concurring Supreme Court Justices claimed that a standard of respectability was necessary to a citizenry's protection. Although members of the American citizenry better criticized Yang's prescription of respectability a century later, respectability remains a common way of evaluating an individual's entitlement to

⁸⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. xiv.

citizenship. This paper has detailed how non-white individuals are often Othered from respectability and marked as deviant, meaning that questions of loyalty and deviance will likely be disproportionately enforced against abject bodies. This manifests as deviant violence when deviance is externally punished or disciplined, but also as respectable violence when non-white individuals subject themselves to internal self-disciplining.

Consequently, whether a non-white individual enacts respectability or not, there remains a violent cost for them, despite performative citizenship's supposed ethnoblindness. Respectability and deviance can nonetheless be presented as self-chosen fates under performative citizenship and give an impression that non-white individuals have the freedom to choose their belonging in today's citizenry.

We can see that performative citizenship has become entrenched in the United States because of this notion of "choice." Relative to historical forms of citizenship, the American citizenry is able to claim that it no longer excludes on the basis of immutable identity. It instead excludes on an ethnoblind basis of performance. This paper, however, has demonstrated that performative expectations of respectability are not equally enforced across racial and ethnic identities. Even if immutable identity is no longer disciplined, racially and ethnically informed understandings of deviance are, which forces abject individuals to disproportionately satisfy performative expectations of respectability compared to white Americans, or risk facing deviant violence. Despite this onus, performative citizenship maintains its legitimacy because unlike phenotype, respectability can be performed and therefore chosen. This project has problematized this claim by demonstrating how abject performances of respectability are seldom free choices and often result in respectable violence. By understanding the demands made against abject individuals under performative citizenship in the United States, the "choice" to embrace

respectability is understood as a “choice” between external deviant violence and internal respectable violence.

Yet this supposed “choice” has justified the ethnocentric treatment of non-white individuals within performative citizenship today. This “choice” has led theorists and practitioners to frame performative citizenship as a predominantly emancipating institution for abject individuals. By presenting how scholars have theorized citizenship and how American politicians have designed current U.S. citizenship, I demonstrate how they have both worked to legitimize performative citizenship on the basis that abject individuals can “choose” to become respectable and therefore free right-bearing citizens, while neglecting the forms of deviant and respectable violence that continue to threaten abject individuals under an American performative citizenship.