

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: GLOBALIZATION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY
IN THE ART OF THERESA HAK KYUNG
CHA, YONG SOON MIN, AND NIKKI S.
LEE.

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History and Archaeology

This dissertation offers a comparative study of the work of three Korean American women artists: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982), Yong Soon Min (1953-), and Nikki S. Lee (1970-). While the works by these three artists have garnered some critical attention, they have never been the subject of in-depth art historical research. Embracing the artistic media of photography, film, and video in their work these three artists express a common concern about their identities as simultaneously Koreans, Americans, and women. By looking at these artists' work together, this dissertation explores how the three artists negotiate their hybrid cultural identities in a globalized contemporary America. This dissertation also examines the role of photography, film, and video as their major artistic media following the art practice of the 1970s' Conceptualism.

Cha's subtle and allusive film and video installation, *Exilée* (1980), for example, features images associated with the colonial history of her home country along with images and text about trans-pacific passage. Min's work from the 1990s includes photographs of writing on her own body, and images referring to historical events in both

Korea and the United States. In her performative series of photographs entitled *Projects* (1997-2001), Lee disguises herself as a member of various social and cultural groups, trying to assimilate into them. Together, the three artists offer an intensive comparative case study of the ways in which hybrid cultural identity can be figured in the contemporary world. Focusing on the interpretive analysis of selected art works, the dissertation will show the unique intensity of the visual arts as a tool to communicate concepts of cultural identities, while also bringing needed specificity to the theoretical debates on the issues of cultural and ethnic identities.

GLOBALIZATION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY IN THE ART OF THERESA HAK
KYUNG CHA, YONG SOON MIN, AND NIKKI S. LEE

By

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To My Mother

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Introduction

Three Korean American women artists, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982), Yong Soon Min (1953-), and Nikki S. Lee (1970-) each produced a distinctive body of work in the quarter century after 1975. Cha created highly subtle and allusive works that included performance, video, film, mail and audio art, an anthology of film theory, and a novel. Drawing upon linguistic and film theories, her work explores themes such as the functions of language, memory, and time. Min, a contemporary of Cha, began to produce photographs, installations, and prints in the 1980s that often featured images referring to historical events both in Korea and the United States. From a new generation of artists, Lee undertook a series of photographic performances from 1997 to 2001, in which she disguised herself as a member of various social and cultural groups.

Despite the different visual expressions and artistic media, these three artists share a common concern about their identities as simultaneously Koreans, Americans, and women. While the works of these three artists have garnered some critical attention, they have never been the subject of in-depth art historical research. By looking at these artists' work together, this dissertation explores how the three artists negotiate their hybrid cultural identities in a globalized contemporary America. Focusing on the interpretive analysis of selected art works, the dissertation shows the unique intensity of the visual arts as a tool to communicate concepts of cultural identities, while also bringing needed specificity to the theoretical debates on the issues of cultural and ethnic identities.

The Selection of the Artists

Issues of identity are not always a compelling concern for Asian American artists. However, Cha, Min, and Lee vigorously and consistently address the issue of identity in their work. I chose Cha, Min, and Lee for the subject of my dissertation not only because the issue of identity is central for them, but also because these artists intensely and critically reflect upon shifting conceptions of identity in an increasingly transnational and global world. While attempting to move beyond old assimilationist agendas of identity politics confined to the U.S. domestic context, Cha's work seeks to extend her concern to the colonial history of her homeland, articulating the intertwined relationship between her hybrid identity as a Korean American woman in the U.S and the history of her home country. Similarly, rejecting the cultural nationalist approach to Asian American identity of previous years, Min connects her position in the U.S. to the modern and contemporary history of her home country by engaging the ideology of the Minjung movement, a 1980s social, political, and cultural movement in South Korea. While assuming a transnational or diasporic attitude,¹ Cha and Min firmly ground their senses of hybrid identities in the specific material history of modern and contemporary Korea. As a new immigrant, Lee also adopts a pronounced transnational perspective in her work, distancing herself from the old Asian American identity politics. While challenging old essentialist notions of cultural and ethnic identity, Lee often reveals a distanced and uncritical approach to the

¹ Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist, eds., *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* (Amsterdam University Press, 2010): 20-21. Initially, the use of the term "diaspora" was limited to indicating the historical experiences of forced dispersion of Jews and Armenians. Since the late 1970s, the use of the term has extended to encompass various kinds of dispersion of people from their original homelands. The term "transnationalism" was coined in the 1990s to describe migrant activities occurring across national borders. While the classical use of the term diaspora tends to emphasize distinct collective identity and cultural boundaries of certain ethnic or religious group in the host countries and their ties to countries of origin, over the past decade both terms have increasingly been used interchangeably to denote complex cross-border activities. This dissertation mostly uses the two terms interchangeably.

specific histories of the communities. Lee's attitude reflects a new-found confidence about her Asian identity which resulted from the rapid growth of the Asian American community and of the economic power of Asian countries.

In particular, I selected three female artists whose concerns with cultural and ethnic identities are always affected and shaped by those with gender issues. Although employing an allusive style, Cha consistently strives to address her female identity throughout her work. On the other hand, Min expresses much more explicitly her perspective as a woman through her critical approach to the masculinist discourses of nationalism. While Lee's engagement in the issues of gender is equally pronounced in her work, Lee's work often reveals a reiteration of the existing gender stereotypes, rather than a subversion of them.

The three artists are of Korean descent whose works are informed and affected by the unique immigration history of Korea, Japanese colonialism, war, U.S. neocolonialism, as well as shaped by their female identities. While the Korean American community shares common experiences of racial discrimination and marginalization with Asian immigrant communities in general, it is distinctive in that members of the Korean American community tend to maintain a strong sense of nationalism and ethnic attachment. Although Korean immigration to the U.S. started in the late 1880s, the first major influx of the immigrants took place only after the liberalization of the 1965 immigration law.² As a result, the Korean immigrant community consists mainly of first-generation immigrants and their children, who are often called the 1.5 generation,

² Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 20. Lowe notes that the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 marks the removal of the national origins quota system. Since the 1920s, immigrants acts such as National Act of 1924 and the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 had restricted Asian immigration by giving lower quotas to Asian countries.

indicating immigrants who were born in Korea and immigrated to the U.S. between the ages of five and thirteen. With the first-generation immigrants representing the majority of the community, the Korean immigrant community shows a distinctive sense of ethnic attachment. Scholars also note that the cultural and linguistic homogeneity of Korean society results in a strong ethnic attachment among Korean immigrants.³ Additionally, pronounced nationalistic feelings in the community are closely tied to the historical condition of the first wave of Korean immigration, which took place during Japanese colonization. Like Korean immigrant communities in other parts of the world, the Korean immigrant community in America was permeated with marked nationalist spirit. Immigrant communities were often used as important centers for independence movements. Until the liberation of Korea in 1945, Korean immigrants remained vigorously committed to the cause of national independence, sending money and aiding various military and diplomatic activities.⁴ In addition to the strong legacy of colonialism, the lasting impact of the Cold War and the division of the country made the lived experiences of Korean Americans distinct from those of other Asian immigrant communities. Post-1965 Korean immigration is marked by the entry of the college-educated middle class and professionals. As new immigrants with higher levels of educational attainments, they carry a strong sense of their ethnic heritage and maintain close contact with their home countries.⁵ The strong sense of ethnic attachment and nationalism prevalent in the Korean American community is intricately related to the

³ Pyong Gap Min, ed. "Korean Americans," in *Asian Americans: Contemporary Trends and Issues*, 2nd ed. (London and New Delhi: Thousand Oaks, California, London, and New Delhi: Pine Forge Press, 2006), 244.

⁴ Richard S. Kim, *The Quest for Statehood: Korean Immigrant Nationalism and U.S. Sovereignty* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

⁵ Pyong Gap Min, 234.

transnational or diasporic attitudes of the three artists, Cha, Min, and Lee. These common cultural and historical heritages bring an intensely focused approach to the investigation of the complexities and dynamics of the formation of a certain ethnic identity.

While Cha and Min are contemporaries, Lee belongs to a much younger generation. Cha and Min emigrated to the U.S., leaving their home country's devastating economic and political situations while Lee benefited from the rapid economic growth and globalization of Korea prior to arriving in the U.S. This purposeful selection of artists from different generations enables us to gain insights into different approaches to one's sense of cultural and ethnic identity in the context of changing social and cultural environments.

Asian American Art History

While the works of the three artists have received some critical attention, they have never been the subject of a substantial art historical investigation. Encouraged by the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, Asian American scholars and activists coined the term "Asian American," by which they attempted to mobilize a political coalition of different Asian communities in the U.S. While emphasizing the common collective historical experiences of Asian Americans in the U.S. and their unique cultural and ethnic heritages, scholars and activists protested the long-standing idea of Asian immigrants as "foreigners." They rejected the term "Orientals," which perpetuated the foreignness of Asian immigrants, and instead presented the term "Asian American" to claim their rootedness in and belonging to the United States.⁶ The Asian

⁶ Arif Dirlik, "Asians on the Rim: Transnational Capital and Local Community in the Making of Contemporary Asian America," *Amerasia Journal* 22, no. 3 (1996): 5.

American movement led to the establishment of the field of Asian American studies at many colleges and universities across the nation. Since the 1970s, Asian American historians and literary scholars have sought to recover and reclaim the experiences of Asians in America. For example, the first anthology edited by American-born Asians, *Aiiieeeee!* (1974) and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976) clearly addressed the desire of Asian American writers to shatter Orientalism by claiming their sense of belonging in America.⁷

While Asian American history and literature have been considered important tools to examine the lived experiences of Asian Americans, artistic production by Asian Americans has not received proper appreciation from the Asian American community.⁸ Artistic production by Asians in the U.S. began during the Chinese immigration of the mid-1880s. Prior to 1965, the number of artists of Asian descent was limited as a result of restrictive immigration laws, and they worked individually rather than within the rubric of the Asian American community. However, they organized a number of art associations and clubs to promote their art and exhibited their works in numerous solo and group exhibitions.⁹ With the coinage of the term *Asian American* many Asian American artists in the early 1970s actively participated in developing visual forms that expressed their experiences while promoting the visibility of Asian American art and artists through workshops and publications. They were associated with workshops such as the Basement

⁷ Sheng-mei Ma, *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 12. On Orientalism, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

⁸ Gordon H. Chang, "Emerging from the Shadows" in *Asian American Art: A History, 1850-1970*, ed. Gordon H. Chang, Mark Dean Johnson, and Paul J. Karlstrom (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), ix.

⁹ Gordon H. Chang and Mark Dean Johnson, introduction to *Asian/American/Modern Art: Shifting Currents, 1900-1970*, exh. cat., ed. Daniell Cornell and Mark Dean Johnson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 9.

Workshop in New York, the Asian American Resource Workshop in Boston, and the Kearny Street Workshop in San Francisco. These workshops produced various magazines and supported art activities as well as educational projects. The Basement Workshop produced a magazine entitled *Bridge* and the artist book *Yellow Pearl*. Working in collaboration, artists produced wall murals and posters for rallies and community events.¹⁰

Despite efforts by many artists to gain public attention, Asian American art did not achieve significant visibility among the general public and in the mainstream art scene until the early 1990s. As postmodern theories questioned the hegemonic nature of Western art and the marginalized art of women and minorities, the mainstream art world began to look to the issues of multiculturalism. Calling into question the art museum's dedication to representing white and heterosexual male ideas, multiculturalism urged mainstream art museums to pay attention to issues of race, gender, and ethnicity and the systematic discrimination against women and artists of color. A series of exhibitions in the early 1990s, such as *The Decade Show: Framework of Identity in the 1980s* in 1990 and *1993 Whitney Biennial*, were framed around identity politics and introduced numerous marginalized artists including African Americans, Asian Americans, Latin Americans, and Native Americans. Organized by the New Museum of Contemporary American Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, *The Decade Show* was acclaimed as an unprecedented attempt to examine a broad range of issues such as racial, ethnic, and sexual identities. However, these exhibitions received some negative reviews. Critics such as Maurice Berger pointed out

¹⁰ Elaine H. Kim, *Fresh Talk Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 21.

that *The Decade Show* was organized as a token gesture in a hasty attempt to respond to cultural and social changes. He contended that the exhibition failed to explore the depth and complexity of minority artists whose works had been ignored by mainstream art institutions in its superficial glimpse of the work of over 140 artists. Berger also criticized the 1993 *Whitney Biennial* for its poor representation of artists of color.¹¹ In her review of the Biennial, Eleanor Heartney also stated that while the exhibit sought to grapple with the issue of multiculturalism, it perpetuated the simplistic binary rhetoric of the victim and oppressor.¹² Despite these limitations, the exhibitions nonetheless helped to increase the visibility of Asian American artists in the mainstream art world.

The early 1990s saw an increase in both art activities of Asian American artists and critical attention to Asian American art. In 1990, Lucy Lippard published *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*, which focused on works produced by non-white artists and the issues of ethnic and cultural identity. She organized her book around five themes including “mapping” and “naming,” and she examined a number of works by Asian American artists. In the same year, a group of Asian American artists including Margo Machida, Ken Chu, Tomie Arai, and Byron Kim organized *Godzilla: Asian American Art Network* in New York. The purpose of the organization was to provide a space for communication and mutual support among artists and curators by publishing a newsletter and holding regular meetings. The founding members sent an

¹¹ Maurice Berger, “Are Art Museums Racist?,” *Art in America* 78 (Sept. 1990): 74.

¹² Eleanor Heartney, “Identity Politics at the Whitney” in *Postmodern Perspective: Issues in Contemporary Art*, ed. Howard Risatti (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1990), 286.

open letter to David Ross, the newly-appointed director of the Whitney Museum, protesting the lack of representation of Asian American artists from the 1991 Biennial.¹³

A number of smaller scale exhibitions addressing the theme of multiculturalism were held in the early 1990s. In 1992, the exhibition *Mistaken Identities*, curated by Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Connie Lewallen, was held at the Art Museum of the University of California, Santa Barbara. This exhibition introduced artists of color including Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Yong Soon Min. In her catalogue essay, Solomon-Godeau called for a politically charged multiculturalism rather than a pluralist one, arguing that pluralism overlooks racism and economic inequalities.¹⁴

In 1993, the Queens Museum in New York organized an exhibition titled *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art*. Curated by Jane Farver, the exhibition examined both the similarities and differences between the works by Korean immigrants in the United States and those by Korean artists in the homeland, suggesting the need for solidarity and alliance. In 1994, the first major exhibition focusing exclusively on contemporary works by American artists of Asian descent, *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, was organized by The Asia Society in New York and traveled to Tacoma, Minneapolis, Honolulu, San Francisco, Boston, and Houston, over the course of two years. The exhibition featured twenty immigrant and refugee artists from China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and India who represented four overlapping categories:

¹³ Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora: Asian American Visual Arts Collectives from Godzilla, Godzookie, to the Barnstormers* (Beijing and Shanghai: Timezone 8 Limited, 2008), 39.

¹⁴ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Mistaken Identities," in *Mistaken Identities*, exh.cat., University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1993):19. Solomon-Godeau distinguishes politically charged multiculturalism from pluralism which is based on the idea of "assimilation of cultural difference to mainstream art culture."

“Traversing Cultures,” “Situating,” “Speaking to and of Asia,” and “Addressing East-West Interaction.” As these categories suggest, *Asia/America* focused on the issue of Asian American identity formation and its association with immigration and acculturation.¹⁵ The exhibition was built upon the experiences of displacement, loss, and acculturation shared by artists who were born in Asia and immigrated to the United States. Focusing on the experiences of recent Asian immigrant artists and their strategies to negotiate new culture, the exhibition sought to frame their work within a broader global social and cultural context.

Margo Machida, the curator of *Asia/America*, pointed out that the framework of the exhibition built upon a shared cultural and ethnic identity often led to a general misunderstanding of the exhibition as “self-marginalizing” and expressing the rhetoric of victimization and the traditional distinction between center and periphery.¹⁶ In her book *Why Asia?: Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, published in 1998, the late art historian Alice Yang similarly expressed her concern that exhibitions focusing on Asian American identity often reduce the complex and multiple concerns of Asian American artists into a general ethnic concern.¹⁷ She stated, “At the same time that Asian American artists try to articulate their own position within this society, they run the risk of reducing it into a formulaic set of generalities. Trying to open up a space for critical discussion within their own community, they run the risk of isolation and segregation.” On the other hand, the exhibition *Asia/America* was regarded as a general expression of the diasporic experience shared by many people in the twentieth-century. For example, in New York

¹⁵ Margo Machida, Vishakha N. Desai, and John K. Tchen, *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, exh.cat., The Asia Society Galleries (New York: The New Press, 1994), 65.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁷ Alice Yang, *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), 105.

magazine, Kay Larson dismissed the complex historical specificities of immigrant experiences by stating that “The migrants tell of loneliness, sleeping on floors, working at dull jobs, learning that nobody cares. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?...We’re all in exile. None of us has a way home.”¹⁸

More publications on Asian American art came out in the early years of the 21st century. In 2003, Elaine H. Kim, Margo Machida, and Sharon Mizota published *Fresh Talk, Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* in which they examined issues of Asian American identity formation in the contemporary world and introduced lesser-known Asian American artists.¹⁹ In 2008, *Asian American Art: A History, 1850-1970* was published, which contained the first exhaustive survey of Asian American art history.²⁰ In the same year, the exhibition titled *Asian/American/Modern Art: Shifting Currents 1900-1970* was held in the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, which focused on works by Asian American artists in the period before 1970.²¹

Since 1968, when the idea of Asian American art was first conceived, the visibility of such art has increased drastically. However, the complexity and the richness of the terrain of Asian American art have not yet been fully recognized. By investigating the ways in which the three Asian American artists, Cha, Min, and Lee, formulate their ethnic identities, the dissertation will show how Asian American visual art is a uniquely

¹⁸ Kay Larson, “Asia Minor,” *New York* 27, no.10 (March 7, 1994): 80, 96. In her review of the exhibition *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* which featured Min’s work, Larson viewed the exhibition as a cliché and self-marginalizing, dismissing the complex social and historical specificities of the artists’ work.

¹⁹ Elaine H. Kim, *Fresh Talk Daring Gazes*, 47.

²⁰ Gordon H. Chang, Mark Dean Johnson, and Paul J. Karlstrom, eds. *Asian American Art: A History, 1850-1970* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

²¹ Daniell Cornell and Mark Dean Johnson, ed. *Asian/American/Modern Art: Shifting Currents, 1900-1970*, exh. cat (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008).

important tool to understand the lived experiences of Asian Americans. It will illuminate the intense specificity of the visual arts in expressing the ideas of cultural identities.

Globalization and the Formation of Asian American Identity

Since the 1970s, postmodern theories have challenged the traditional static and essentialist notions of identity. Drawing upon poststructuralism and cultural theories, postmodern scholars and critics have developed a model that views identity as fluid, contingent, and socially constructed. Globalization theories of the 1980s and 1990s further emphasized the multifaceted and situationally-contingent nature of individual and group identity. Numerous theorists argue that in this globalized world, ethnic and cultural identity is fluid, situational, and volitional. Ethnicity is defined as one category that individuals and groups can choose as they define themselves and others. Some scholars and critics contend that we are now in a period of post-identity politics: post-raciology, post-feminism, and post-ethnicity, repudiating the old essentialist view of identity.²²

“Asian American” as a racial and ethnic category that was built upon a common historical experience in the United States has been questioned within the field of Asian American cultural criticism.²³ Since the term was coined, Asian American scholars have emphasized the idea of rootedness in America, discouraging the connection to specific Asian origins and cultures. However, scholars have simultaneously noted that the

²² Ross Posnock, “The Dream of Deracination: The Uses of Cosmopolitanism,” *American Literary History* 12, no.4 (winter 2000): 807; David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 7.

²³ Sai-Ling C. Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads,” *Amerasia Journal* 21, no.1 & 2(1995): 6-7. Wong states as Asian-born new immigrants constituted the majority of Asian American since 1965, the essentialist and a nation-bound definition of “Asian American” has been questioned.

category often reduces the heterogeneous experiences of people of Asian descent into a monolithic and homogenous one. The dramatic increase and diversification of Asian populations in the United States since 1965 further called into question the monolithic notion of the term. Concurrently, rapid global transportation and communications rendered suspect the traditional notions of home and the nation that are restricted to geographic location or a homogenous national culture. The multicultural experiences and multinational ties enabled Asians to assume multiple and diasporic identities. Critics agree that ethnic identity has become an increasingly contested term in a globalized world. This has led to a series of critical questions. How do we maintain the viability of the term “Asian American” in the period of globalization? How do we refigure an “Asian American” identity as a significant conceptual tool to understand the way we formulate our sense of being and belonging in this globalized world?

The debates on globalization are marked by profound disagreement among scholars. While numerous theorists argue that globalization brings about the permeability of national borders and cultural homogenization, ultimately generating global wealth and democratization, others note a simultaneous process of ethnic fragmentation and the emergence of new nation-states, as well as new forms of nationalism. In his book titled *In Defense of Globalization*, published in 2004, Jagdish N. Bhagwati celebrates globalization as beneficial since the free global movement of capital and trade generates global wealth, and the new information technologies have liberating effects on human communication and exchange.²⁴ For scholars such as Bhagwati, globalization brings out a new cosmopolitan virtue which tolerates social divisions and conflicts. Other scholars conceive of globalization as harmful in that it generates increased domination and control

²⁴ Ibid., 30.

by the wealthier countries and cultural homogenization, which threatens local culture. Masao Miyoshi argues in his essay, “A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State,” that globalization is merely an economic substitute for Western colonialism, pointing to the inequality of globalization.²⁵ In his essay “Globalization, Desire, and the Politics of Representation,” Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan similarly argues that globalization draws upon the logic of dominant nation-states and nationalisms.²⁶ This second group of theorists argues that the celebratory view of globalization glosses over the continuing unequal power relations between nations and its oppressive effect on local culture and subaltern resistance.

Globalization theorists such as Arjun Appadurai seek to provide a more nuanced view of globalism, explaining globalization in cultural terms. Appadurai’s perspective draws on the postcolonial notions of hybridity and heterogeneity that are embraced by Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha contends that the condition of hybridity emerging from multiple and heterogeneous identifications between race, sexuality, culture, and class, enables oppositional politics.²⁷ In his book *Modernity at Large*, published in 1996, Appadurai states that mass migration and the electronic mediation of information engendered profound changes in the collective cultural imagination. Announcing the impending end of the era of nation-states, Appadurai argues that the contemporary globalized world is defined by disjunctures caused by the interaction of the multiple cultural flows including “ethnoscapes, mediascape,

²⁵ Masao Miyoshi, “A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State,” *Critical Inquiry* 19 (summer 1993): 726-51.

²⁶ Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, “Globalization, Desire, and the Politics of Representation,” *Comparative Literature* 53, no.4 (2001): 329.

²⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 438.

technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes.”²⁸ For him, these disjunctures caused by multiple cultural flows generate heterogeneity, irony, and resistance at a local level rather than bringing about cultural homogenization, embracing globalization as a positive term. Focusing on the issue of Asian American identity in a contemporary world, Arif Dirlik argues for the need for a reformulation of Asian American identity in his essay “Asians on the Rim: Transnational Capital and Local Community in the Making of Contemporary Asian America,” while emphasizing the continuing strategic importance of the ethnic specificity of Asian Americans.²⁹

On the other hand, feminist scholarship has challenged the gendered assumptions that are invisible in mainstream globalization theories. For example, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, published in 1994 and edited by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, contends that the accounts of postcolonialism and transnationalism overlook issues of gender. The editors maintain that feminism should consider the new global economic structure and the new forms of hegemonies it produces.³⁰

Embracing globalization as a distinguishing aspect of the present moment, scholars have sought to reconfigure the meaning of ethnic boundaries and bonds, repudiating an essentialist approach to ethnicity. In his essay “New Ethnicity,” cultural theorist Stuart Hall draws on a postmodern view of identity in his definition of ethnicity as that which is “constructed historically, culturally, politically.” Hall seeks to provide a non-essentialized view of ethnic identity, which was traditionally associated with nation-

²⁸ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.

²⁹ Arif Dirlik, 13.

³⁰ Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 20.

states and race. He explains that the “new ethnicities” are emerging based on the recognition of difference, plurality, and contradiction.³¹ Focusing on ethnic formation in the United States, David Hollinger, in his 1995 book *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, contends we are on the verge of a “postethnic America,” and he calls for a civic nation that all members of communities can join regardless of their ethnic heritage. He argues that postethnic cosmopolitanism allows for broad and voluntary affiliations between ethnic communities, rather than the limited solidarities afforded by communities of multiculturalism.³² These complexities in the debates surrounding globalization and the formation of ethnic identity point to the ruptures, contradictions, and complexities in the ongoing process of constructing ethnic identity in a contemporary world. These complex discourses of globalization and ethnicity affirm that although old essentialist notions of Asian American identity is limiting, an uncritical celebratory stance toward fluid transnational Asian American identity that elides past cultural struggles of Asian Americans and continuing racism in the U.S is also problematic. This dissertation claims that the term Asian American cannot be completely invalidated. Rather, it should be redefined with a new transnational or diasporic cultural perspective leading to a politically ground Asian American diasporic identity. This dissertation argues that in this sense the term Asian American is still viable.

Asian American art historians and scholars have attempted to examine the impact of globalization on the ways in which Asian American artists perceive identification and belonging. The 1994 exhibition *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* mentioned above already addressed a concern of the changing cultural

³¹ Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 443.

³² David Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 7.

terrain in the context of globalization. Focusing primarily on contemporary Asian-born artists who were working in the U.S. and exploring their experiences of displacement and acculturation, the exhibition sought to reflect the impact of globalization and the 1965 Immigration Act on Asian American communities.

A traveling exhibition entitled *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, organized by the Asia Society in 2006, directly challenged the viability of the category of Asian American art in an increasingly globalized world. In the catalog essay “Reframing Asian America,” Margo Machida notes that the younger artists included in the exhibition distance themselves from issues of ethnic and cultural identity, instead conceiving themselves as cosmopolitans.³³ In 2008, Alexandra Chang published *Envisioning Diaspora: Asian American Visual Arts Collectives from Godzilla, Godzookie, to the Barnstormers*. In this book, the author explores the ways in which contemporary Asian American artists position themselves as diasporic subjects.³⁴

While studies on Cha, Min, and Lee have noted the effect of globalization on identification in their work, they have not fully investigated the specific ethnic and historical conditions out of which the artists produced their work, thus failing to delineate the complexities and the changing dynamics of their works. Reflecting upon the contemporary cultural terrain of globalization, Cha, Min, and Lee’s art rejects essentializing notion of Asian American ethnic identity, which is based on the U.S. assimilationist approach that valorizes an American identity for Asian Americans. While their works argue for considerable attention to issues outside the nation-state in a

³³ Melissa Chiu and Karin Higa, eds., *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, exh. cat. (New Haven and London: Asia Society in association with Yale University Press, 2006), 19.

³⁴ Alexander Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora: Asian American Visual Arts Collectives from Godzilla, Godzookie, to the Barnstormers* (Beijing and Shanghai: Timzone 8 Limited, 2008).

globalized world, they nonetheless reveal the pitfalls of the universalizing and abstract notion of hybrid subjectivity acclaimed by globalization. The three artists assert the significance of the historical specificities of their hybrid cultural identities as Asian Americans in the United States as part of an increasingly globalized world. By investigating the ways in which Cha, Min, and Lee formulate their ethnic identities in their art work in the context of an increasingly globalized world, this dissertation will provide a distinct contribution to current debates on the viability of certain ethnic categories, and of identity politics in a globalized world. By utilizing theories of globalization and the notion of material hybrid subjectivity suggested by Lisa Lowe and Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan to conduct an in-depth analysis of the artists' works, and by vigorously exploring the similarities and differences in the artists' approaches to ethnic identity, this dissertation will contribute greatly to current studies of the three Asian American artists.³⁵

Organization of the Dissertation

The organization of this dissertation is largely based on thematic concerns. The dissertation is composed of the introduction, the three body chapters each on one artist, and the conclusion. Each chapter starts with sections that provide a literature review of the artist's work and biographical information. These sections are followed by in-depth discussions of selected works of art.

The first chapter of the dissertation explores the ways in which Cha addresses issues of hybrid cultural identity in conjunction with globalization. This chapter examines

³⁵ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 67; R. Radhakrishnan, "Globalization, Desire, and the Politics of Representation," 329.

Cha's artistic *oeuvre*, focusing on selected video, film, and performance works including *Aveugle Voix* (1975), *Mouth-to-Mouth* (1975), *Passages/Paysages* (1978), *Other Things Seen*, *Other Thing Heard (Ailleurs)* (1978), and *Exilée* (1980). Cha's work often employs postmodern and poststructuralist approaches by featuring disjunctive images and text. Her work invokes Bhabha's notion of hybridity, and "in-between-ness" as conditions of a postmodern and postcolonial subjectivity that engenders a possibility of resistance.³⁶ However, frequently referencing the specific colonial history of her home country which had been marginalized in Western discourse of history, Cha's work simultaneously distances itself from the utopian element of Bhabha's theory. Radhakrishna's essay, "Globalization, Desire, and the Politics of Representation," which argues for a reformulation of the notion of "hybridity" based on the particular material contexts and the reality of unequal power relations, is significant in the delineation of the complexities and dynamics of Cha's work.³⁷

Cha's work frequently refers to the history of Japanese colonialism in Korea and the resulting pain and trauma experienced by the Korean people. The discussions of Cha's work incorporate her family background, which played a crucial role in her introduction to the colonial history of her home country. The analysis of her work is closely interwoven with the colonial history of Korea and the harshness of assimilationist colonial policies enacted by Japan from 1910-1945. While addressing emphatic ties to the history of Korea, Cha's work simultaneously distances itself from old essentialist approaches to the nation and nationalism by presenting her Asian American and female identity. This aspect of her work is examined against the backdrop of the history of Asian

³⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, 438.

³⁷ R. Radhakrishnan, 329.

immigrants and Korean immigrants in the United States from the late 1800s to the present. Cha's own experiences of cultural racism and feelings of isolation—both in her adopted and home countries—provide a closer, more specific understanding of her hybrid cultural identity. By offering an in-depth art historical inquiry into the specificity of Cha's Korean American identity in relation to her visual work, the first chapter will shed light on the complex way that Cha positions herself as a Korean American woman.

The second chapter explores Min's selected installation and photographic works such as *Half Home* (1986), *Defining Moments* (1994), *deCOLONIZATION* (1991), *Bridge of No Return* (1997), and *DMZ XING* (1994), and it investigates the ways in which these works address Min's sense of being and belonging in a globalized world. Min resists the essentialist view of Asian American identity, addressing the history of her home country and the history of third world countries. Min embraces the ideology of the South Korean Minjung movement in the 1980s, yet she approaches it critically by emphasizing her hybrid identity as a Korean American woman. The chapter provides a thorough overview of modern and contemporary South Korean history, which is marked by war, political and social turmoil, and the Minjung movement. However, it is equally important to explore the history of the Korean American community, and the Los Angeles riots in particular, which had a substantial impact on Min's sense of Korean American identity. The chapter also examines the implications of the 1965 Immigration Act in general and for Min's own conceptualization of Asian American identity in the contemporary world.

The last chapter of the dissertation focuses on Lee's work *Projects*, including *The Hispanic Project* (1998), *The Ohio Project* (1999), *The Tourist Project* (1997), *The*

Yuppie Project (1998), and *The Skateboarders Project* (2000). While the last chapter will examine the shared interests in the idea of fluid identity by other artists such as Cindy Sherman, Adrian Piper, and Tseng Kwong Chi, it will focus on how Lee's work reveals the contradictions and complexities of how we formulate our identities in a globalized world. Repeatedly creating and refashioning Lee's identity across various social boundaries including race, class, age, sexual orientation, and geography, *Projects* appears to celebrate a permeable identity, resisting any essential notion of identity and belonging. Lee's act of boundary-crossing invokes Stuart Hall's essay "New Ethnicities" and David Hollinger's book *Postethnic America*.³⁸ However, as critics and scholars have noted, Lee's concept of the permeability of identity is often thwarted by the elements that support the idea of fixed boundaries. While critics and scholars have failed to explore Lee's sense of identity as a new Asian immigrant, this chapter will argue that her ambiguous attitude toward the concept of fluid identity results from her specific experience as a new Korean immigrant in the context of changing demographics of the Asian American community and a shifting international economic structure. This last chapter investigates the ways in which Lee's *Projects* resonates with these changes in social and cultural terrains at both the domestic and global levels.

Methodology

This dissertation relies heavily on a critical interpretation of the published articles, essays, and books related to issues of globalization, feminism, identity politics, and Asian American identity in order to establish a firm understanding of the theoretical frameworks and to provide a strong interpretive analysis of works of art by three artists:

³⁸ Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," 443; David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, 7.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Yong Soon Min, and Nikki S. Lee. For its formal and iconographic analysis of each artist's work, this dissertation examines materials accessible at local and non-local sites, such as relevant museums, published exhibition catalogues, and artists' archival collections. I have visited the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive located at the Art Museum of the University of California, Berkeley, as well as galleries in New York City, including Sikkema Jenkins Co., that house Lee's collection. In addition to the evaluation of written documents and the examination of the art work itself, the dissertation incorporates interviews with two of the artists, Min and Lee, and Cha's brother John Hak Sung Cha, into the overall interpretation of their work. I visited Min at her residence in Los Angeles for the initial interview, which was followed by an additional interview via email. During the first interview, I had chance to examine works held by Min as well as the family photographs on which several of her works are based. I interviewed Lee twice via phone, since she resided in Seoul, South Korea at the time. Mr. Cha responded to my interview questions via email regarding Cha's artistic *oeuvre*.

Chapter 1: Haunted by Memories of Home: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relieve the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment by each fragment from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion.³⁹

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha from
Dictée

Consisting of abstract and ambiguous images and texts and utilizing multiple languages, the work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha seemingly refuses to produce explicit and cohesive meaning. However, through fragmentation and ambiguity, Cha seeks to articulate her sense of being and belonging as a Korean American woman in the U.S. The quotation above shows the ways in which Cha pursues this goal through her art. Cha obsessively engages in the repressed colonial history of her home country and highlights the lasting effect of colonialism on Koreans. Exploring the intertwined relationship between her hybrid identity as a Korean American woman in the U.S. and the history of her home country, Cha reveals the specific difference of her hybrid identity. While Lawrence Rinder has provided the first substantial academic inquiry into Cha's visual

³⁹ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1995), 33.

work, to-date scholarly research has overlooked the relationship between the specific material history of Cha's Korean American identity and her visual work. This chapter will examine the ways in which Cha's seemingly ambiguous visual works reflect the specific history of her home country and its relation to the U.S.

Literature Review on Cha's Work

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was active from 1974 to 1982 and she created a substantial body of work including performance, video, film, mail and audio art, an anthology of film theory, and a novel. However, Cha's work languished in obscurity until the early 1990s when critics and scholars began to pay attention to Cha's literary work *Dictée*, for which she is best known. When it first appeared in 1982, Cha's novel *Dictée* received scant critical attention from the nascent fields of Asian American Studies, Third World Studies, and Women's Studies. Scholars and critics noted that Cha's book did not express explicit Asian American identity and failed to conform to the dominant trend in Asian American identity politics of "claiming America."⁴⁰ The critics were hesitant to embrace Cha's book as an authentic representation of Asian American identity. While a small number of critics lauded the experimental quality of her book, *Dictée* failed to elicit critical attention until 1994, when a collection of essays entitled *Writing Self/Writing Nation: Essays on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictée* was published. Edited by Elaine Kim and Norma Alarcón, the volume characterized Cha's book as a significant feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial work. Cha's work began to garner critical attention in the late 1980s as poststructuralism and postmodernism's emphasis on

⁴⁰ Patti Duncan, *Tell the Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* (Iowa City: University of Iowa press, 2004), 131.

multiplicity and indeterminacy began to challenge essentialist notions of identity. Critics such as Juliana M. Spahr and Elisabeth A. Frost noted that *Dictée* presents notions of multiple and fragmented subjectivity, emphasizing emancipatory aspects of postmodernism.⁴¹ Postmodern feminist critics such as Stephen-Paul Martin similarly espoused Cha's *Dictée* for its expression of a female voice that rejects the essentializing notion of female identity.⁴² However, criticizing an ahistorical perspective of postmodern framework, scholars such as Elaine H. Kim, Lisa Low, and Shelley Sunn Wong emphasized the importance of taking into account specific material history and the difference of Cha's Asian American female identity.⁴³

Although Cha's work was included in several group shows in the 1980s, her visual works were largely unknown in the mainstream art world until the early 1990s. In 1984, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, an exhibition titled "Difference: On Representation and Sexuality" featured Cha's work *Passages/Paysages*, and in 1986, Susan Wolf published an article in *Afterimage* entitled "Theresa Cha: Recalling Telling ReTelling." In 1988, INTRA Latin American Gallery in New York organized a traveling exhibition—"Autobiography: In Her Own Image"—which featured Cha's work. In 1989, Cha's small-scale retrospective was held at the Mills College Art Gallery, along with the exhibition "Autobiography: In Her Own Image."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Juliana Spahr, "Postmodernism, Readers, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*," *College Literature* 23, no. 3 (1996): 24.; Elisabeth A. Frost, "In Other Tongue: Body, Image, Text in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*" in *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*, ed. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 182.

⁴² Stephen-Paul Martin, *Open Form and the Feminine Imagination: The Politics of Reading in Twentieth-Century Innovative Writing* (Washington, DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1988), 189.

⁴³ Elaine H. Kim, "Poised on the In-between: A Korean American's Reflections on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*" in *Writing Self Writing Nation*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994), 22-23; Shelley Sunn Wong, "The 'Liberatory Voice' of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*" in *Writing Self Writing Nation*, 134; Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 67.

⁴⁴ The 1989 retrospective was Cha's first solo exhibition.

Critics began to credit Cha's work with addressing issues of race and gender as multiculturalism emerged as a significant issue in the art world in the early 1990s. In 1990, Cha's performance *Aveugle Voix* was featured by Lucy Lippard in her book *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. In his 1990 thesis *The Theme of Displacement in the Art of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and a Catalogue of the Artist's Oeuvre*, Lawrence Rinder provided the first in-depth art historical inquiry into Cha's work. Drawing upon theories of psychoanalysis, film, and linguistics, his thesis explored the ways in which Cha's work addressed the idea of displacement.⁴⁵ In the same year, the University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (UAM/PFA) at the University of California, Berkeley organized an exhibition called "Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, MATRIX/Berkeley 137, which was curated by Lawrence Rinder. The UAM/PFA also arranged a symposium that provided comprehensive analysis of Cha's visual works. In 1992, the exhibition "Mistaken Identities" was held at the Art Museum of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and also traveled to Germany, Austria, and Denmark. Curated by Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Connie Lewallen, "Mistaken Identities" centered on themes of multiculturalism and featured Cha's works *Exilée* and *Mouth to Mouth* along with other artists of color whose work dealt with issues of race and gender. In her catalogue essay, Solomon-Godeau called for a politically-charged multiculturalism rather than a pluralist one, which she claimed overlooked existing racism and economic inequalities.⁴⁶ In the same year, the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Memorial Foundation donated Cha's art and archives to the University Art Museum and the Pacific Film Archive.

⁴⁵ Lawrence R. Rinder, "The Theme of Displacement in the Art of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and a Catalogue of the Artist's Oeuvre," (master's thesis, Hunter College, 1990), 1.

⁴⁶ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Mistaken Identities," 19.

In 1993, Cha's work *Other Things Seen, Other Things Heard* was featured in the "New American Film and Video Series 69" at the Whitney Museum of American Art. As a part of the film and video program, a small-scale retrospective of Cha's work called "Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Then and Now," was organized by the Museum, together with a panel discussion. Cha's work *Exilée* was featured in the 1995 "New American Film and Video Series 76" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and in 1996, Cha's video work *Passages/Paysages* was shown in the exhibition "Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art" at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art. The exhibition "Infinite Facets of Moments: Artist Video and Documentary Film" featured Cha's works at the City College of New York in 1998. The following year, the exhibition "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s," curated by Jane Farver, Luis Camnitzer, and Rachel Weiss, presented Cha's work *Mouth to Mouth* at New York's Queens Museum of Art, while in 2000, the Whitney Museum of American Art organized "The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900-2000," which featured *Mouth-to-Mouth*.

In 2001, Cha's major retrospective, "The Dream of the Audience," was held at the Art Museum of the University of California at Berkeley. The exhibition toured the United States and South Korea and the exhibition catalogue included essays written by Constance M. Lewallen, Lawrence Rinder, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, which discussed complex and profound nature of Cha's visual works.⁴⁷ In 2007, the exhibition "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution," curated by Connie Butler, was held at the Museum of

⁴⁷ Constance M. Lewallen, *The Dream of the Audience*, exh.cat (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2001).

Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and it featured Cha's work *Passages/Paysages* and stills from *Secret Spill*.⁴⁸

In the late 1990s, scholars and critics in the field of Asian American literary criticism also began to pay closer attention to Cha's visual work. In her 1998 essay, "Remembering Home," in the book *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, Hyun Yi Kang discussed Cha's works *Mouth to Mouth*, *Passages/Paysages*, and *Exilée*, along with *Dictée*. In 2003, Elaine H. Kim, Margo Machida, and Sharon Mizota published *Fresh Talk, Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art*, which introduced lesser-known Asian American artists and addressed issues of Asian American identity formation in a globalized world. In the introduction titled "Interstitial Subjects: Asian American Visual Art as a Site for New Cultural Conversations," Kim discussed Cha's works *Dictée*, *Passages/Paysages*, and *Aveugle Voix*.⁴⁹ More recently, in 2005, Thy Phu's essay, "Decapitated Forms: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Visual Text and the Politics of Visibility," discussed the relationship between image and text in Cha's work by exploring her photographic work *Chronology* and her book *Dictée*.⁵⁰

Despite these various kinds of writings, critics and scholars have failed to pay substantial scholarly attention to the relationship between the specific history of Cha's Korean American identity and her visual work. Scholars such as Hyun Yi Kang and Elaine H. Kim in the field of Asian American studies have touched upon this topic, but only briefly.

⁴⁸ Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed., *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, exh.cat (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2007).

⁴⁹ Elaine H. Kim, *Fresh Talk Daring Gazes*, 47.

⁵⁰ Thy Phu, "Decapitated Forms: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Visual Text and the Politics of Visibility," *Mosaic* 38, no.1 (March 2005): 28-35.

In an approach typical of many critics, Susan Wolf, for example, discusses a wide range of Cha's visual work yet fails to explore the significance of Cha's Korean American identity in understanding Cha's work. In her article "Theresa Cha: Recalling Telling Retelling," Wolf focuses on Cha's poststructuralist approach to language, while deemphasizing the specific difference of Cha's Korean American ethnic identity. She states, "The suffering and misery are not denied, but the strength to fight and the ability to see Korean history in more universal terms provide a feeling of release and triumph."⁵¹ The 1985 exhibition "Difference: On Representation and Sexuality," curated by Kate Linker and Jane Weinstock at the New Museum in New York, frames Cha's work around themes of sexual difference in relation to language. The 2007 exhibition "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" also features Cha's work because of its expression of shifting female identity. While postmodern feminism celebrates the liberating effect of deconstruction and effectively problematizes the socially constructed nature of the idea of femininity, it often ignores the complex discourse that comes with specific racial and ethnic identities. In the generalized postmodern feminist discourse, the complexity and intensity of Cha's work has been reduced to a single argument against patriarchal discourse.

While Lawrence Rinder's thesis, mentioned above, provided the first in-depth art historical inquiry into Cha's visual work, it fails to fully examine the specific history of Cha's Korean American identity and its relation to her visual work. While presenting "displacement" as both thematic and formal device for Cha's visual work, Rinder focuses on the relationship between Cha's visual work and the structure of film and psychoanalytic film theory. His exploration of Cha's Korean American identity is

⁵¹ Susan Wolf, "Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Recalling Telling Retelling," *Afterimage* (Summer 1986): 13.

extremely general and often far-fetched.⁵² For him, Cha's main concern in her art was to express universal ideas about language and human consciousness. He states, "While she occasionally addressed the personal and historical circumstances of her state of exile, Cha's work typically treats this theme symbolically, representing displacement through shifts and ruptures in the visual and linguistic forms of her work."⁵³ He adds, "Cha was able to translate a personal experience of profound physical and cultural displacement into a foundation for exploration into universal aspects of language, memory, communication, and consciousness." Rinder also states in his 2001 essay, "The Plurality of Entrances, the Opening of Networks, the Infinity of Languages," included in the exhibition catalogue *The Dream of the Audience*, "Her work is rich with references to Korean dance, history, literature, politics, religion, language, and mythology. However, rather than building a coherent picture of Korean identity, Cha's work reveals fracture upon fracture, destabilizing the relation of past and present, home and exile, being and nonbeing."⁵⁴ In contrast to the generalizing approach that Rinder's remark typifies, this dissertation chapter will provide an in-depth inquiry into the specificity of Cha's Korean American identity in relation to her visual work, in hopes of shedding light on the complex way that the artist negotiated her hybrid identity in a globalized world.

This chapter will focus on selected works by Cha, including performance, video, photographic, and multi-media works that clearly illustrate the ways in which she approaches the topic of her cultural hybrid subjectivity. Rather than following a

⁵² Rinder, "The Theme of Displacement in the Art of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and a Catalogue of the Artist's Oeuvre," 6- 7, 12. Rinder makes a general connection between Cha's art and Confucianism and Taoism. His explanation about Cha's work's indebtedness to Korean poet Kim Sowol from the 1920s seems far-fetched.

⁵³ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁴ Lawrence R. Rinder, "The Plurality of Entrances, the Opening of Networks, the Infinity of Languages," in *The Dream of the Audience*, exh.cat., by Constance M. Lewallen (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2001), 17.

chronological order, the discussion of the selected works will be based on the significance of the work in relation to the major thesis of the chapter. While focusing on the selected works, the chapter will also briefly examine other works pertinent to the major topic.

Cha's Background

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was born in 1951 in Pusan, located on the southern tip of South Korea. Her parents were born and raised in Manchuria and worked as teachers, but left for Korea after Japanese colonial rule of the peninsula came to an end. When the Korean War broke out (1950-1953), Cha's family sought refuge in Pusan from the advancing North Korean armies. In 1962, they emigrated to Hawaii to escape the social and political unrest caused by the military coup d'état and the subsequent authoritarian military regime in Korea. One year later, the family moved to San Francisco where Cha attended the Convent of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic high school. During her high school years, Cha felt a strong sense of isolation since she and her sister were the only Asians in the school. While in high school, she studied French as well as Greek and Roman classics. She then enrolled at the University of San Francisco. After one semester, Cha transferred to the University of California, Berkeley where she continued her studies for ten years. During her teenage and undergraduate years in the 1960s, Cha witnessed anti-war and civil rights protests on the streets of Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco, which raised her consciousness about issues related to Asian American identity. In 1968 and 1969, Cha also witnessed demonstrations led by students from San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley. These students organized the Third

World Liberation Front to call for the establishment of an ethnic studies program in institutions of higher education. During her undergraduate years at the University of California, Berkeley, Cha studied art with James Melchner and learned ceramics, sculpture, and performance. She also studied literature and film theory with Professor Bertrand Augst in the French and Comparative Literature departments. She later received a BA in Comparative Literature in addition to a BA, an MA and an MFA in Art from the University of California, Berkeley. Cha received numerous awards and fellowships for her art work. While studying Comparative Literature, Cha enjoyed reading Korean poetry.⁵⁵ According to her older brother, John Hak Sung Cha, Cha's interest in Korean history and culture was sparked by her mother, Hyung Soon Huo, who was a good storyteller and writer. Associated with numerous writers whose works were imbued with strong nationalist spirits, Cha's mother shared many stories about the period of Japanese colonization with her daughter.⁵⁶

While studying French and Comparative Literature, Cha read works by Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Stephane Mallarmé, and Marguerite Duras, and attended lectures by prominent film makers including Jean-Luc Godard and Chris Marker. Cha was attracted to the innovative treatment of narrative and the subject of memory and consciousness in the works of Carl Dreyer, Marguerite Duras, and Jean-Luc Godard. Her interest in film theory led her to study at the Centre d'Etudes Americaine du Cinema in France for one year.⁵⁷ Cha's study with Bertrand Augst, and the lectures by Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz she attended in France inspired her to apply French film

⁵⁵ Lawrence R. Rinder, "Biography, 1996" (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley).

⁵⁶ John Hak Sung Cha, e-mail message to author, March 12, 2012.

⁵⁷ Lawrence R. Rinder, "Biography."

theories to her art practices. She wrote: "It is essential for me to see the possibilities of film-making as an expression closely tied with other expressions supported by its theory as Reference; to see the application of theory to actual works followed by a re-recognition, 'realization' of the theory in practice." ⁵⁸

Cha was deeply influenced by apparatus theory. Incorporating psychoanalytic theory and Marxist theory into the structuralist view of the film image prevalent in 1960s France, apparatus theory was developed by theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry, Thierry Kuntzel, and Christian Metz. In this new model, the theorists urged critics to pay attention to the entire apparatus of the film experience —the film maker, projector, screen, framed image, spectator, and the darkened theater.⁵⁹ In 1980, Cha published an anthology of film theory titled *Apparatus-Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings* which included writings by these film theorists. She designed for Tanam Press and inserted her own art work entitled *Commentaire*, into the anthology.⁶⁰

Between 1979 and 1981, Cha returned to Korea three times, and she moved to New York City in 1980. She worked on a film entitled *White Dust from Mongolia* during her visit to Korea in 1980, but never finished the film. Instead, she planned to publish a book with the same title. Then, in 1982, Cha published the book *Dictée*, which critics consider to be the epitome of her artistic ideas expressed through many different media. Shortly after the book was published, Cha was raped and murdered by a security guard in a building in New York City.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, "Artist's Statement, 1976" (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley).

⁵⁹ Philip Rosen, ed. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 282.

⁶⁰ Rinder, "The plurality of Entrances, the Opening of Networks, the Infinity of Languages," 23.

⁶¹ Rinder, "Biography, 1996"

Dictée contains various forms of narrative: poetry, French language exercises, autobiographical stories, letters, verse, prose, cinematic scripts, and mythology. The texts are written in four languages—French, Chinese, English, and Korean—and are interspersed with unidentified photographs, a map of Korea, still images from film, and anatomical diagrams. The book is divided into nine sections, each titled after out of the nine classical muses. The three main sections of the book—“Clio History,” “Calliope Epic Poetry,” and “Melpomene Tragedy”—explicitly address the history of modern Korea, including Japanese colonization, the Korean War, and the social, political unrest during the military authoritarian regimes. In *Dictée*, Cha seeks to uncover the marginalized history of her homeland through her exploration of the function and meaning of the language.

Cha’s artistic *oeuvre* was in large part shaped by Conceptualism, a major 1970s artistic movement, to which she was exposed in California. The late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by political and social upheaval exemplified by widespread student demonstrations, laborers’ protests, and civil rights, anti-war, and women’s liberation movements. In response to the political and social turmoil, artists in the late 1960s and 1970s began to question the existing aesthetic values in myriad ways. Rejecting the notion of art work as a portable and thus saleable object, artists turned to other artistic mediums, such as performance, body art, and media art. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, anti-war and civil rights protests took place on the streets of Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco. While participating in demonstrations, college students and teenagers were engaged in a new youth culture: the Hippie movement. During these years, the Bay Area became a center for the counterculture and the use of psychedelic drugs. The

politically and socially explosive atmosphere provided artists in the Bay Area with the perfect environment in which to create a variety of experimental and imaginative works.⁶²

Many early Conceptual artists embraced the notion that aesthetic ideas hold primacy over the resulting object. For these artists, language seemed the most suitable form to express pure "idea." Artists such as Joseph Kosuth focused on different representational forms in their work. Drawing upon semiotics, Kosuth sought to convey the idea that all representational systems are inherently unstable. Like many other Conceptual artists, Cha chose language as her main subject.

Cha embraced performance as a suitable media through which to express her interest in language. While many Conceptual artists used documentary photographs, maps, books, or printed statements as alternative art forms, some Conceptualists utilized their bodies as an important artistic medium, both in public performances and in private videos and photographs. Chris Burden produced a conceptual performance in Los Angeles in 1971 in which he had his assistant shoot him in his left arm in order to explore the subjects of physical pain and endurance. In the Bay Area, after earning an MFA from the University of California, Davis, in 1966, Bruce Nauman produced a performance in which he spouted a stream of water from his mouth, punning on Marcel Duchamp's readymade *Fountain* (1917). Nauman documented his activity in a series of color photographs.⁶³

⁶² Moira Roth, "Toward History of California Performance: Part One," *Arts Magazine* 52, no.8 (1978): 94.

⁶³ Linda Freye Burnham, "Performance Art in Southern California: an Overview" in *Performance Anthology: Source Book of a Decade of California Performance Art*, ed. Carl E. Loeffler (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1980), 398; Carl E. Loeffler, "From the Body into Space: Post-Notes on Performance Art in Northern California" in *Performance Anthology*, 369.

Conceptualist activity in the Bay Area centered on performance and process rather than on static art forms. The emphasis was on improvisational elements, ritualistic activities, and austere atmosphere. In the late 1960s, mysticism was pervasive in the Bay Area, and numerous artists engaged in private, meditative rituals. In addition, Conceptualism in the Bay Area was rooted in its artistic tradition of combining different art forms—poetry, dance, music, film, and theater—which led to the popularity of performance. The two major venues for Bay Area Conceptual artists were Tom Marioni's Museum of Conceptual Art and the University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive of the University of California at Berkeley.⁶⁴

Cha was influenced by her teacher James Melchner and artists such as Terri Fox, Tom Marioni, Lynn Hershman, Linda Montano, and Judith Barry. Melchner inspired Cha to explore the unique power of performance as an artistic medium. Terry Fox's Conceptualist performances and installations in the 1970s and Judith Barry's conceptualist feminist performances particularly affected Cha's work.⁶⁵

As a female artist of the mid-1970s and early 1980s, Cha witnessed and participated in the feminist movement of the 1970s. Many feminist artists of the 1970s began to question the marginalization of female artists in art history and the problematic representation of women and femininity in male-dominated art practices. Drawing on French psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, feminist artists of the 1970s expressed concern with the isolation of female artists and the negative representation of women's bodies and experiences in the male-dominated discourse of art history. Feminist artists sought to reclaim and revalue femininity and women's experiences, and many found

⁶⁴ Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area: 1945-1980* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 193,195.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

performance to be a suitable medium for expressing their ideas. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro created a site installation entitled *Womanhouse* in 1972 with their art students from the Feminist Art program at the California Institute of the Arts. *Womanhouse* included a kitchen titled *Eggs to Breasts*, and other rooms with the names *Menstruation Bathroom*, *Nursery*, *Bridal Staircase*, as well as other areas that dealt with women's identity in relation to the home. As a graduate student at the California Institute of the Arts, Faith Wilding performed *Waiting at Womanhouse*, in which she sat passively with her hands clasped on her lap and rocked in her chair. Martha Rosler produced a performance titled *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* in 1977 in San Diego and presented it on video. It featured a man in a white coat measuring and evaluating a woman. Feminist artists and critics protested against white- and male- oriented museum exhibitions and they attacked the "Art and Technology" show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The museum later organized an exhibition titled "Women Artists: 1550-1950" in 1976.⁶⁶

In the Bay Area, Lynn Hershman produced a performance in which she created an alter ego named Roberta Breitmore. Roberta interacts with the real world for three years in San Francisco and other locations around the country by keeping a diary, owning her own bank account, and socializing. Linda Montano performed *Chicken Dance* in 1972 in which she danced around the streets of San Francisco while dressed in a costume with large gauze wings. Between 1975 and 1980, she produced a performance called *Learning to Talk* in which she assumed various personae and told their life stories. Her work is characterized by ritualistic and spiritual elements. In 1977 in the Bay Area, Judith Barry

⁶⁶ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1994), 149.

organized a series of performances by women entitled “Seven Sundays after the Fall” in response to the invisibility of female performance artists in the area. Barry presented a work entitled *Past Present Future Tense*, which consisted of dissolve slides on three screens and a soundtrack related to different women's lives, as well as her body covered with sand. Cha participated in "Seven Sundays after the Fall" by presenting her performance *Reveillé dans la Brume* in which she used dissolve slides and made her body become part of the images projected on the screen. Cha began her performance work in 1974 and was closely involved with artists such as Judith Barry, Susan Wolf, and Reese Williams.⁶⁷

During the 1970s, some women of color began to challenge the unified notion of female sensibility and experience based on the dominant experiences of white, middle-class women. Artists such as Faith Ringgold and Adrian Piper sought to express how their racial and ethnic identities affected their gendered identities. As postmodern theories questioned the hegemonic nature of Western art and the marginalization of women and minorities, the mainstream art world began to look to the issues of multiculturalism. Questioning the dedication of art museums to representing white and heterosexual male ideas, multiculturalism urged mainstream art museums to pay attention to issues of race, gender, ethnicity, and the systematic discrimination of women and artists of color. A series of exhibitions in the early 1990s such as *The Decade Show: Framework of Identity in the 1980s* in 1990 and *1993 Whitney Biennial* were framed around identity politics and introduced numerous marginalized artists, including African Americans, Asian Americans, Latin Americans, and Native Americans. In the 1980s, American feminist theories began to pay extensive attention to European poststructuralism. Poststructuralism

⁶⁷ Moira Roth, 102.

focuses on the role of language in the formation of subjectivity, which is constantly negotiated through cultural, political and economic forces. Embracing poststructuralist theory, feminism in the 1980s questioned the biological determinism emphasized in previous generations of feminism. Feminist theorists sought to undermine the fixed notion of femininity by showing that femininity was socially and culturally constructed.⁶⁸ Critics using American feminist theory of the 1980s described Cha's work as emancipatory in its refusal to subscribe a unitary subjectivity.⁶⁹

Searching for the Roots of the Language

As others have pointed out, Cha's work does indeed draw upon poststructural theories of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and film. Her work utilizes written and spoken words from several languages including English, French, Chinese, and Korean. She presents these words with various images, vocal sounds, and music. She often uses different media within one work while combining highly emotional elements with analytic language. Her work employs live-voice and recorded voice, sometimes both in one work, and uses both male and female voice-overs. Using multiple sources of narration, medium, and languages, Cha's work rejects the Modernist idea of a unified and autonomous subject, embracing postmodern ideas of shifting, multiple, and hybrid subjectivity.

While employing the poststructuralist approach, however, Cha's work also strongly conveys the senses of loss, pain, and displacement associated specifically with her experience as a Korean immigrant woman. She explores her hybrid cultural identity

⁶⁸ See, for example, Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1997).

⁶⁹ Juliana Spahr, 24; Elizabeth A. Frost, 182.

as a Korean, an American, and a woman in the United States by constantly making reference to the colonial legacy of her home country. Cha takes up language as a prevailing theme across different media in her art. Cha stated:

The main body of my work is with Language, "looking for the roots of the language before it is born on the tip of the tongue." Since having been forced to learn foreign language more "consciously" at a later age, there has existed a different perception and orientation toward language.⁷⁰

This statement illustrates Cha's deep engagement with language and its multiple implications. The statement also epitomizes the way in which Cha approaches language. She acknowledges that her particular interest in language is closely linked to her specific experiences of immigration and learning a foreign language.

Cha's concern with the repressed history of her home country was most intensely expressed in her works *Aveugle Voix*, *Amer*, *Mouth to Mouth*, *A Ble Wail*, *Other Things Seen*, *Other Things Heard (Ailleurs)*, *Chronology*, and *Exilée*. She began her artistic career as a performance artist, and her performance work shows the direct influence of Terry Fox's work, which often employed ritualistic materials such as candles, mirrors, basins, flour, dust, veils, and ritualistic movements. Moreover, Judith Barry's performance *Past Present Future Tense*, which used multiple media including screens, a soundtrack, and a performance, bears certain resemblances to Cha's performance.⁷¹ Only a glimpse can be seen through the photos and documentations Cha left of her performances.

⁷⁰ Cha, "Artist's Statement, 1976" (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley).

⁷¹ Thomas Albright, 196.

Cha performed *Aveugle Voix* (Fig.1) at 63 Bluxome St. San Francisco in 1975. In this performance, Cha is dressed in white and squats before a white rolled banner. She blindfolds herself with a white headband inscribed with the word "VOIX" (French for "voice"), and places another white band with the word "AVEUGLE" (French for "blind") over her mouth. She stands and unfurls the banner, revealing the text stenciled in black. She then puts the banner on the ground, crouches over the banner and touches it with her hands.⁷²

As she unrolls the banner like a scroll, words appear: WORDS-FAIL-ME-SANS (without)-MOT (word)-SANS-VOIX-AVEUGLE. The text is a mixture of English and French. As she finishes unrolling the banner, the text can be read in reverse as "words fail me without word without voice blind" or forward as "blind voice without word without me fail words." There are also words on her head. Covering her head with strips of cloth inscribed with the words AVEUGLE and VOIX, the artist's body becomes part of the text. The words VOIX and AVEUGLE at the end of the scroll are repeated in reverse order—AVEUGLE -VOIX— on the bands over her head, causing the audience to reflect upon the meaning and relationship of the two words. Cha could mean "me without word" or "word without me." She could mean "blind without voice" or "blind voice without word." Rejecting a normal linear progressive reading of the text from beginning to end, the artist allows the audience to engage in a play on words. The words on the banner are fragmented; they do not convey discernable meanings. The fragmentation of the words is enhanced by the mixture of the English and French languages. Focusing on the

⁷² Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, "*Aveugle Voix*," unpublished description and ten black-and-white photographs documenting the performance (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley).

fragmentation of the words, and multiple and disjointed meanings, Cha's work draws upon postmodern and poststructuralist theories. Poststructuralism challenges the structuralist idea of coherence of language as a signifying system by arguing that the signifier /signified relationship is essentially arbitrary and unstable, and that language is always influenced by other social systems and subjective processes. While structuralists emphasize the linguistic structure that governs a subject's utterance, poststructuralists are concerned with the "speaking subject" that interacts with social and cultural systems and with other people.⁷³

While embodying Cha's interest in a poststructuralist view of the function of language, *Aveugle Voix* demonstrates Cha's strong concern with specific female subjectivity. The feeling of alienation within language is intensified by the artist's position as a female. Voix (voice) and voir (to see) sound similar. Cha seeks to "see" the "voice" that is blind, hidden behind the mask, referring to the voice of a woman that has been silenced in the patriarchal social system. In this sense, Cha seems to critically engage in poststructuralist psychoanalytic theory and its problematic relationship to a female subjectivity. In Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity, a child achieves a sense of identity when entering the gendered space of the Symbolic order of language. In the pre-linguistic "mirror phase," or in the realm of the Imaginary, lacking physical co-ordination, the baby at the age of six months first perceives itself as "self." The baby's sense of self comes from the reflected image of itself from someone else. The mother is the one who usually provides a sense of self-image to the baby. In the realm of the Imaginary, both the male and female child identify with the mother. Rejection by and

⁷³ Roman Seldon, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Theory* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 74.

separation from the mother is necessary for the formation of subjectivity—the speaking being. Entering the Symbolic world of language, a boy realizes that his mother lacks the sign of power and experiences castration anxiety. In order to be a full human subject, a gendered subject, the boy accepts the presence of the father. As Rosalind Minsky suggests in her book *Psychoanalysis and Gender*, however, the female child's entry into language is more complex.⁷⁴ In her passage to the Symbolic realm, she realizes her own lack of the phallus, the sign of power and full subjectivity. While she adopts the Law of the father, her entrance into the Symbolic is a negative one. In the Symbolic order of language, women can possess a full subjectivity only as a substitute for the mother, a passive object of male desire, and a site of men's unconscious. Lacan claims that the word "phallus" does not connote a physical organ; instead it signifies full presence and power for both males and females. However, the term "castration anxiety" and his definition of the female subject as a reflection of male lack involves a phallogentric system in which women are positioned as marginal.⁷⁵ In her performance *Aveugle Voix*, by covering her mouth and eyes with cloths having the words "voix" and "aveugle" written on them, and by hiding her body behind the scroll, Cha attempts to reveal a female voice that is repressed in the phallogentric system of language.

Cha presents a text that is a mixture of French and English. She juxtaposes words in French with those in English and translates French into English, or English into French—Mot/Words. In the process of translating one language into another one, we encounter slippage, deferral of meaning, and, consequently, the heterogeneity of meaning. Cha focuses on the slippage of meaning occurring when we shift between

⁷⁴ Rosalind Minsky, ed. *Psychoanalysis and Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 154.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

different languages. Translation involves an act of transformation for both the original and the translated in the process of mutual exchange of cultural codes. Crossing between the boundaries of different cultures, the act of translating blurs the boundary between the original and the translated, and any essentialist notion of culture and nation.

While it is apparent that Cha engages poststructuralism, I argue that Cha's ultimate goal in her work is to explore the meaning of language that goes beyond the abstracted realm of signs. She is concerned with the historical materiality of the language. The artist's female body, with the long black hair often associated with Asian women, suggests a specific relationship between the artist as an Asian female and the system of language. When we encounter foreign language, we experience alienation as we translate. As a Korean immigrant, Cha was forced to adopt a new language. In addition to English, she had to learn French in a Catholic high school. The act of translation between not only Korean and French/English, but also between French and English, denotes her doubly-displaced experience as an Asian immigrant. In the section of her book *Dictée* entitled "Disease" (French for female monologist), Cha invokes the difficulty of acquiring a new language as an immigrant woman by describing the physical process of speaking:

She mimicks [*sic*] the speaking. That might resemble speech... The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter something. But the breath falls away. With a slight tilting of her head backwards, she would gather the strength in her shoulders and remain in this position.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée*, 3.

Cha's use of two languages in *Aveugle Voix* —English and French— further highlights the specific material history of her Korean American identity. The presence of two of the most dominant languages of colonialism invokes the history of Western imperialism, in particular American and French imperialism in Korea during the nineteenth century. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were marked by the competitive domination over East Asia by Western colonial powers. France, England, the Netherlands, and later, the United States turned to East Asia after acquiring colonies in the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, and South East Asia. French warships approached ports in Korea in 1866, and after forcing Japan and China to open their doors to Western powers, in 1877 the U.S. aggressively pushed Korea to open its ports to trade through the use of armed vessels. In 1882, the U.S urged Korea to sign the Korean-American Treaty, a treaty plagued with inequality.⁷⁷

Cha's work *Amer* (Fig. 2) more explicitly addresses the history of American and French imperialism. Created in 1976, *Amer* consists of a simple American flag with a minor alteration by the addition of the word "Amer." It is a pre-1959 American flag with forty eight stars, representing the period before Alaska and Hawaii became the 49th and 50th states. On one of the stripes, Cha stamped the stenciled word "Amer." She also stamped the word "amer" repetitively on the stars.⁷⁸ "Amer," the first four letters of the word America, is also French for bitter. *À mer* means "to the sea." While engaging in word play on a pre-1959 American flag, Cha seems to invoke the U.S.'s overseas expansion into Alaska and Hawaii and its imperialist history in the late nineteenth and

⁷⁷ Carter J. Eckert and others, *Korea Old and New: A History* (Seoul, Korea: Ilchokak, Publishers, 1990), 194-5, 205.

⁷⁸ Featured in Constance M. Lewallen, *The Dream of the Audience*, 104. Cha's family owns the work.

early twentieth centuries. The United States purchased Alaska from the Russian Empire in 1867, and the territory became the 49th state of the U.S in 1959. The acquisition of Alaska was highly beneficial for the U.S. because of the area's rich mineral resources and the extension of the trading route with Asia. The U.S. annexed the Hawaiian Islands in 1898, which became a territory in 1900 and the 50th state in 1959. The addition of Hawaii provided the U.S. with an important coaling station for trading with Asian countries.⁷⁹ By presenting an American flag from before 1959, Cha further reveals the American imperialist project in Asia and her homeland. The Taft-Katsura Pact of 1905 allowed Japan free rein in Korea in exchange for Japan permitting the U.S. to occupy the Philippines.⁸⁰ The Treaty of Paris (1898), signed after Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American War, allowed the U.S. to acquire the islands of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. The U.S. colonized the Philippines for forty eight years from 1901 to 1946, a period that shattered the Philippine national economy and culture. By using a French word on the American flag, Cha also alludes to the history of French colonialism and the bitter wars fought in Indochina. The word "amer" suggests the complicated and intertwined relationship between French and the U.S. in their imperialist overseas expansions, and, in particular, their involvements in the protracted conflicts in Vietnam. Using the symbol of American patriotism and national pride, Cha brings forth the bitter history of her adopted country and the history of Western colonialism.

Cha's use of the two colonial languages in *Aveugle Voix* further points to Japanese colonization in Korea and its use of language. Cha explores the significance of

⁷⁹ Walter Lafeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 29.

⁸⁰ Alexis Dudden. *Japan's Colonization of Korea: Discourse and Power* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 62.

language in exercising colonial power by associating Japanese colonial rule with its linguistic domination. Colonialism uses language as an effective hegemonic apparatus for the transformation of the spiritual and cultural lives of the colonized. By using the two colonial languages and wrapping them over her face, Cha enacts the banishment and silencing of her mother tongue during Japanese colonialism. Cha's covered mouth signifies the voice of the Koreans that was muted under colonialism. Cha squats over the words and touches them, creating a sense of struggle and pain. This points to the Korean people's struggle to speak their banned language. In her book *Dictée*, she writes about the pain in the collective memory of the Korean people that was caused by the imposition of the Japanese language during Japanese colonization:

Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary. To *this* enemy people. The meaning is the instrument, memory that pricks the skin, stabs the flesh, the volume of blood, the physical substance blood as measure, that rests as record, as document. Of *this* enemy people.⁸¹

Japan was forced to open its doors to the European colonial powers in the 1850s, but, as a result of the 1868 *Meiji* Restoration, Japan began to modernize the nation and strengthen national security to compete with Western countries in world affairs. Shortly thereafter, Japan joined these modern colonial powers. Situated between far more powerful neighbors— China, Japan, and Russia— the Korean peninsula had become a battle-ground for the competing colonial powers by the nineteenth century. Japan fought China over the Korean peninsula in the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, and, by winning the war, Japan gained control over Korea and acquired Taiwan. After being

⁸¹ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée*, 32.

defeated in the Russo- Japanese War of 1904-1905, Russia also acknowledged Japan's supremacy in Korea. Through the 1905 Taft-Katsura agreement between Japan and the U.S., the U.S. acknowledged Japan's interest in Korea and Japan recognized the U.S.'s domination over the Philippines. Having won recognition from Russia, America, and the United Kingdom, Japan immediately declared Korea a Japanese protectorate in 1905, and, in 1910, officially annexed Korea.⁸² During the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910-1945, Korean culture, social life, and economy were ravaged. Drawing upon the French colonial policy of assimilation, the Japanese government employed a similar policy to control the colonized. While claiming that the goal of the assimilation policy was to embrace Koreans as equal Japanese imperial subjects, the Japanese authorities in reality treated Koreans as an inferior people incapable of administering their own nation.⁸³ The Japanese assimilation policy also aimed to eradicate Korean culture and identity and to mold Koreans into Japanese imperial subjects. Japanese authorities controlled the spoken and written language of Korea by imposing the teaching of the Japanese language upon schools and by banning Korean newspapers. The Japanese authorities banned the study of Korean and the use of Korean in general instruction at schools. They used history as a vehicle to justify their colonial rule over the Korean people and they collected and burned all books on Korean history and biographies of popular Korean figures. At schools, they taught their own version of Korean history written by Japanese historians.⁸⁴ Begun as a gradual program, the assimilation policy was accelerated, shifting to a highly oppressive policy in the early 1930s with Japan's intense

⁸² Alexis Dudden, 62.

⁸³ Mark E. Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 81.

⁸⁴ Fred A. Mckenzie, *Korea's Fight for Freedom* (New York and Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1920), 200.

involvement in wars. Under the new policy, "The Name Order," promulgated in 1939, Koreans were required to change their names to Japanese ones, for which they had to obtain official approval. If people refused to change their names, they were expelled from schools and fired from work. While being forced to change their Korean names to Japanese ones, Koreans also experienced continuing discrimination and exploitation in their everyday lives. Over eighty-four percent of the population adopted Japanese names under the new policy.⁸⁵ This policy, among other assimilation policies, caused an enormous psychological trauma to the collective memory of the Korean people.

Another of Cha's works that strongly addresses the material history of language is *Mouth-to-Mouth*, a video work created in 1975 (Fig. 3). It is an eight-minute black and white video work that begins with a slow pan of the eight Korean vowels- ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅗ, ㅛ, ㅜ, ㅠ. Then, in the blizzard-like pattern (passages of video static), blurred close-up shots emerge of a female mouth trying to enunciate these vowels. The mouth-shots alternate with passages of video static which often obscure and nearly obliterate the image of the mouth. A soundtrack of running water, thunder, and other noises fades in and out. Her attempt to mimic the sound of the mother tongue is constantly threatened by the blizzard and soundtrack. Her mouth closes, tries to speak, then closes again. Yet the sounds of the vowels are not produced by her mouth.⁸⁶ The slow fades in and out between the images of mouths directs the audience to reflect on the in-between blank spaces. The images of her mouth are blurred along with the blurred video static. The

⁸⁵ Carter J. Eckert and others, *Korea Old and New: A History*, 318.

⁸⁶ The author viewed *Mouth-to-Mouth* (DVD) at Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive, June 24, 2010; unpublished description of the work at the Archive.

interrupted attempts of the mouth by the video static, the slow fades, and the inaudible sounds of the vowels suggest the difficulty of retrieving her mother tongue which was lost in the process of acquiring a new language in the adopted country.

Simultaneously, these interrupted attempts suggest the difficulty of recovering the marginalized history of Cha's mother tongue. However, the mouth's repeated attempts to enunciate the Korean alphabet points to Cha's persistent effort to uncover the marginalized history of her mother tongue. The Korean written alphabet (*Hangul*) was invented in 1443 by King Sejong during the Choson Dynasty (1392-1897). Previously, in the Korean peninsula, the Chinese characters were used, but they were not suited to express all the sounds in the Korean phonetic system. Due to this difficulty, only intellectuals were able to learn and use Chinese. King Sejong intended to create letters that would be widely usable to all the population. However, after the promulgation of the Korean alphabet, these intellectuals continued to use Chinese until 1945 because of the long tradition of using Chinese characters in Korea.⁸⁷ Originally called *hunminjongum* (correct sounds for instructing people) by King Sejong, *Hangul* consists of a twenty-four-letter-alphabet—fourteen consonants and ten vowels. The shapes of the consonants are modeled on the shape of the mouth and tongue during the act of pronouncing the sounds represented by the letters. The vowels are based on the cosmic elements— man (a vertical line), earth (a horizontal line), and heaven (a dot).⁸⁸ Only recently have the simplicity and logical nature of the Korean alphabet begun to attract the attention of Western scholars. In *Mouth-to-Mouth*, while enunciating each Korean vowel, Cha

⁸⁷ Jae Jung Song, *Korean Language: Structure, Use and Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 48.

⁸⁸ Iksop Lee and S. Robert Ramsey, *The Korean Language* (Albany: State University of New York, 2000), 35.

expresses the logic of the Korean alphabet and seeks to rectify the invisibility of the history of the Korean written language.

On the other hand, it seems to me that the mouth's struggle to speak the Korean alphabet serves as a metaphor for the struggles faced by Korean women in telling their stories of oppression in Korean culture and society, and in the history of Korean written language. The Choson Dynasty was governed by neo-Confucian ideology based on a strong hierarchical order in every aspect of human life. The family system was built upon the hierarchical relationship between man and wife. Women's lives revolved around subjugation to men. "Three Obedience," a neo-Confucian teaching on women's lives requests that women obey their father when they are young, their husband upon marriage, and their son after their husband has died. Women's living quarters were separated from those of men, and they were urged to focus on housework and the children. The main role of women was to continue the patriarchal lineage by delivering males. Chastity was required only for women, and when it was not kept, women were punished.⁸⁹

During the Choson Dynasty, most women were not provided with a formal education. After the invention of *hangul*, however, a large number of elite women were able to read and write *hangul* in addition to the classical Chinese texts, while illiterate women from middle or lower classes were able to become educated through recitation. Women were encouraged to read texts about Confucian ideals of female virtues rather than serious scholarly works. Through Chinese classics translated by the male neo-Confucian scholars, women were instructed about their filial duties based on a patriarchal

⁸⁹ Bae-yong Lee, *Women in Korean History* (Seoul: Ewha Woman's University Press, 2008), 15. Developed during the Song and Min Dynasty in China, neo-Confucianism was transmitted to Korea in the early Choson Dynasty and consolidated by the mid-Choson Dynasty.

family structure and good manners, such as modesty and chastity.⁹⁰ Although a mother was viewed as an important educator for her children, excessive learning by females was considered inappropriate. When women wrote poems or books, their circulation was limited to the private space of women. While repressed under neo-Confucian doctrine, numerous women attempted to express their personal feelings and opinions about society. However, most of the women's productions remain anonymous, and only a few female writers are recorded in the history of the Choson Dynasty.⁹¹ In *Mouth-to-Mouth*, by featuring a woman's mouth struggling to articulate the Korean alphabet, Cha attempts to uncover the repressed voices of the numerous Korean women writers and artists and their struggle to speak their own stories.

The mouth's struggle to speak the Korean alphabet further refers to the painful history of Cha's mother tongue. The work draws on the history of her mother tongue, a history that had faced the threat of effacement by Japanese colonialism. It also refers to the specific history of her mother's exile and her loss of the Korean language in Manchuria, which Cha was told many times growing up. Escaping from the oppressive Japanese colonial rule, Cha's grandparents fled to Manchuria, a vast region in northeast China. As Japan invaded Manchuria in 1937, the Japanese language was also imposed upon the Korean exiles there. The Korean exiles and their children, like Cha's mother, were capable of speaking both Chinese and Korean. However, they were forced to speak only Japanese. In *Dictée*, Cha describes the painful story of her mother's doubly exiled life in Manchuria:

⁹⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Still, you speak the tongue the mandatory language like the others. It is not your own. Even if it is not you know you must. You are Bilingual. You are Tri-lingual. The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak in the dark. In the secret. The one that is yours. Your own. You speak very softly, you speak in a whisper. In the dark, in secret. Mother tongue is your refuge. It is being home. Being who you are.⁹²

Cha's concern for the experiences of Koreans exiled in Manchuria is also expressed in her proposal for a novel *White Dust from Mongolia*. She planned to write a story about a Korean woman who was exiled in Manchuria and lost her memory. She states:

Having been forced to leave her native country as an immigrant to China, where again the Japanese had by their law, enforced their language, she is doubly displaced. She is not permitted to speak her language to begin with, then finally, she ceases to speak at all.⁹³

Korean exiles abroad during Japanese colonialism are strongly associated with the nationalist movement. As early as 1905, exiled Koreans in Hawaii sent two delegates—Syngman Rhee and Yun Pyong-gu—to the Portsmouth conference to deliver a petition to President Roosevelt for the preservation of Korea's independence. As former soldiers and others exiled in Manchuria formed resistant groups, Manchuria became one of the three centers of the Korean independence movement fighting against Japanese

⁹² Cha, *Dictée*, 45.

⁹³ Cha, "Project Proposal: Statement of Plans," (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive).

colonialism. According to Cha's brother John Hak Sung Cha, their mother Hyung Soon Huo was born in Yong Jung (Longjing), a center for the Korean independent movement in Manchuria and she witnessed intense guerilla activities in the region. She was also associated with numerous writers, including her brother and Yun Dong-ju, who wrote famous poems on resistance during colonization. She was taught by Ahn Su-gil, a writer who authored a novel entitled *Bukgando* (North Jiandao), dealing with the lives of Korean exiles in Manchuria.⁹⁴ Informed by her mother about detailed stories of nationalist activities in Manchuria, Cha came to deeply connect to the colonial history of her home country. The independence activities of the exiles made a significant impact on the first nation-wide independence movement in 1919, The March First Movement, which led to the establishment of the Korean provisional government in Shanghai.⁹⁵ The mouth's struggle to speak the Korean language in *Mouth-to-Mouth* suggests the struggles and fights of the Korean exiles for regaining freedom to speak their own language.

The Korean alphabet signifies Korean national consciousness and identity. While the Korean language has regional dialectic differences, people from all regions of Korea can use it to communicate with each other. The linguistic homogeneity gives the Korean people a strong sense of unification, despite a long-lasting political division. While evoking Cha's detached and ambiguous attitude toward essentialist notions of Korean identity and Korean nationalism through the use of blurred images, its focus on the in-between space, and the images of interrupted attempts to speak, *Mouth-to-Mouth* makes

⁹⁴ John Hak Sung Cha, e-mail message to author, March 12 2012.

⁹⁵ Chong-Sik Lee, *The Politics of Korean Nationalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), 102, 107. The main centers of the nationalist movements abroad included Manchuria, southeastern Siberia, Shanghai, and Hawaii. The leaders of the nationalist movements carried out various nationalistic activities including sending delegates and petition to the peace conference to bring about the independence of Korea, and their activities encouraged the leaders in Japan and Seoul to organize a mass demonstration for the declaration of independence.

strong references to the specific efforts of Korean people to keep their national identity, to speak their silenced language under the Japanese colonial rule. It also refers to the history of the artist's own mother who seemed to feel invisible to and marginalized by the Western discourse of history.

Cha's Work and Poststructuralist Film Theory

Although Cha's performance pieces such as *Barren Cave Mute* and *Reveillé dans la Brume* do not specifically deal with Cha's Korean American identity, they exemplify Cha's engagement in poststructuralist film theory. This section will discuss the two works and the ways in which Cha utilizes film theories in her work.

Barren Cave Mute (Fig. 4) was performed at the University of California at Berkeley in 1974. According to Cha's own unpublished description provided by the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive at the University of California at Berkeley, in *Barren Cave Mute*, the artist suspended three 10 x 4 foot sheets of white paper. Inscribed on the paper were words from the title written in white wax. The paper banners were shown in a completely darkened room. From behind, Cha used a candle to melt the wax, gradually exposing the words to the viewer. On the back of the first paper banner, Cha inscribed the words BARREN and CAVE diagonally upward from bottom left corner to upper right, while making each letter reversed so the audience may read the text.⁹⁶

N
E
R
R
A

⁹⁶ Cha, "Barren Cave Mute," unpublished description and twenty-six black-and-white photographs documenting the performance (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive).

B

She begins to melt the words from bottom right, requiring the audience to read the word from right to left. While the audience can identify each letter, the mismatch between the direction of the letters' exposure and the usual direction of the reading confuses the meaning. As soon as the artist exposes the word BARREN, the audience automatically starts to read the word from left to right and see it as NERRAB. The audience has the same experience with the word CAVE by reading it as EVAC—abbreviation of evacuation. MUTE is read as ETUM—a suffix meaning a collection of a specific group of plants.

As the words are exposed slowly, the viewer is encouraged to reflect on the multiple meanings and associations of the words. After the words BARREN and CAVE appear on the first banner, they burst into flames and become a pile of ashes on the floor. The bright flames from the banner turn the gallery space from darkness to light. The flames also expose the artist to the audience, who is standing still in the left corner of the gallery and looking at the banners burning into ashes. As the flames on the first banner disappear and the artist moves to the second banner, the room is darkened. She repeats this process with the other banners. As the flames from the last banner on the floor disappear, the room falls into darkness. The alternating darkness and light makes it harder for the audience to grasp the meaning of the words on the banner.

By exposing the words hidden behind the banners to the viewer, Cha probably attempts to reveal the hidden meanings of the words. However, the words shown on the banners are fragmented. They were exposed backwards to the viewer with a diagonal angle. After briefly being revealed, the words disappeared with the flames, preventing the

viewer from reflecting further on the meanings and associations of the words. In addition, the repeated darkness and light disrupts the audience's full understanding of the words. All these elements of the performance suggest that the complete meaning of the language can never be gained, but only grasped through ambiguity and slippages. In this performance, the audience only gets a glimpse of Cha as she melts the wax behind the banner in the darkness or through the shadow of her body cast on the gallery wall behind the banner. Bright flames only briefly expose the artist standing in the corner. The artist is not shown to the audience as a substantial and unified subject. Focusing on the fragmentation and slippage of language, and presenting herself as obscure, Cha refers to Lacan's idea of subjectivity as fragmented and split.

The performance further shows Cha's particular interest in poststructuralist film theory. The word CAVE from the title of the performance probably refers to French film theorist Jean-Louis Baudry's discussion of Plato's allegory of the cave in his essay "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema," which Cha included in her anthology of film theory *Apparatus*. Baudry draws an analogy between Plato's cave and the spectator's experience of film.

Included in the beginning of Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato's allegory consists of a dialogue between Plato's teacher, Socrates, and Plato's brother, Glaucon. In his story, Plato presents a cave in which prisoners are chained down and forced to watch the front wall of the cave. They are unable to turn their heads to see what happens behind them; they see only what lies before them. Between the fire and the prisoners lies a bridge, in front of which a curtain wall has been built. People are passing along the bridge, carrying various things including figures of men and animals made of wood and stone. These

people cast shadows on the wall and the prisoners perceive the shadows as reality. The people also talk and make noises, and the prisoners hear echoes of them reverberating off the walls of the cave.⁹⁷ The allegory suggests that what we perceive as real is false since it is based on our imperfect interpretations of reality. What we actually see is simulacra of what is real, the representations of Truth, which is not visible to us.

French film theorists Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz note that the film audience's experience is comparable to the infantile experience in the mirror stage. They draw attention to the machinery of cinema and any ideological and psychological factors that affect the subject's cinematic experience. Developing a new theoretical model called "apparatus theory," they emphasize the entire cinematic experience—film maker, projector, screen, framed image, spectator, and the darkened theater.⁹⁸ In his essay "The Imaginary Signifier," Metz embraces Freud's psychoanalytic theory for his explanation about the nature of film and argues that the experiences of film spectators are analogous to infants' experiences in the mirror stage. In Freud's theory, infants relate first to their mother as their primary identification. Metz replaces the infant with the spectator and replaces the mother with the film. He argues that the spectator identifies with the cinematic apparatus itself.⁹⁹

Baudry argues that the spectator perceives images on the screen, believing what he/she perceives is real. However, the spectator's perception of reality is created by carefully arranged cinematic apparatuses. The mechanical apparatus conceals and suppresses the differential elements such as discontinuities between images, for the

⁹⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin, 1987), 514a-b.

⁹⁸ Philip Rosen, ed. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 282.

⁹⁹ Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier [excerpts]," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 253.

spectator to receive the "impression of reality."¹⁰⁰ Thus, the cinematic apparatus is comparable to the unconscious which should be repressed for the subject to achieve a full subjectivity in the Symbolic realm of language. Baudry notes that just like the prisoners chained in a dim space, in a darkened theatre the spectator is relatively immobile as he leans back in his chair. The spectators are looking at the images projected onto the screen, while the prisoners are looking at the shadows projected onto the cave. Baudry contends that the spectator's experience is also analogous to that of an infant lacking physical coordination during the mirror stage.¹⁰¹ Like an infant in the mirror stage, the spectators in film and the prisoners in Plato's cave allegory are governed by the illusion of reality. Drawing upon Baudry's ideas, Cha's performance encourages the audience to reflect on the way in which his/her perception of reality is controlled by the entire viewing apparatus.

Cha's performance *Barren Cave Mute* further addresses the suppressed and muted voice of women in patriarchal western culture and history. According to feminist scholar Luce Irigaray, Plato's accounts of the cave suggest that the cave is a metaphor for the womb. Irigaray claims that Plato's description of the cave as "an underground chamber like a cave, with a long entrance to the daylight" is reminiscent of female anatomy. Although in Plato's original Greek text the gender of the prisoners was not specified, they are always assumed, Irigaray writes, to be men.¹⁰² In Plato's allegory of a cave, the prisoners have lived in the cave since their childhood. The cave is represented as

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Ideological Effects of the Basic Apparatus," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 291.

¹⁰¹ Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 302.

¹⁰² Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 244-5.

something always already there, an origin, a maternal body. However, everything created in the cave is simulacra and falseness. In the womblike cave, Truth does not exist.

Irigaray argues that the absence of Truth within the cave indicates the devaluation of the feminine. She further notes that the feminine entity is reduced to a simple backdrop for the discourse about representation and mimesis.¹⁰³ In Plato's allegory the prisoners are eventually liberated from the cave. Although the experience of getting out of the cave is distressful and painful, they discover the real world, the truth, and the sun. They realize that what they experienced in the cave is false. Irigaray notes that, in the cave, men are ignorant, baby-like, and connected to the mother's body, and only outside the cave do men become enlightened. The separation from the womb-cave is essential for men to become truly enlightened. In the classical accounts of the cave, the maternal body is the force that misleads men, and thus should be suppressed.¹⁰⁴

Cha's word MUTE probably refers to women's stories and experiences which were suppressed and muted by patriarchal Western culture. Cha seems to try to restore this hidden story of women. The words on the banners are spelled backwards with a diagonal angle, disrupting any conventional reading of the words. This disruption signifies a re-writing of a woman's story that is excluded from patriarchal accounts. Cha stands in the corner of the wall, looking at the ashes. She enacts the role of a female who is alienated from language and culture.

Cha's performance *Reveillé dans la Brume* (*Awakening in the Mist*) (Fig. 5) also addresses her engagement in poststructuralist film theory by invoking the space of the in-between. It was performed at the San Francisco Art Institute Annual, Fort Mason, in

¹⁰³ Ibid., 263.

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Homans, "The Woman in the Cave: Recent Feminist Fictions and the Classical Underworld," *Contemporary Literature* XXIX, 3 (1988): 383.

1977. The piece is marked by the use of multiple media, languages, and sources of voice. The audience enters a dimly lit gallery space, and, after everyone is seated, the lights fade to complete darkness. Standing in the center of the gallery, Cha lights a match. As she makes a circle with the match until it goes out, her voice from an audio tape recites the words "firefly/glow worms /firefly/ glow worms." After Cha lights another match and circles her arm, she walks to the microphone and speaks: "Everything is light/ Everything is dark...everything feels light/ Everything feels dark..." The room is completely darkened and there is a pause. Cha alternates darkness and light by lighting a match and extinguishing it, raising the gallery light and reducing it. Simultaneously, she speaks about darkness and light.¹⁰⁵

Then the audience hears another voice coming from the tape in the darkness. The voice says, "Now? Not now/Not yet. Now?/ Not just yet. And Now?/ Not quite yet. How about now?/ Not quite at this moment. What about now?/ Not right at this time. And now?/ Not this time."¹⁰⁶ Cha's exploration of darkness and light progresses to the investigation of time. In this passage, Cha anxiously waits for the right moment to come, but constantly fails to decide on the right moment.

Then the light comes back on and Cha recites, "Since, since then, only so often, only so." After a pause, Cha says "absolute silence," while the light rapidly dims to black. The light surges to medium as she says, "Reduced silence...guarded silence..." As the light descends to darkness, Cha's voice continues, "To pass over something in silence/ To

¹⁰⁵ Cha, "*Reveillé dans la Brume*," unpublished description and twelve photographs documenting the performance (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.; also quoted in Susan Wolf, "Theresa Cha: Recalling Telling Retelling," *Afterimage* (summer 1986): 11.

pass under something in silence."¹⁰⁷ Cha explores the differentiation among variations of silences.

She uses lap-dissolve projection that involves two slide projectors operating alternately. Lap-dissolve projection allows one image to fade away while another image appears on the same screen. By extensively using lap-dissolve, Cha exposes a specific technical element of filming to the audience, which was meant to create the effect of smooth displacement of place and time for the audience in traditional film-making.

The two slide projectors are turned on and show five-second dissolves of words on slides. They are displayed on a white door located in the back wall of the gallery. One projector presents a list of nouns including ENTRANCE, INLET, ORIFICE, MOUTH, DOOR, GATE, DISAPPEARANCE, EVANESCENCE, ECLIPSE, and DEPARTURE. The other slide projector displays verbs including EXIT, DISSOLVE, FADE, DEPART, LEAVE NO TRACE, EFFACE, and LOST TO SIGHT.¹⁰⁸

The dissolves of the words further lead the viewer to reflect on the relationships between words and their meanings, as well as the relationships between the two groups of words on the two different slides. The words on the lists are all related to "movements," yet each word has subtle differences of meanings, nuances, and connotations. The words such as entrance, inlet, door, and threshold indicate different names for passage-ways. The two groups of the words have opposite meanings— entrance vs. exit, sight vs. lost to sight, and appearance vs. disappearance. While the two groups of words suggest a binary relationship, the dissolves of the words from the two projectors make the relationship indefinite.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Then the artist shows color slides featuring a door with ten-second dissolves. In addition to the words related to passageways, the images of the door further denote Cha's exploration of the space of the in-between. Cha shows direct shots of the door slowly opening as the camera zooms in, which ends with a long shot. A second set of slides features negative images of the door slowly closing while shifting the camera frame from a long-shot to a close-up shot. As the door closes, Cha walks slowly toward the image. Her shadow becomes part of the projection. Alternating between walking and stillness, she moves in synchronization with the door. Cha carefully controls the distribution of light, the timing of the dissolves and narration, and the synchronization of her movements with the images.

Since the images of the door are projected on the actual door, and since the artist merges her body with the image of the door, the audience is confused as to whether the door is the actual door, or if it is the images of the door closing and opening. It is unclear whether the artist in the image is real or a shadow. As she moves further toward the wall and the large image of the closed door, everything fades to black. Cha merges her body with the images of the door opening and closing, the doorway, and the threshold. Her body literally appears to move in/through the threshold as a result of the overlapping images of the door moving and the actual door. Cha's body occupies the space between the outside and the inside, the liminal space of the two worlds. Cha's recorded voice speaks simultaneously:

Be this word somewhere before this word between this word just before this word
even before this word even before word begins just before this word ends
somewhere once before this word said this word written before sound formed this

gesture the last breath taken before uttered before reaching ears when its leaves
before the wind becomes felt and ends there and not end there at all.¹⁰⁹

Cha's narration further indicates her search for the space and time that is "in-between." Cha's engagement in an "in-between," the liminal space, invokes postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's notion of "in-between-ness" described in his book *The Location of Culture*. In the book's introduction, Bhabha argues that the process of articulating the differences between two different cultural groups produces a negotiation of cultural identities with regards to differences of race, class, gender, and cultural traditions. According to Bhabha, the process of negotiation results in the creation of a new hybrid culture. He calls the space in which a new hybrid culture forms a liminal "in-between" space—a space that is neither one nor the other, but beyond the two.¹¹⁰ Bhabha suggests that the globalized contemporary world, or what he calls the "new internationalism," is marked by the massive circulation of immigrants, exiles, refugees, and other diasporic groups, and their experiences of "estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness." According to Bhabha, the "unhomeliness" is the condition in which people can generate a sense of inhabiting the in-between space of cultural hybridity.¹¹¹

The title of the performance also suggests Cha's engagement in Baudry's psychoanalytic film theory. Baudry draws a parallel between cinematic apparatuses and the language of dreams. Freud considered dreams to be the main outlet for unconscious desires. Drawing on Freud's theory of dreams, Baudry notes that in dreams, the subject is in a condition of reduced motor function and experiences a regression of the self into a

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 4.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 9.

state of egoistic narcissism. The dreamer is also experiencing a regression of thoughts into visual images. Baudry argues that the condition of the dreamer resembles that of the spectator sitting motionless and watching a film in a darkened room. Just as the spectator experiences the film as real, the dreamer perceives the dream as real, or "more-than-real."¹¹² Baudry adopts Bertram Lewin's notion of the "dream screen," which indicates a surface on which a dream seems to be projected. The dream screen is often ignored by the dreamer, just as the screen is not discernible by the spectator. According to Lewin, while the dream screen represents the desire to sleep, a state of complete satisfaction in the oral phase in which perception and representation are confused, the dream images represent the desire to stay awake, the desire for contact with the real. The apparatus of the dream is marked by the contradictory desire of the dreamers. The apparatuses of cinema reproduce similar conditions to those experienced by the dreamer—reduced motor function, return to narcissism, translation of thoughts into visual images, conflicting desires, and the effect of reality.¹¹³

As previously discussed, Cha was deeply engaged in poststructuralist film theory and some of her works serve as good examples of her use of film theory, including her performances *Barren Cave Mute* and *Reveillé dans la Brumes*.

Valorizing the Difference of a Korean American

This section will return to Cha's works that show her strong concern with her specific identity as a Korean American woman. It will discuss Cha's performance *A Ble Wail*, a video work *Passages/Paysages*, a multimedia work *Other Things Seen, Other*

¹¹² Ibid., 310.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Things Heard (Ailleurs), a photographic work *Chronology*, and another multimedia work titled *Exilée*.

In contrast to *Barren Cave Mute* and *Reveillé dans la Brume*, the 1975 performance *A Ble Wail* (Fig. 6) explicitly shows Cha's attempt to affiliate with Korean woman's identity. She performed the piece at the Worth Ryder Gallery in Berkeley. The unpublished description by Cha does not provide any hint of the meaning of the title. Only the last word, "Wail," is listed in the dictionary, meaning "to express sorrow audibly." This strange title directs the audience to read it in multiple ways. It could be read as "Able/Wail," or "A Blew/Ail." In French Blé means wheat and Ail means garlic. The title also suggests Blue Whale and Blue Wail. In this performance, Cha separates herself from the audience with a gauze curtain between her and the audience. The audience sees the performance through this translucent veil. Inside the performer's space, lighted candles are arranged with mirrors behind them. The candles create an oval. Cha wears a white robe with white band wrapped around her head. In a dim performance space, she sits with her back to the audience. As the soundtrack of high-pitched noise starts, Cha proceeds with dance-like movements. She alternates between slow movements and stillness, while sound and silence accentuate her alternating gestures. She turns to the audience, covering her face with her arms. Later on, she removes her arms from the face. As the soundtrack produces various noises, such as sounds of ripping paper and small percussion instruments, she unfolds twenty meters of black and red cloth from under her sleeves. Cha continues to move slowly, while dragging the two strands of cloth.

As she continues dance-like movements, Cha becomes entangled in the cloth. At the end of the performance, she sits on the floor, encircled by the ribbon.¹¹⁴

The flickering candle lights and the alternating movements and stillness evoke a mysterious and ritualistic atmosphere. Cha's ritualistic movements and the use of translucent curtain, mirrors, and candles show the direct influence from contemporary performance artist Terry Fox.

The translucent veil which blurs the scene of the performance, together with the flickering candle lights and the reflection of the lighted candles in mirrors, leads the audience to a surreal experience. With regards to this performance, Cha stated, "I want to be the dream of the audience."

The use of the veil and dream-like atmosphere again highlights Cha's interest in Baudry's psychoanalytic film theory. In her performance *A Ble Wail*, Cha enacts the condition of the dreamer. The translucent curtain signifies the dream screen, and the blurred images seen through the veil refer to ambiguous and fragmentary dream images. Cha's movements represent the conflicting and ambiguous desires of the subject in his/her dreams. Adopting Baudry's film theory, Cha suspends a translucent curtain and separates the space between the performer and the audience. The audience is focused on the performance space in a darkened room. Cha urges the audience to reflect on their condition in viewing the performance, drawing a parallel between her performance and a film theatre. She directs the audience's attention to the apparatus itself on which our perception of reality depends. Baudry and Metz noted that the cinematic apparatus is not ideologically neutral. It is carefully arranged machinery that maintains the dominant

¹¹⁴ Cha, "A Ble Wail," unpublished description and twenty-eight black-and-white photographs documenting the performance (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive).

ideology of the culture. Cha suggests that the idea of the transcendental all-perceiving subject, which is epitomized in the subject position in the cinema, is illusory, since our perception of reality is always determined by cultural and social ideologies.

In Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, for the formation of the full-speaking subject in the symbolic, the rejection of and the separation from the mother is required. The realm of the unconscious, of the pre-Oedipal, is associated with woman. Julia Kristeva calls the pre-Oedipal phase "the semiotic." According to Kristeva, there are two ways of signification in our use of language—the symbolic and the semiotic. The semiotic signification is associated with the way a child expresses itself through babbles and gestures, involving elements of movements, rhythm, feelings, energy, and desire, while the symbolic signification involves a logical use of language that is governed by grammar and syntax.¹¹⁵ Kristeva emphasizes the semiotic is not wholly distinct from the symbolic; it is another way of signification. She uses the term "semiotic chora," indicating a kind of receptacle or a space and links it to the mother's body. Emphasizing the role of the female writer, Kristeva argues that in the semiotic chora, the woman is free from being silenced and she can subvert the Law of the Father by way of poetic means.¹¹⁶ Cha's exploration of the space of the unconscious and the dream, and her engagement in the fragmented poetic language strongly invokes Kristeva's feminist idea of the semiotic chora.

While engaging in film theory, Cha's performance makes a specific reference to traditional Korean dance and shamanistic rituals. Cha learned traditional Korean dance including *salpuri* and shamanistic rituals in Hawaii from Korean dancer Halla Pai Huhm.

¹¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 24.

¹¹⁶ Rosalind Minsky, ed., *Psychoanalysis and Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 180.

Realizing that Korean traditional dance and music were little-known in Hawaii, Halla Pai Huhm began to teach these dances to large numbers of Korean students.¹¹⁷ Cha's movements strongly allude to the dancer's movements in the Korean traditional dance, *salpuri*. As a type of folk dance, the *salpuri* dance was established as a dance form in the mid-1930s. The term *salpuri* and the style of the dance originated from traditional shaman rituals in which a female shaman exorcises evil spirits. Performed at the end of the *gut*, or the shaman ritual, the *salpuri* dance indicated that the ritual had reached the final stage. In a *gut*, the female shaman uses white cloth to signify the departing soul of a dead person and to comfort the families of the dead.¹¹⁸

In the *salpuri* dance, the dancer wears a traditional white dress and dances with a white scarf, attuning to the rhythmic sounds of wind and percussion instruments. This dance is usually performed by a single female dancer. The dancer often starts by turning away from the audience and proceeding with very slow movements followed by fast movements. Cha's white robe in *A Ble Wail*, her use of the strands of cloth, and the ritualistic movements consisting of alternating slow and fast movements coupled with the gestures of pulling cloth under her sleeves and stretching her arm strongly resemble *salpuri* dancing. Cha also included percussion instruments in her soundtrack. The dance is characterized by its serene and simple movements which appear to ease people's *han*, or deep-seated sorrow and anger.¹¹⁹ Her broken movements, controlled gestures, and movements repeatedly entwined in the red and black ribbons express a strong sense of struggle and sorrow, the same emotion conveyed to the audience during the *salpuri* dance.

¹¹⁷ R. Anderson Sutton, "Korean Music in Hawaii," *Asian Music* 19, no. 1 (autumn-winter 1987):106.

¹¹⁸ Malborg Kim, *Korean Dance* (Seoul: Ewha Women's University Press, 2005), 76.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

In the discourse of Korean shamanism, shamans serve as an intermediary between gods or spirits and the human beings. They solicit help from the gods to solve human problems, heal people by expelling evil spirits, and guide the spirits of the dead to heaven. The dream-like atmosphere of *A Ble Wail* evokes the female shaman's rite in which she experiences a trance state to meet with gods or spirits. When a female shaman enters into a trance state to obtain help from a spirit, she speaks with the voice of the spirit. In a *gut* for the dead, the shaman often calls for help from the spirit of princess Pali, a mythical princess who is considered to be the origin of all female shamans. In Korean myth, Pali was born to a king as a seventh daughter, but was abandoned by her father because she was a girl. Pali was rescued by a Heavenly King and brought to Heaven. When she learned about her mother's illness, princess Pali traveled to find medicine water for her mother. She later came down to earth and became a shaman to heal other people.¹²⁰ In her book *Dictée*, Cha describes princess Pali's journey to get the medicine water from a well.¹²¹ In *A Ble Wail*, Cha presents herself as a voice that speaks the story of the rejected princess and her strong bond with her mother. By invoking the story of the princess Pali's abandonment and the relationship between a daughter and a mother, Cha critiques an oppressive patriarchal authority and the marginalized position of women in the Korean myth.

Cha, I am arguing, attempts to uncover the repressed story of women in the discourse of Korean shamanism. Although the origin of the female shaman, *mudang*, links her to a kingly status, Korean culture and society has relegated *mudang* to a lower

¹²⁰ Jung Yong Lee, *Korean Shamanistic Rituals* (The Hague, Paris, and New York: Mouton Publishers, 1981), 168.

¹²¹ *Dictée*, 167-70.

social position.¹²² While Korean shamanism has recently been presented as an important part of Korean culture, the negative perception of *mudang* still prevails. Enacting a female shaman, Cha seeks to unearth the marginalized story of women in Korean cultural history.

Cha's 1978 video work *Passages/Paysages* (Fig. 7) is another example of her intense engagement in the language and its relation to her specific hybrid identity. The work consists of a twenty-six-minute-long, three-channel video installation. The three video monitors are placed adjacent to each other. The screen features dissolves and fades of still images with a voice-over repeating words, phrases, or sentences spoken in French, Korean, and English. Black-and-white images feature landscapes, an interior view of windows showing landscapes, a lit candle being blown out, an empty room with three windows shown from the inside, an empty gallery with seats facing Cha's video installation, a bundle of letters tied up, an unmade bed, an old photograph of Cha as a young girl with her mother in a Korean traditional dress, and Cha's hand opening and closing. The monitor also features a landscape painting. Sometimes the image on the monitor is unrecognizable due to the complete overlapping with another image. The images are sometimes the same on the three monitors, sometimes different. At one point, the first channel features the image of a photograph of Cha and her mother taken in Korea before leaving for America, the second channel features a blurred landscape, and the last channel shows an empty room with three windows, which is Cha's apartment in America. At another point, the three channels feature a Korean landscape, a house in America, and

¹²² Chongho Kim, *Korean Shamanism: The Cultural Paradox* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 23.

a bundle of letters tied up side by side.¹²³ The three monitors placed adjacent to each other with the images, texts, and sound constantly moving back and forth cause the viewer to experience literal spatial displacement. The images of two distant places side by side strongly evoke a sense of spatial displacement. The photograph of Cha as a young girl with her mother, the image of Cha's own apartment in the U.S., and the image of blurred landscape in the middle all suggest the temporal and spatial disjunction between Cha's homeland and America. These images also refer to the spatial displacement that Cha and her family experienced when they migrated to the U.S. The image of the Korean landscape next to the image of a house in the U.S. denotes the spatial gap between the two places, while the tied-up letters suggest a long time separation and the difficulties of overcoming the temporal disjunction between two countries.

Words and phrases featured on the screens are a mixture of French and English including *passé* (French for "past"), *paysage* (French for "landscape"), *passages*, *entice*, *allure*, *clothe*, and *allume* (French for "lights") without the accent *aigu*. The title of the work partially rhymes: *Passages/Paysages*. Words such as *etteindre* are not listed in the dictionary. Whether it was meant to be *attendre* (French for "stay") or *eteindre* (French for "extinguish"), or if it was purposely misspelled, is not clear. Words are typed or chalked, and sometimes they are in different typefaces. Some words are so obscure that they are almost invisible. The second channel quickly shows each letter of the title one after the other. The images and words on the screen are fragmented and blurred, and sometimes the images do not match the words being spoken. When used with the

¹²³ The author viewed *Passages/Paysages* (DVD) at Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, June 24, 2010; unpublished description of the work at the Archive.

dissolves and fades, Cha's manipulation of words causes the viewer to reflect on the words' diverse meanings and associations. The images of a hand opening and closing next to the image of the words suggest the difficulty in grasping the word's meaning.

Over the images of an unmade bed, Cha's voice says:

A few remaining moments, they should be as good as gone, yet still remaining moments...I'm closing my eyes, remembering just the other day. Do you remember me closing my eyes? Do you remember the other day, closing my eyes, closing my eyes...?¹²⁴

The passage conveys a sense of struggle to capture the passing moments as well as a sense of yearning for the past. This sense of yearning is enhanced by the fades and dissolves, and by Cha's hypnotic voice. Cha continues to explore the passing of time and memories, and narrates softly:

Not gone/Not yet/Not gone no yet/ A few remaining/A few/A few remaining moments moments/It should be as good/It should be as good as gone/Good as gone, gone/But still-but still remaining moments moments yet/Still remaining moments yet/Wait/Wait what wait whom waits where and when.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Quoted in Lawrence Rinder, "Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Passages Paysages" in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of twentieth-Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 359.

Another voice-over in Korean repeats the sentences containing various usages of the verbs "light" and "extinguish"—"Turn off the light." "Have you turned off the light?" "I have turned off the light." "Turn off the light." "Try turning on the light," etc.¹²⁶

In this work, as critics note, Cha investigates the function of language and the theme of temporal and spatial displacement. However, critics often fail to discuss Cha's use of specific visual and audio elements that reflect her identity as a Korean American immigrant. Over the images of letters and telegrams, Cha uses several male and female voice-over readings of letters which sometimes overlap. Soft and delicate musical sounds of *Kayagum*, a Korean traditional musical stringed instrument, emerge. Cha's mother's voice reads a letter in Korean, which is addressed to Cha. She says, "Dear Hak Kyung, How are you doing? We are doing fine. It must be so cold there. Weather is pleasant here..."¹²⁷ Several voice-overs begin to overlap, sometimes barely audible. Together with the image of the photograph of Cha with her mother, these images, sounds, and voice-overs suggest Cha's deep yearning for her motherland. Cha's use of the fragmented and blurred images and words signifies the difficulty of returning home, positioning herself in disjunction between her home country and the adopted one. Yet, the recurrent images about her homeland strongly suggest Cha's attempts to articulate the specificity of her identity as a Korean American woman.

Cha's multimedia work entitled *Other Things Seen, Other Things Heard* (*Ailleurs*) (Fig. 8) also illustrates her attempt to uncover the repressive history of her home country and its relation to her Korean American identity. The work was presented at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1978. "Ailleurs" is the French word for

¹²⁶ The author viewed *Passages/Paysages* at Cha Archive, June 24, 2010.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

“somewhere else.” The piece consists of two slide projectors, one film projector, recorded voices, and Cha’s performance. According to Robert Etkins’ unpublished review, the piece was presented in a small, darkened gallery. There is sandy powder at one end of the floor. The screen begins to feature black and white images of beaches and rocks. Recorded voices emerge. It is impossible for the audience to focus on the content of the words because the sound-track begins to overlap. Cha appears in front of the screen and sits meditatively.¹²⁸ Sometimes she sits and looks at the images projected on the screen, and other times she stands and merges her body with the images. Standing in front of the screen featuring an empty stage, Cha appears to be in a theatre, forcing herself to be “somewhere else.” She drags ropes tied to the rocks toward the screen. The rocks are labeled with the stenciled words REDEMPTION, PURITY, FORBIDDEN, RETURN, and ABANDON, and the same rocks are also shown on the screen. Standing in front of the close-up shots of rocks, Cha appears to be in a surreal space. The screen also features handwritten texts, images of hands, barren landscapes, Cha with her hands covering her mouth, and various film stills. The film-stills, the slides, Cha’s movements, the shadow cast by her body on the screen, the sound track, and the merging of all the elements together make the viewer constantly look across different media.¹²⁹

The fragmented words and images evoke a sense of loss, time past, and a yearning for the past. The images of an empty theatre refer to the experience of the audience in a theatre. In a part of her book *Dictée*, entitled “Memory,” Cha writes, “an empty theatre. The immediate familiarity upon entering the theatre, of that which has passed in shadow

¹²⁸ Robert Etkins, “Other Things Seen, Other Things Heard (Ailleurs),” an unpublished review for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 1978 (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive); Eleven strips of film negatives and forty-eight black-and-white slides documenting the performance (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive).

¹²⁹ Ibid.

and darkness...She hovers in a silent suspension of the simulated night as a flame that gives itself stillness and equally to wind as it rises. Her eyes open to distance as if to linger inside that which has passed in shadow and darkness.”¹³⁰ Cha continues to illustrate the audience’s experience in the theatre. She writes, “She remains for the effect induced in her, fulfilled in the losing of herself repeatedly to memory and simultaneously its opposition, the arrestation of memory in oblivion.”¹³¹ In these passages, Cha suggests that the audience in the theatre is experiencing a suspension of time, or a timelessness as they watch the images on the screen constantly passing in shadows and darkness.

Cha’s exploration of memory invokes Freud’s notion of memory. Freud notes that like dreams, memory reveals our suppressed unconscious desires and emotions. He suggests we repress emotionally painful memories to a realm of the unconscious and we tend not to remember the traumatic events of the past. Freud writes, “The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past.”¹³² Traumatic memories are thus pushed away into the realm of the unconscious, and they repeatedly return to consciousness.

The experience of an exiled immigrant is marked by the traumatic memories of displacement from the home country and alienation in the adopted country. Cha’s exploration of memory and her search for the past specifically point to the repressed and

¹³⁰ *Dictée*, 149.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹³² Peter Gay, ed. *The Freud Reader* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 602.

traumatic nature of her memory as an immigrant. Her exploration of memory further points to the collective memory of Korea and the Korean people marked by the traumatic history of colonialism. Although the process of retrieving and encountering the traumatic memory of her experience as an Asian American in the U.S. and the colonial history of her home country is painful, Cha constantly seeks to recover those memories rather than submerging them in silence.

In *Other Things Seen, Other Things Heard (Ailleurs)* (Fig. 8) Cha shows film stills of the female character from *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), directed by Alain Resnais with a screenplay by Marguerite Duras, of Joan of Arc from Carl Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), and of a Japanese woman in a kimono from an unidentified source. Although critics note that Cha was greatly influenced by film makers such as Alain Resnais, Marguerite Duras, Carl Dreyer, and Robert Bresson, they have not discussed still images from *Hiroshima Mon Amour* in this work. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* portrays the bombing of Hiroshima through a love affair between a French actress and a Japanese architect. The film centers on the French woman's memory about war in France, the couple's conflicting memories of the bombing of Hiroshima, and the process of forgetting their traumatic history. The film suggests that remembering such a traumatic historical event is impossible.¹³³ However, focusing on French and Japanese suffering and victimization during World War II, the film glosses over the history of their colonial practices. It also omits the historical fact that more than thirty-thousand Koreans who were forced to work at war factories during Japanese colonization were killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It seems to me that, by featuring film stills of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Cha exposes the invisibility of the history of her home land.

¹³³ Dana Strand, "'Documenting' the National Past in French Film," *Pacific Coast Philology* 39 (2004): 23.

The film stills of Joan of Arc suggest Cha's concern with women's involvement in nationalist movements. While commemorating women's self-sacrifice for the national cause, Cha simultaneously reveals the rarity of female participation in nationalist movements. For example, Joan of Arc had to suffer from and resist the prejudices of the male authorities before she led the troops. By featuring images of women across different times and places, Cha points to women's shared history of oppression under patriarchal authority.

Joan of Arc was canonized by Pope Benedict XV in 1920 and is considered one of the most popular saints of Catholic Church. Presenting the still images from Carl Dreyer's film that emphasizes the spiritual endurance and intense emotional pain of Joan of Arc, Cha specifically points to the history of French Catholic missionary colonialism in Korea in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Colonized women in patriarchal nations were forced to endure the double oppression inflicted upon them by both colonial and patriarchal authorities. I argue that by showing the images of colonizers, France and Japan, along with images of herself with her hands covering her mouth, Cha attempts to reveal the doubly marginalized history of Korean women in colonial history.

Cha's photographic work *Chronology* also conveys a strong sense of her hybrid and diasporic Korean American identity. She created *Chronology* (Fig. 9) in 1977. It features color photocopies of Cha's family photographs attached on eighteen pressboard panels. The images are accompanied by enigmatic texts. The photocopied images are based on family photographs, probably all taken prior to the family's immigration to the U.S.: one of Cha's father, one of Cha's mother as a girl, one of her parents' wedding ceremony, and one of Cha with her siblings. Some of these images are superimposed over

one another. For example, the image of Cha's mother is superimposed over the one of her father; the wedding picture is superimposed over the image of the siblings.¹³⁴

By juxtaposing words with the images, Cha explores the relationships between their different registers of meaning. The first panel features a picture of Cha's mother when she was young and the accompanying text reads "could HAVe been kNot one." The text shows Cha's word play. "kNot" can denote both "knot" and "Not." "Knot" means a fastening by intertwining or connecting two cords together or a unifying bond, such as the bond of marriage. If we use "Not" as a negation of a word, the phrase is read, "could have been not one, but two." These multiple meanings do not directly relate to the image shown on the same panel. When the capitalized "HA" in HAVe is joined with another capitalized letter "N" in Not, it becomes a word "Han," which is a major river flowing through Seoul, South Korea. Also in Korean, "han" means deep-seated sorrow and anger caused by the repeated experiences of oppression. The word "han" further refers to the Korean people's experience of colonization.

Other panels contain fragmented and often undecipherable words. Cha makes variations in the text by moving the location on the panel or by changing the words graphically. Some texts are inscribed right below the images, functioning as captions for the image. However, the text gives no indication of the identities of the figures in the photocopied images. They are simply a mother, a father, and children. Cha presents poor-quality photocopies of her family rather than photographic prints of them. She does not provide captions or the text related to the images. Superimposed by other images, some of the images are completely unrecognizable. Cha repeatedly shows identical images of the children with the variations in the text. By providing the reproduction of

¹³⁴ Cha, "*Chronology*" and unpublished description of the work (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive).

family photographs, Cha conveys the sense of distance caused by the time passed. By giving no indication as to the identity of the figures, combining two images, and repeating the same images, she resists the conventional method of "chronology" marked by the arrangements of events in their order of occurrence in time. By resisting the logic of "chronology," Cha reveals the invisibility of her family's genealogy.

During Japanese colonialism in Korea, a large number of Korean people left their homeland for Manchuria, Hawaii, the continental United States, and elsewhere in order to escape oppressive Japanese colonial rule. Many former soldiers who lost their jobs, farmers who lost their lands, and others left Korea for Manchuria. They endured a long and harsh journey through mountainous areas and finally settled in Manchuria. Cha's grandparents were exiled to Manchuria where her mother was born and raised, but later returned to the homeland. Cha's parents escaped the social and political turmoil caused by a long military dictatorship by leaving their home country for Hawaii. They then moved to San Francisco. Cha's family was diasporic living far from their relatives in South Korea.

The first panel of *Chronology* features a photocopy of Cha's mother, the same photograph Cha included in the beginning of the section entitled "Calliope Epic Poetry" in *Dictée*. In the following autobiographical section of the book, she describes her mother's status as an exile along with other Koreans living in Manchuria. She writes:

Mother, you are eighteen years old. You were born in Yong Jung, Manchuria and this is where you now live. You are not Chinese. You are Korean. But your family moved there to escape the Japanese occupation. China is large. Larger than large. You tell me that the hearts of the people are measured by the size of the land. As

large and as silent. You live in a village where the other Koreans live. Same as you. Refugees. Immigrants. Exiles. Farther away from the land that is not your own. Not your own any longer.¹³⁵

Cha's brother John Hak Sung Cha has stated that Cha once told him that "Exile is my condition."¹³⁶ Although Cha was not an exile *per se*, she identified her status with that of her mother, and her grandparents. The repetition of the images on the panels signifies the repeating history of her family's exiled status: Cha's grandparents as the first generation of Korean exiles in Manchuria, her mother as a daughter of the first generation exile and as the first generation in America, and Cha as a 1.5 generation Korean American. The repetitive images further refer to the history of the Korean people's diaspora caused by the repeated foreign invasions and wars. The notion of diaspora involves multiple, non-directional spatial displacements. Cha presents diaspora as a concept to challenge the logic of "chronology" which is based on the linear progress of time. The status of Cha's diasporic family within the conventional family chronology is ambiguous and invisible.

The genealogy of Asian immigrant families is invisible and alienated from U.S. history. Building upon an assimilation framework that suggests that immigrants from different racial and ethnic backgrounds are integrated into a culture of the adopted country, the discourse of the nation promotes a homogenous and abstract notion of national citizenship.¹³⁷ However, in reality, Asian immigrants were subject to systematic legal exclusion and cultural alienation. Between 1850 and World War II, approximately

¹³⁵ *Dictée*, 45.

¹³⁶ John Hak Sung Cha, e-mail message to author, March 12, 2012.

¹³⁷ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 29.

one million people from China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and India emigrated to the continental United States and Hawaii. Many Americans considered these people to be sources of cheap labor needed to develop the U.S. economy. The second wave of Asian immigration started during World War II and continues today. The U.S. government controlled Asian American lives through immigration quotas, limiting opportunities for citizenship, and even internment. Before the removal of quotas based on national origin in 1965, a sequence of laws passed in 1882, 1917, 1924, and 1934 limited immigrants from China, Japan, and the Philippines.¹³⁸ Coupled with these exclusive immigration laws, Asians have been subjected to racial stereotypes produced by mainstream white society. They were often characterized as the “Yellow Peril”—a military, economic, and moral threat to white society. Later, Asians were also categorized as a “model minority” that easily assimilated to the dominant white culture and society.¹³⁹ Cha's *Chronology* reveals the alienated and invisible diasporic history of her family and the history of Asian Americans.

Cha's multi-media work *Exilée* (1980) (Fig. 10) epitomizes her concern with her hybrid cultural identity as a Korean American woman. The piece consists of a large film screen and a single video monitor cut into the center of the screen. The video monitor shows black and white images accompanied by Cha's voice-over from an audio tape. The work starts with a Super-8mm film displaying the image of a gradually-emerging bamboo tree in shadow. Then, the images of a window with an undulating curtain and a tabletop with light moving over it appear on the screen. The film is slowly projected without a

¹³⁸ Ibid., 4-5.

¹³⁹ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997): 89.

sound-track.¹⁴⁰ Simultaneously, the black and white still images on the video monitor start with a word-play of the title *Exilée*:

E X I L

E X I L É

I L E

É

É E

The French title *Exilée*, a feminine form of *exilé*, or past participle of *exiler*, indicates a woman who is away from her home country. The monitor shows the word EXIL which dissolves into EXILÉ. It is slowly replaced by ILE, É, then by ÉE that recedes into a blank. Cha explores the variety of meanings related to the word *exilée*: “*exil*”—exile, banishment; “*exilé*”—a man who is away from his home, or a state of being exiled; “*île*”—island; and “*e*,” signifying the female gender. By slowly showing a series of words from the title, Cha visually illustrates a state of exile or displacement.

The accompanying voice-over narrates: "Before. Before name. none other. None other than given. Last. Absent. First. Name. without name. A no name. no name. between name. absent name. named." This narration attempts to illustrate various implications about the formation of name and identity. It also denotes Cha's status as an exile or an immigrant who neither fully belongs to one culture nor the other. Although Cha came to the U.S. at an early age and became fully acculturated as a citizen, as John Hak Sung Cha stated, she felt as though she was in exile.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ The author viewed *Exilée* (DVD) at Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive, June 24, 2010; unpublished description of the work at the Archive.

¹⁴¹ John Hak Sung Cha, e-mail message to author, March 12, 2012.

The narration is followed by the image of a black brush-stroked X on the video monitor, dissolving into another. The X as a crossing-out or a deletion refers to the isolation and marginalization of the exile. The X signifying multiplication refers to the multiple or hybrid cultural identities of the exile, which rejects an essentialist notion of home.

The black and white still images that dissolve and fade include pictures of an empty white bowl casting a long shadow on a straw floor, passing clouds, an inside view of an airplane with a row of empty seats, drying laundry, and shoes outside a temple door. The monitor also shows an envelope gradually sprinkled with flour until it is completely covered, and the shape of the envelope left on the surface when it is removed from it.¹⁴²

Simultaneous projections of the film image onto the screen and the video image on a smaller screen within the larger one cause the audience's attention to constantly shift between the two screens. In addition, the audio track further scatters the viewers' attention. Cha's use of multiple screens and the repeated fading in and out of images evokes a sense of displacement. Her use of multiple languages, fragmented words and phrases, and the disjunction between spoken words and images generates a sense of rupture and displacement. Her words explore the gaps between different language systems, while simultaneously questioning the function and ability of language to convey meaning.

The images are interspersed with words, phrases, or sentences written in English and French. The text fades in and out and is sometimes completely blurred. The monitor often shows a completely blank slide followed by a long pause. Cha's voice-over is not

¹⁴² The author viewed *Exilée* at the Archive.

synchronous with the text on the screen. While these elements all suggest postmodern and poststructuralist ideas of fragmentation, multiplicity, and indeterminacy, some of the images coupled with texts specifically refer to her experience as a Korean American immigrant. The following narration by Cha, along with the images of passing clouds and the inside of an airplane illustrates her trip between San Francisco and Seoul. Cha's voice narrates:

Following daylight to the end of daylight

Ten hours twenty three minuits [*sic*]

Sixteen hours ahead of this time

Ten hours twenty two minuits [*sic*]

Sixteen hours ahead of this time

Ten hours twenty one minutes

Sixteen hours ahead of this time ¹⁴³

In this voice-over, Cha explores a flight from Seoul to San Francisco which lasts ten hours and twenty three minutes. By counting off each of the passing minutes until her arrival in San Francisco, the passage illustrates the physical experience of Cha's departure from her home land to the foreign country. The voice-over continues with a sequence of cloud images. The repetitive phrase "sixteen hours ahead of this time" indicates the time change, the temporal and spatial distance separating San Francisco from her homeland. While the flight time indicates a travel from Seoul to San Francisco., Cha's repetitive use the phrase "this time" suggests the opposite direction. Simultaneously evoking two points of departure, Cha refers to her experience of

¹⁴³ Ibid.

returning home. While the passage does not provide a clear sense of the direction of the flight, the images of the passing clouds and an inside view of an airplane evoke a sense of being airborne. The repetition of the phrase “sixteen hours ahead of this time” further suggests Cha’s experience of many years of separation and subsequent feelings of deep longing for her homeland. In 1979, Cha made her first trip back to her homeland in seventeen years.

Many images in the work refer to liminality: a pulled-down shade, figures seen through a translucent curtain or shade, sliding doors, and a row of shoes at a stepped entryway. Liminality characterizes the experience of an exile as being between two distinct cultures, feeling deeply dislocated and alienated.

Cha's exploration of the state of liminality suggests her ambivalent relationship to her native country and her Korean identity. Cha expresses her feelings of frustration through the description of her first trip back to Korea in *Dictée*. She traveled to South Korea in 1979 when the country was embroiled in social and political turmoil because of totalitarian military rule and massive anti-government demonstrations. The assassination of President Park Chung Hee in 1979, who had ruled for eighteen years, led to General Chun Doo Hwan’s coup and the declaration of martial law. Protesting Chun's coup, numerous civilians and students joined the May 18 Kwangju Uprising in 1980, which resulted in the massacre of hundreds of people (See Appendix). Under martial law, the uprising was denounced as a rebellion instigated by the political leader Kim Dae Jung and his communist followers. Martial rule ended after Chun Doo Hwan assumed the presidency.¹⁴⁴ Cha’s feelings of frustration and pain when she encountered student

¹⁴⁴ Jungwoon Choi, *The Gwangju Uprising: The Pivotal Democratic Movement that Changed the History of Modern Korea*, trans. Young-nan Yu (Paramus: Homa & Sekey Books, 2006), 22.

demonstrations are clearly expressed in *Dictée*. She states, “Nothing has changed, we are at a standstill. I speak in another tongue now, a second tongue, a foreign tongue... Here at my return in eighteen years [*sic*], the war is not ended. We fight the same war.”¹⁴⁵

Recalling the April 19th Revolution in 1960 and her brother John Hak Sung’s involvement in the student demonstrations, as well as her family’s subsequent immigration to the U.S., Cha laments the repeating painful history of her home country. Cha made another trip to South Korea in 1980. The purpose of this trip was to work on a film titled *White Dust from Mongolia*, which was never finished. Cha and her brother James Hak Shin Cha, a cinematographer, were questioned by South Korean officials regarding their suspected involvement in espionage for North Korea.¹⁴⁶ In her book *Dictée*, Cha expresses her feelings of anxiety when she returned home:

You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference. All the time you understand what they are saying. But the papers give you away... They ask you identity [*sic*]. They comment upon your inability or ability to speak.

Whether you are telling the truth or not about your nationality. They say you look other than you say. As if you didn't know who you are.¹⁴⁷

Despite Cha’s feelings of deep kinship for her own people, she was questioned about her national loyalty because of her passport and her flawed usage of the Korean language. Cha’s experience of going back home is marked by an alienating encounter between the returned emigrant and the native Korean people.

¹⁴⁵ Cha, *Dictée*, 80,81.

¹⁴⁶ John Hak Sung Cha, e-mail message to the author, March 12, 2012.

¹⁴⁷ *Dictée*, 56-7.

Cha's engagement with the notion of liminality and space in between suggests her refusal to align with either an assimilationist Asian American identity or with essentialist Korean nationalism. Nevertheless, Cha's work is not contained in the generic discourse of exile as a postmodern and postcolonial condition. While disrupting restrictive conceptions of identity, Cha resituates herself within the specific material history of her home country and its connection to her immigrant experience in the U.S.

Although the following text shown on the monitor appears to be the simple French translation of English words, it specifically points to the painful history of Asian American immigrants: Name-Nom/Sex-le sexe/ Permanent residence-résidence permanente/Birthplace-lieu de naissance/ Wife husband-mari épouse/ Minors-mineurs/ Issue date-date d'émission/ Expires on-expire sur. The text refers to the U.S. passport Cha was given after she became naturalized in 1977. It is a document that legally proves her U.S. citizenship. In this bureaucratically-authorized new identity, the loss of her previous identity and the painful experience of relocating and adapting to the new country are not visible. Moreover, the history of Asian American immigrants marked by the government's refusal to acknowledge Asian American subjects through legal exclusions and cultural alienation is not visible in this official language of authorization. Cha conveys her sense of loss in the process of identity transformation in her book *Dictée*:

I have the documents. Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature. One day you raise the right hand and you are American. They give you an American passport. The United States of America. Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph. The other one. Their signature their

seals. Their own image. And you learn the executive branch the legislative branch and the third. Justice. Judicial branch. It makes the difference. The rest is past.¹⁴⁸

Cha's work's foreground lies in the specific colonial history of her homeland. Often shot close-up, the images featured in *Exilée* are abstract, fragmentary, and devoid of detailed contexts. They appear to be images lingering in memory. Critics often describe the still images featured in *Exilée* as typical Oriental scenes that evoke a romantic yearning for home. However, they fail to recognize that these images show specifically Japanese scenes. The still images feature a *Shinto* temple, *Shinto* priests' shoes carefully arranged at the entryway, *Fusuma*—traditional Japanese sliding doors, and *Tatami*—Japanese floor mats made of straw. During the Japanese colonial rule, as the number of Japanese settlers throughout the cities and towns in Korea increased, Japanese housing marked by unique flooring and doors rapidly expanded. In the beginning of the colonial period in 1910, Japanese authorities began to establish the Japanese state religion, *Shinto*, in Korea. They built *Shinto* shrines throughout the major cities in Korea. In the early 1930s, Japanese authorities began to accelerate their cultural assimilation policy. In addition to the forced use of the Japanese language, under a new policy promulgated in 1935, students and employees were required to attend *Shinto* ceremonies. As imperial subjects, Koreans had to celebrate the Japanese indigenous religion based on the creation myth of Japan and its sacred emperor. This policy aimed to eradicate the Korean national identity and to encourage Korean people to accept the authority of the emperor of Japan.¹⁴⁹ Although seemingly abstract, devoid of context,

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 56.

¹⁴⁹ Carter J. Eckert and others, *Korea Old and New: A History*, 315.

and beautifully designed, these images featured in *Exilée* are haunted by the brutal history of Japanese colonial policy and its psychological impact on the Korean people. While engaging in the postmodern idea of hybrid cultural identity, Cha firmly grounds her hybrid identity in the specific colonial history of her home country.

By evoking liminality, Cha's work resists the old assimilationist idea of Asian American identity that emphasizes American identity. While conveying the liminal nature of her hybrid cultural identity, Cha's work also distances itself from the utopian and abstract aspect of the notion of cultural hybridity. Bhabha argues that the space in-between creates a new hybrid culture, a culture of resistance, celebrating the liberating effect of the cultural hybridity. However, the articulation of the space in-between is meaningless without examining the specific material history of the hybrid cultural subject.

Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan argues in his essay "Globalization, Desire, and the Politics of Representation" that a reformulation of the notion of "hybridity" should be based on particular material contexts and the reality of the unequal power relations.¹⁵⁰ In another essay, "Postcoloniality and The Boundaries of Identity" Radhakrishnan calls into question the de-historicized notion of postcolonial hybridity that draws on postmodernism, arguing for the distinction between "metropolitan" hybrid and "postcolonial" hybridity. According to him, postcolonial hybridity involves "expression of extreme pain and agonizing dislocations."¹⁵¹ Cha's art invokes Radhakrishna's notion of hybridity in that it consistently expresses the senses of pain and loss related to her

¹⁵⁰ R. Radhakrishnan, "Globalization, Desire, and the Politics of Representation," 329.

¹⁵¹ R. Radhakrishnan, "Postcoloniality and The Boundaries of Identity," *Callaloo* 16, no.4 (autumn 1993): 753.

identity as a Korean American woman. Lisa Lowe also presents the notion of a "material hybridity," which emphasizes the specific material histories of the individuals. In her essay "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences," Lowe argues "hybridity" should be examined in the context of the histories of uneven and unsynthetic power relations.¹⁵² Resonating with these approaches to the idea of hybrid identity, Cha delineates the complex ways that a female Korean exile reformulates her specific hybrid subjectivity in a contemporary globalized world.

¹⁵² Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 67.

Chapter 2: Connecting to History: Yong Soon Min

In one of her installation works, *deColonization* (1991), Yong Soon Min cites a poem entitled *Home* written by a Korean American poet Won Ko. It reads, “To us already a birth place is no longer our home. The place we were brought up is not either. Our history, rushing to us through fields and hills is our home.”¹⁵³ This quotation illustrates the main theme that moves across different media in Min’s art. In her work, Min expresses her sense of being and belonging through her constant attempt to come to terms with the history of her home country and her adopted country. While resisting the essentialist notion of home and belonging, Min grounds her sense of hybrid identity as a Korean American woman in the specific material history of modern and contemporary Korea. While critics and researchers have noted Min’s engagement in Korean modern history, none of them have paid substantial academic attention to her involvement in the ideology of the Minjung movement, a 1980s social, political, and cultural movement in South Korea. This chapter will reveal the specific difference of Min’s Korean American identity through an examination of the ways in which the ideas of the Minjung movement are engaged in her work.

Literature Review on Min’s Work

Min’s work has been widely exhibited since the late 1970s, but it didn’t begin to garner critical attention from the mainstream art world until the early 1990s. Her work

¹⁵³ Won Ko, excerpt from “Home,” *Amerasia Journal* 16, no. 2 (1990): 132.

was shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions in the U.S. and abroad. Min exhibited works such as *Xen:Migration, Labor, Identity* (2004), *Bridge of No Return* (1998), *AlterNatives* (1997), *DMZ XING* (1994), and *deCOLONIZATION* (1991) in her solo exhibitions. A series of prominent group exhibitions in the early 1990s such as *The Decade Show: Framework of Identity in the 1980s* in 1990 and the *1993 Whitney Biennial* were framed around identity politics and introduced numerous groups of marginalized artists including African Americans, Asian Americans, Latin Americans, and Native Americans. *The Decade Show* was the first major exhibition to present race, gender, and sexuality as the most important concerns of the 1980s. While the *1993 Whitney Biennial* overlooked works by Cha and Min, *The Decade Show: Framework of Identity in the 1980s* did include Min's work *Make Me* (1989).¹⁵⁴ Smaller scale exhibitions such as *Mistaken Identities* and *Finding Family Stories* featuring Min's work *deCOLONIZATION* highlighted the theme of multiculturalism. *Mistaken Identities* was curated by Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Connie Lewallen at the Art Museum of the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1992, and *Finding Family Stories* was held at the Japanese American National Museum and Korean American Museum in Los Angeles in 1995.¹⁵⁵ In 1993, the Queens Museum in New York organized an exhibition titled *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art*, which featured works by Korean American and Korean artists, and the exhibition traveled to Seoul, South Korea. Curated by Jane Farver, the exhibition included Min's installation *Ritual*

¹⁵⁴ *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, exh. cat (New York: The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990), LIV.

¹⁵⁵ *Mistaken Identities*, exh. cat. (Santa Barbara, University Art Museum, University of California, 1993), 57; *Finding Family Stories*, exh. cat (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 1995), 8.

Labor of a Mechanical Bride (1993).¹⁵⁶ In 1994, the first major exhibition exclusively concentrating on contemporary works by American artists of Asian descent, *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, was organized by The Asia Society in New York and traveled to Tacoma, Minneapolis, Honolulu, San Francisco, Boston, and Houston. The exhibition featured Min's work *Dwelling* (1994). In the catalogue essay "Out of Asia: Negotiating Asian Identities in America," Margo Machida discussed Min's work.¹⁵⁷ Min's work was also included in a traveling exhibition called "Autobiography: In Her Own Image" at the INTRA Latin American Gallery in 1988, which featured the works of twenty women of color. In 1986, her work *Half Home* was shown at the Soho 20 Gallery. Min also curated numerous exhibitions including *transPOP: Korea Vietnam Remix* (2008), *Exquisite Crisis and Encounters* (2007), and *THERE: Sites of Korean Diaspora* (2002). She was awarded numerous grants such as Rockefeller Foundation Project Grant (2003), National Printmaking Fellowship (funded by the NEA) at the Rutgers Center for Innovative Printmaking Workshop (1990), and NEA Visual Artists Fellowship grant in New Genres (1989-90).¹⁵⁸

Numerous critics and scholars in the fields of Asian American Studies, Women's Studies, and Art History have discussed Min's work. In 1990, in a section entitled "Mixing" of her book *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*, Lucy Lippard briefly discussed Min's work *Whirl War* (1987).¹⁵⁹ In 1993, Betty Kano examined some of Min's work in an essay titled "Four Northern California Artists:

¹⁵⁶ Jane Farver, *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art*, exh. cat. (Queens, N.Y.: Queens Museum of Art in cooperation with SEORO Korean Cultural Network, 1993), 23.

¹⁵⁷ Margo Machida, Vishakha N. Desai, and John Kuo Wei Tchen, *Asia/American: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1994), 94.

¹⁵⁸ Yong Soon Min, *Xen: Migration and Identity*, exh. cat. (Seoul: Ssamzie Space, 2004), 46.

¹⁵⁹ Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 190.

Hisako Hibi, Norine Nishimura, Yong Soon Min, and Miran Ahn.”¹⁶⁰ In 1995, Valerie Soe discussed Min’s work in an essay titled “Turning the Tables: Three Asian American Artists” which was included in the book *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies*, edited by Diane Neumaier. In her essay, Soe focuses on the ways in which a group of Asian American women artists, including Min, utilized the medium of photography to assert their ethnic identities and to challenge the negative stereotypes of Asian Americans.¹⁶¹ Elaine H. Kim discussed Min’s work in her 1996 essay “‘Bad Women’: Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min” and in the introduction of the 1998 book titled *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* edited by herself and Chungmoo Choi. Adopting a feminist perspective, Kim explored how a group of Asian American women artists including Min dealt with the subject of “bad women,” whose experiences in the U.S. were suppressed and marginalized because they challenged the patriarchal discourse of Asian American identity.¹⁶² In a chapter of her 2002 book *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian American Women*, Laura Hyun Yi Kang discussed a group of Korean American women writers and visual artists including Min. Kang focused on the ways in which their artistic production addressed issues of the U.S. military involvement in Korea and military prostitution. Her discussion included Min’s drawings *Back of the Bus*, 1953(1985) and *American Friend* (1985).¹⁶³ In 2005, Peter Selz discussed the relationship between

¹⁶⁰ Betty Kano, “Four Northern California Artists: Hisako Hibi, Norine Nishimura, Yong Soon Min, and Miran Ahn,” *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 3 (fall 1993): 632.

¹⁶¹ Valerie Soe, “Turning the Table: Three Asian American Artists” in *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies*, ed. Diane Neumaier (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 262.

¹⁶² Elaine H. Kim, “Bad Women: Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min,” *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 3 (fall 1996): 595-601.; Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, eds., *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 5-7.

¹⁶³ Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 243-5.

politics and visual art in California after World War II in his book titled *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond*, published in conjunction with an exhibition. He examined Min's work in the chapter titled "On Racism, Discrimination, and Identity Politics," which discussed Asian immigrants' experiences of racism and exclusion.¹⁶⁴ In her 2008 book *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary*, Margo Machida focused on art works produced by Asian American artists in the 1990s, exploring how they refigure their identity in a globalized, contemporary world. She provided a more substantial examination of Min's work in the chapter of the book, titled "Trauma, Social Memory, and Art."¹⁶⁵ The writings mentioned above generally examined the ways in which Min's work engaged the relationship between her hybrid cultural identity and changing social and political world structures. While some explored the subject through a feminist lens, others emphasized the strong political content of Min's work. Their discussions on Min's work, however, are mostly brief and insubstantial.

While considerable critical essays on Min's work have been produced, only a few theses providing a substantial academic investigation of her work have been published. In 2004, Hwa Young Choi Caruso wrote her dissertation titled *Art as a Political Act: Expression of Cultural Identity, Self-Identity and Gender in the Work of Two Korean/Korean American Women Artists*. The dissertation was written in the field of art education and focused heavily on the role art plays in expressing artists' senses of

¹⁶⁴ Peter Selz and Susan Landauer, *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond*, exh. cat (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, San Jose Museum of Art, 2005), 138.

¹⁶⁵ Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 149-158.

cultural, sexual, and political identity.¹⁶⁶ In 2007, Jung Heum Whang wrote her thesis titled *Body Politics of the Asian American Woman: From Orientalist Stereotype to the Hybrid Body of Yong Soon Min*. While exploring the sociopolitical aspect of Min's work, Whang draws upon Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the "third space" or "in-between-ness" and uncritically celebrates the counter-hegemonic force of the hybrid subjectivity.¹⁶⁷

Numerous researchers and critics have noted that Min's sense of hybrid cultural identity as a Korean American woman is firmly rooted in her understanding of the specific sociopolitical histories of her home country and the U.S. However, none of them have paid substantial academic attention to the relationship of Min's work to the Minjung movement in general and to the Minjung art that emerged in the mid-1970s and early 1980s in South Korea as a protest against the authoritarian regime. Beginning in the 1980s, Min began to engage with the Minjung ideology and addressed the central themes of the Minjung movement, such as the division and unification of Korea in her art work. While embracing the major tenets of the movement as a counter-hegemonic discourse against state nationalism, Min simultaneously attempts to provide her own perspective as a Korean American woman—a perspective that often challenges the ideas of the Minjung movement. Presenting her position as a Korean American woman, Min thus forms an ambivalent relationship both with the hegemonic discourse of state nationalism and counter-hegemonic Minjung nationalism. By investigating the ways in which Min engages in the Minjung movement in her work, this chapter will reveal her specific way of working with her Korean American identity. It will focus on selected works by Min,

¹⁶⁶ Hwa Young Choi Caruso, "Art as a Political Act: Expression of Cultural Identity, Self-Identity and Gender in the Work of Two Korean/Korean American Women Artists," (EdD thesis, Columbia University, 2004), 12.

¹⁶⁷ Jeung Heum Whang, "Body Politics of the Asian American Woman: From Orientalist Stereotype to the Hybrid Body of Yong Soon Min," (master's thesis, The State University of New York at Buffalo, 2007), 32.

including installations and drawings, that clearly illustrate her concern with the Minjung ideology and movement, as well as explaining her perspectives on the ideology and movement. Rather than following a chronological order, the discussion of the selected works will be based on the significance of the work in relation to the major thesis of the chapter. While focusing on the selected works, the chapter will also briefly examine some other works pertinent to the topic.

Min's Background

Yong Soon Min was born in 1953 in Bugok, a small village in the southern part of South Korea. Her father worked as a civilian translator in the South Korean armed forces and left for the United States before Min was born. Min lived in Bugok with her grandparents until she reached the age of six. Her mother lived with Min's brother in Seoul, working at an American military base. After joining her mother and brother in Seoul in 1960, at the age of seven, Min and her family left for the U.S. to meet her father. Min grew up in Monterey, California, and attended the University of California at Berkeley. She received a BA and an MA in 1975 and 1977, and an MFA from the Art Department in 1979. She was a friend of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. While at Berkeley, Min experimented with Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, and Conceptualism. She also spent much time in the Pacific Film Archive at University of California at Berkeley and became interested in Marxist film makers such as Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, and Jean-Luc Godard. Eisenstein and Kuleshov's montage theory and Godard's innovative treatment of narrative in film led Min to explore the effective artistic form to convey complicated social and political narratives. In her graduate years, Min began to

engage in the narrative installations. She explored a wide range of artistic media including drawing, painting, lithograph, sculpture, installation, photography, and performance.¹⁶⁸

In 1981, Min moved to New York to participate in the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum. After teaching printmaking in Ohio from 1981 to 1984, she returned to New York. In 1984, Min and Fred Ho, an activist and Jazz musician, founded the "Asian American Arts Alliance," a New York-based non-profit organization which promoted and supported Asian American artists and their activities. Min served as the administrative coordinator from 1985 to 1986, and as a member of the board of directors from 1988 to 1993. Min organized the first Asian American art festival, "Roots to Reality," which involved exhibitions as well as theatre, and literary components. Later the organization focused more on supporting and granting activities rather than on art programming. The Asian American Arts Alliance still actively promotes visual, performing, and literary Asian American arts. Later, she also joined the "Godzilla: Asian American Art Network," organized by Margo Machida, Tomie Arai, Ken Chu, and Byron Kim in 1990. Min, along with other members of the Godzilla, sent an open letter to the director of the Whitney Museum to protest the lack of representation of Asian American artists from the 1991 Whitney Biennial. Min served as a member of the board of directors of the Women's Caucus for the Arts from 1992 to 1995, the College Art Association from 1997 to 2000, and the Korean American Museum from 1997 to 2005. While actively participating in these groups, Min was simultaneously involved with a Korean activist group called "Young Koreans United." Through this organization, Min had the opportunity to learn for the first time about the contemporary history of Korea including

¹⁶⁸ Yong Soon Min, interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, August 17, 2010

the Korean War, military dictatorships and social unrest in South Korea.¹⁶⁹ In 1993, Min left New York for southern California to accept a position at the University of California at Irvine. As of 2012, she lives in Los Angeles, and serves as an associate professor of Art at the University of California at Irvine.

Opening to the History of Home

While experimenting with a variety of artistic styles and media, Min began to actively engage the subject of her own identity as a Korean American woman in the early 1980s. Like Cha, who witnessed anti-war and civil rights protests on the streets of Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco during the 1960s, Min had realized the marginalized positions held by Asian Americans in the U.S. Through her active involvement in the Asian American organizations in New York, Min deeply engaged in the subject of Asian American identity. Min's participation in the Korean American organization "Young Koreans United (YKU)" in New York in the early 1980s further inspired her to explore her specific Korean American identity through her work.

In 1985, Min participated in the artist residency program at Yaddo, an artists' community in Saratoga Springs, New York, and while there, she created numerous drawings. These drawings show Min's deep interest in her hybrid cultural identity as a Korean American woman and her keen awareness of U.S neocolonial history. While at Yaddo, Min created a drawing entitled *American Friend* (Fig. 11). The mixed-media drawing is based on an old family photograph of Min's which shows her father with a group of people. The photograph was taken prior to her father's departure for the U.S.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

In this drawing, two rows of figures pose for the camera in front of a building: Two Korean men and a woman, and one white man are seated in the front row while four Korean men and two women stand behind them. All of the men are dressed in army uniforms, except for one in the back row. The uniformed white man draws the viewer's eye because of his position at the center of the front row and his larger body size. In addition, his body is colored green, while the others are rendered black and white, suggesting that he is the one to whom the title of the work refers. On the bottom of the drawing are large capitalized and stenciled letters repeating the title. The letters are presented in army camouflage patterns. Min drew the letters in color, connecting them to the colored central figure in the group. While the figures are rendered realistically, the lower part of the building is blurred, making the spatial relationship between the building and the figures ambiguous. The realistic representation of the figures is contrasted with the two-dimensional stenciled letters on the bottom. The feet of the two figures seated in the front row at the right are awkwardly placed on the word "Friend." The large stenciled phrase "American Friend" on the bottom, the man's central position, and the colored representation of his body all emphasize the significance of the existence of the white man. These elements appear to celebrate a friendship between the central figure and the others in the group, and the long-standing friendly relationship between the U.S. and South Korea. However, this benevolent interpretation is disrupted by the stern faces of the group. The *Hangul* inscribed in the right upper corner of the work further creates a sense of rupture. In contrast to the English phrase on the bottom of the image, these letters are small and barely legible and at first glance they appear to be decorative inscriptions on the wall. The *Hangul* text is also done in handwriting. In the drawing,

the *Hangul* text reads from right to left in vertical columns, which is based on traditional East Asian script writing. In addition to the contrast of the size and style between the *Hangul* text and the English phrase, the verticality of the *Hangul* text contrasts with the horizontality of the English phrase stenciled on the bottom of the work, thus creating a sense of tension. Moreover, the content of the writing on the wall strongly challenges the seemingly benevolent meaning of the group portrait. The writing in Korean is translated as:

Such a generous friend! You were our father's American friend who sponsored his immigration to the States after fighting together in the Korean War. Dear Friend! Upon our father's request from America, you also got our mother a job on a U.S. army base in Seoul with which she supported her kids during the tough times just after the war.¹⁷¹

The first five columns convey Min's personal gratitude toward the American army officer who actually helped both her father to study in the U.S. and her mother to work at a U.S. military base in Seoul. The American was a sincere friend to Min's family, helping them to survive the difficult times during and after the Korean War. However, the rest of the columns are filled with sarcastic anger toward and criticism of American Cold War politics and military intervention in Korea after World War II.

Dear friend! Since our liberation from Japan, you influenced our political development by supporting the autocrat Syngman Rhee, and the military dictatorships of Park and Chun. You continue to share with us your economic and

¹⁷¹ The drawing and the text are included in Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mayuni Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly, eds., *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (Seattle: CALYX Inc.), 71.

military might. You've even given us your valuable nuclear missiles! You've given us far more than we bargained for. How could we ever reciprocate? ¹⁷²

The repetitive use of the phrase "Dear friend" in the *Hangul* text heightens the sarcastic tone. The text reveals the duplicity of U.S. foreign policy toward South Korea. Min suggests the purported aim of the U.S. foreign policy was to ensure Korean national security, but it conceals U.S. imperialist intentions and American neocolonial domination. The last six columns show the artist's general knowledge about the American relationship with Korea. The defeat of Japan in World War II led to the liberation of the Korean peninsula from thirty five years of rule. However, the two great powers of the postwar era—the United States and the Soviet Union— established trusteeship of the Korean peninsula, occupying separate zones along the 38th parallel. The U.S. backed anti-communist Syngman Rhee, who became the first president of the Republic of Korea through a general election in the south, while the Soviet Union established a separate communist regime in the north, supporting Kim Il Sung. The authoritarian regime of Syngman Rhee was followed by the eighteen years of dictatorship under Park Chung Hee. Park's regime was toppled by another military dictator, Chun Doo Hwan in 1979. In the context of Cold War politics, the U.S. supported these anti-communist dictators. The last column of Min's piece further refers to the U.S. deployment of nuclear weapons in South Korea, which started in 1958 and lasted for thirty-three years. Until the late 1970s, the U.S had direct control over nuclear weapons

¹⁷² Ibid., 71.

and military planning in South Korea.¹⁷³ Min points out that nuclear weapons were deployed in South Korea in order to contain communist expansion and to protect Korean national security, yet the deployment resulted from the military rivalry of the two opposing world powers in the context of the Cold War.

Another of Min's drawings, *Back of the Bus*, 1953, which the artist made at Yaddo in 1985, similarly expresses her concern with the contemporary history of her home country and her relationship to it (Fig. 12). The work is a black-and-white drawing based on a snapshot photograph of Min's mother riding a bus to work with her aunt at an American Army base in Seoul.¹⁷⁴ The drawing shows three Korean women in the back of a crowded bus, seated next to each other. Three uniformed American GIs are seated in front of the women and are craning their necks, trying to get a glance of the women in the back row. The direction of the men's gazes draws the viewer's eyes toward the women in the back. The other Korean passengers are sitting toward the front, either engaged in conversation or keeping to themselves. Seemingly indifferent to the three women and the American soldiers, the other passengers further direct the viewer's attention toward the back of the bus. On the bottom of the work are a series of drawings of Min's face shown in different angles.¹⁷⁵

The title of the work references the racial segregation in America in the 1950s. Initiated after the Reconstruction era following the Civil War, the institutionalized racial segregation continued into the 1950s with the legal doctrine of "separate but equal" and finally ended with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. African Americans were provided with

¹⁷³ Peter Hays, "American Nuclear Hegemony in Korea," *Journal of Peace Research* 25, no. 4 (Dec. 1988): 356.

¹⁷⁴ Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

¹⁷⁵ The drawing is included in Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mayuni Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly, eds., *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (Seattle: CALYX Inc., 1989), 70.

separate public services and facilities, which were often of lower quality than those for white people. In the 1950s, African Americans had to sit in the back of public buses, and yield their seats to any white passengers who were standing.¹⁷⁶ By inserting her Asian face at the bottom of the picture, Min further invokes the marginalized status of Asian Americans in the U.S. and their struggles to secure civil rights in the 1950 and 1960s.

By portraying a scene taking place in a bus in South Korea in 1953 with a title invoking the history of racism in the U.S., Min draws a parallel between the history of the Korean War and the U.S. neocolonial domination over Korea, and the racism experienced by Korean immigrants in the U.S. Min's family immigrated to the U.S. to escape from the social and political turmoil as an aftermath of the Korean War and the subsequent authoritarian rules. As Lisa Lowe suggests in her book *Immigrant Acts*, post-1965 immigrants from Asian countries were influenced by the traumatic experience of war and U.S. neocolonialism in their home countries. These countries' continuing economic dependency on the U.S. facilitated the U.S. exploitation of the Asian immigrant labors and discrimination against Asian immigrants.¹⁷⁷

The Korean women's position in the back of the bus and the objectification of their bodies by the gazes of white American soldiers allude to the relationship between the U.S. imperialist desire over Korea and Korean women, which is a recurring concern in Min's work. The presence of members of the American military in Korea since the splitting of the country in 1945 contributed to a massive sex industry in towns around U.S. military camps. Both the women who engaged in sexual acts for the U.S. soldiers

¹⁷⁶ Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 60.

¹⁷⁷ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 16.

and the women who married U.S. service men and later came to the U.S. were synonymously and negatively categorized as “war brides” or “G.I brides.”¹⁷⁸

Connecting to the Minjung Movement

In 1986, Min began to engage more deeply in the specific history of her home country and explicitly addressed her concern in her art work. She created a wall installation titled *Half Home* in 1986 (Fig. 13), which consists of images, texts, objects, and four tracing paper banners. On the far left of the wall the word “heartland” is written from top to bottom. The *sam-taeguk* (three taeguk) design divides the word “heartland” in the middle. *Sam-taeguk* is a variant of the taeguk design of the Korean national flag, which consists of the three interlocking colored spirals: red, blue, and yellow. The three colors symbolize earth, heaven, and humanity respectively, and the unification of the three in its interlocking form signifies the foundational ideology of both ancient Korea and the Korean national identity.¹⁷⁹ Next to the word “heartland” are the four tracing paper banners which increase in length gradually. The first tracing paper banner hangs over the word “memory,” pages from tourist books of Korea, and text describing the differences and contradictions between the superficial perception and the deeper understanding of her home country. Under the second banner are the words “mother tongue,” and images and text illustrating the difficulty of communication between Min—who forgot her mother tongue growing up in the U.S.—and her mother, who does not speak fluent English. The third banner hangs over the word “history” and images of the Tonghak movement, the Korean peasant uprising in the early 1890s. The last banner

¹⁷⁸Hyunsook Kim, “*Yanggongju* as an Allegory of the Nation,” in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 178.

¹⁷⁹ Andre Schmid, *Korea between Empires, 1895-1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 79.

covers the word “real estate” with the word “state” highlighted in a yellow-colored box, and images and text describing Koreans’ struggles for a home and a state. Only half of the words “half home” is written vertically on the right end of the wall.¹⁸⁰ The viewers have to press down on the tracing paper to read the texts or to see the images, thus suggesting the difficulty of uncovering and reclaiming the marginalized history of her home country and her own experience as a Korean American immigrant.

Min attaches a series of tiny houses made of silver and clear mylar on the wall. The series starts in the middle of the *sam-taeguk* design as a whole house form that contains a close-up image of a family. The house piece placed between the two banners “mother tongue” and “history” contains a close-up image of a mouth attempting to speak. The house piece placed between the two banners “history” and “real estate” contains another transparent house form inside, which is an origami of a picture of three Korean men put on a cross to be killed by Japanese soldiers during Japanese colonization. Min uses the image from Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s book *Dictée*. Placed between the words “half and “home” is a tiny black house. Featuring a series of house forms containing various images, Min explores the multiple and changing meanings of home and nation.¹⁸¹

Through correspondence exchanged in 2010, Min stated that she immersed herself in the “American Dream” during her childhood and tried to fit into a new culture and become a perfect American. However, despite her American upbringing, Min always longed for her Korean self. Witnessing the civil rights movements in the 1960s, Min realized her marginalized position as an Asian American and began to claim her own place in her adopted country. Although she lost the ability to speak her mother tongue

¹⁸⁰ Min, e-mail message to author, September 2, 2011.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

while fully acculturating in America, she considered herself to be a member of the “1.5 generation,” rather than the second generation. However, when she returned to South Korea as an adult, she felt like a tourist in her home country. In the interview, Min described her first visit to South Korea upon graduating in 1979. During her trip to several tourist sites in South Korea, she was involved in student demonstrations in Pusan protesting against Park’s dictatorial regime. Min was viewed by other Korean people as suspicious because of her U.S. citizenship and her plans to travel to Japan. During that time period, there had been several espionage cases involving Korean Americans and Koreans living in Japan. Recalling the massive anti-government demonstrations in Korea prior to her departure for the U.S. in 1960, Min felt deep sadness about the recurring tragedy in her home country. She realized that she was not completely at home either in the U.S. or in Korea.¹⁸² Her sense of being split between two cultures and her simultaneous yearning for belonging is clearly expressed in *Half Home*. The images and text about the difficulty of communicating with her mother and the struggling mouth suggest Min’s sense of being split between two homes. The images of Japanese colonization and the half part of the phrase “Half Home” indicate the painful history of oppression and division in her home country.

The work as a whole represents Min’s progression from her superficial understanding of her home and nation to her awareness of her hybrid cultural experience, and the connection of her sense of split identity to her home country’s division. Min’s progression into a more in-depth understanding of the history of her home country was initiated by her study of the Minjung ideology through an organization called the “Young Koreans United” beginning in 1986.

¹⁸² Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

“*Minjung* (people or masses)” is not a new term, but it gained a specific meaning in the context of political and social movements of the 1970s. It is a broad term that refers to people who are oppressed and alienated in the socioeconomic system. It includes people from all social sectors—workers, peasants, middle class people, and intellectuals. Begun in the mid-1970s, the *Minjung* movement became a significant social, political, and cultural movement in the 1980s. For people who participated in social, political, and cultural struggles against the authoritarian regime, “*minjung*” signified a new collective social identity.¹⁸³

After being liberated from Japanese colonial rule, the Korean people embarked on a process of establishing an independent nation. However, the temporary occupation by the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the south and the north along the 38th parallel to secure an independent provisional government in Korea led to the permanent division of the country in 1948. In the south, the U.S. backed anti-communist Syngman Rhee became the first president of the Republic of Korea through a general election supervised by United Nations (UN), while in the north Kim Il Sung came to power through the support of the Soviet Union, establishing the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Both regimes claimed to be the only legitimate government in the Korean peninsula. Syngman Rhee’s regime faced challenges such as a leftist uprising in Cheju Island and the Yosu-Sunchon rebellion, which protested the separate regimes and called for a reunification. The First Republic brutally suppressed the opposing forces, enhancing its autocratic power. The Korean War led to the consolidation of the authoritarian regime of Syngman Rhee, invoking a powerful state for ensuring national security and reconstruction of the

¹⁸³ Hagen Koo, “The State, *Minjung*, and the Working Class in South Korea,” in *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*, ed. Hagen Koo (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 131.

national economy. The April 19th Student Uprising in 1960 protested Rhee's attempt to prolong his rule through rigged elections and criticized the corrupt and ineffective regime. The student uprising led to the toppling of the Rhee regime, and, in 1961, Park Chung Hee came to power through a military coup. The primary policy of the Park regime was the nation's rapid economic growth through a state-led economic development plan to legitimize the regime's weak political base. This policy entailed the maximization of government power, suppression of political opposition, and the constant invocation of the threat of communism. While Park's development plan brought about tremendous economic growth, its emphasis on export, foreign loans, and cheap domestic labor resulted in the strengthening of monopolistic enterprises, weakening the rural economy and the working class, and widening the gaps between social strata.¹⁸⁴ The establishment of the "Yushin (Revitalization)" Constitution in 1972 gave Park absolute political power,¹⁸⁵ which further accelerated national economic growth at the cost of freedom of the people. However, in the late 1970s, Park's dictatorship and the contradictions of the rapid industrialization caused numerous protests, which led to his assassination in 1979 (See Appendix). With the establishment of the Yushin regime, the Minjung movement emerged as an important social movement. In the Minjung movement, students, writers, workers, and farmers united to protest against Park's dictatorship. While protesting against Park's regime, writers such as Sin Tong-yop, Kim Chi-ha, Paik Nak-chung, historian Kang Man-gil, and sociologist Han Wan-sang

¹⁸⁴ Jean Ahn, "The Socio-economic Background of the Gwangju Uprising," in *South Korean Democracy: Legacy of the Gwangju Uprising*, eds. Gregory Katsiaficas and Na Kanhn-chae (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 32.

¹⁸⁵ Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 33. After winning the election for his third term, Park declared a national emergency in 1971 and the Yushin Constitution in 1972. The Yushin Constitution allowed Park to appoint one-third of the National Assembly and to dismiss it if necessary, turning his regime a dictatorship.

emphasized the role of *minjung* in Korean history, providing a new perspective on Korean history and society based on the experiences of *minjung*. Dissident intellectuals also participated in the revival of Korean folk art traditions such as mask dances and *pansori*, a genre of Korean traditional singing.¹⁸⁶

The Minjung movement reached its peak in the early 1980s with the Kwangju uprising, which was initiated by massive student demonstrations demanding democratization after Park's assassination. The end of Park's regime was followed by a coup d'état led by a new conservative military leader, Chun Doo Hwan. Attempting to seize political power, Chun extended martial law to the entire country. In May of 1980, tens of thousands of people protested against the extension of martial law, demanding the end of military dictatorships. The military authorities sent troops to the city of Kwangju, located in the south-western region of the Korean peninsula, brutally crushing protests there. As many as 2000 people were killed. The transition from Chun's coup to a civilian government was completed in 1981, which led to the beginning of the Fifth Republic. Chun's regime denounced the Kwangju uprising as a rebellion instigated by the democratic political leader Kim Dae Jung, who was allegedly connected to communists. The uprising resulted in more intense and radicalized demonstrations led by students, dissident intellectuals, and workers, who protested against Chun's brutal authoritarian military regime and demanded for the amendment of the constitution for direct presidential elections. These massive demonstrations finally led to the June uprising of

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 191.

1987 that resulted in the government's endorsement of direct presidential elections (See Appendix).¹⁸⁷

The Minjung movement is marked by the nationalistic search for political and economic independence. It sought to achieve a democratic distribution of economic wealth, opposing monopoly capitalism. The movement promoted national unification as an ultimate goal of political democratization, resisting the rhetoric of anti-communism supported by the state and the U.S intervention.¹⁸⁸

As a part of the broad Minjung movement, Minjung art emerged in the early 1980s with the establishment of several artistic groups. In 1979, a group called "Reality and Utterance" was founded by critics such as Sung Wankyung and artists such as Lim Ok-sang and Kim Yong Tae. Another group "Imsul-neon (The Year Imsul)" was founded by artists such as Lee Jong-gu and Song Chang in 1982. Several artists including Kim Bong Joon and Jang Jin Young founded "Durung (Levee)" in 1983. During the 1970s and the early 1980s, the Korean art scene was dominated by the artistic movements of *Art Informel*, or Abstract Expressionism, and Minimalism. Many artists felt that abstract painting with minimal figurative elements and color would effectively express Eastern spiritual ideas and philosophy. Criticizing abstract art for its distance from social reality, Minjung artists promoted representational art that effectively conveyed social and political content to the masses. Calling for a nationalistic art form, they turned to traditional folk art (*minwha*) created by anonymous amateur artists, woodcuts, and Buddhist art. First-generation artistic groups such as "Reality and Utterance" and "Imsul-neon" embraced the crude and simple forms and bold colors of

¹⁸⁷ Carter J. Eckert and others, *Korea Old and New: A History* (Seoul, Korea: Ilchokak Publishers, 1990), 382.

¹⁸⁸ Hagen Koo, 147.

folk art, engaging in subjects such as the authoritarian political system and the effects of rapid industrialization on peasant life. While exploring similar themes in their art, the second-generation group “Durung” actively participated in community activities such as classes for folk art, collaborative art projects, and publications.¹⁸⁹

In the author’s interview with Min, she stated, “The years of my participation in the Young Koreans United (YKU) offered me a significant eye-opening experience into my own Korean American identity and Korean history.”¹⁹⁰ While working as the administrative coordinator of the Asian American Arts Alliance, Min learned about the YKU, which was founded by political exile Yoon Han Bong (1947-2007) in 1984. Yoon fled political persecution for his involvement in the Kwangju uprising in 1980 in South Korea. After settling in Los Angeles in 1981, Yoon founded the YKU of L.A in 1983, and in 1984 founded chapters in New York, Chicago, and Seattle. Later, the YKU added chapters in other major cities in the U.S. and Canada. The YKU engaged in cultural, political, and community activities.¹⁹¹ Min joined *Binari*, the cultural arm of the YKU, in Jackson Heights, New York. Prior to joining this organization, Min had not had a chance to learn about Korean history; her knowledge about Korean history was limited and generalized. In the central office of the YKU in New York, Min read books on Korean history while attending study sessions. During the mid and late 1980s Min was exposed to Asian American history and identity, and the history of her home country. *Half Home* was the first major work Min created after she had become active in the YKU.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ *Minjung Misul 15 yŏn 1980-1994 (Korean Minjung Arts 1980-1994)* exh. cat. The National Museum of Contemporary Art (Seoul: Sam kwa Kkum, 1994), 27.

¹⁹⁰ Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

¹⁹¹ *The Spirit of the 5.18 Uprising Blooms Overseas: History of Young Koreans United and Korean Alliance for Peace and Justice 1984-2008* (Los Angeles: Korean Alliance for Peace and Justice of Los Angeles and Korean Resource Center of Los Angeles), 8.

¹⁹² Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

Yoon Han Bong was a student activist who had protested authoritarian dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s in South Korea. He was an active participant in the Minjung movement emerged in the 1970s. In 1974, Yoon was arrested for his involvement in *Myncheonghakryeon* (Youth and Student Democratic National Confederation) because the group allegedly attempted to overthrow Park's regime. He was sentenced to fifteen years in prison but released early. When the Kwangju uprising broke out in 1980, he joined it and became a wanted fugitive. In 1981, he fled to the U.S. Yoon founded the Korean Resource Center, the YKU, and the Korean Alliance for Peace and Justice in the U.S. and Canada, and through these organizations, he disseminated the Minjung ideology while developing various political and cultural activities that paralleled the democratic movement in South Korea.¹⁹³

Through the YKU, Min not only acquired knowledge about Korean history in general, but also learned about the Minjung art movement in Korea. Through *Binari*, Min associated with South Korean activists such as the dancer Lee Aae Ju, and artists like Kim Bong Joon and Kim Yong Tae, who came to the workshops in *Binari* and gave talks about Minjung politics and art in Korea. Kim Bong Joon founded a Minjung art group called "Durung" in 1984, and Kim Yong Tae was the founding member of the group "Reality and Utterance (1979)."¹⁹⁴ Min was introduced to Minjung art through the two artists. Min and her Korean American artist friends Mo Bahc and Choi Sungho were involved in organizing a small exhibition titled *Min Joong Art: New Movement of Political Art from Korea in New York*, which was held in Toronto and at Mo Bahc's gallery, Minor Injury, in New York. In 1988, the curator for the 1987 exhibition, Um

¹⁹³ Han Bong Yoon, *Mangmyung* (Exile) (Seoul: Hanmadang, 2009), 133-4.

¹⁹⁴ *Minjung Misul 15 yŏn 1980-1994* (Korean Minjung Arts 1980-1994), 17.

Hyuk, with the help of Korean American artists such as Min and Mo Bahc, decided to mount a large scale Minjung art exhibition at Artists Space in New York.¹⁹⁵ In 1990, Min, Mo Bahc, Choi Sungho, and Park Hye Hung formed SEORO Korean Cultural Network to address issues related to Korean American community. They published the *SEORO Bulletin*, a quarterly newsletter, until 1994. In 1991, SEORO approached the Queens Museum of Art to hold an exhibition on Korean and Korean American art. They chose a guest curator, Jane Farver, for the Korean American section, and another curator from Korea, Lee Young Chul, for the Korean art section. Lee was a friend of Mo Bahc and also helped organize the 1988 Minjung art exhibition. In 1993, *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art* was held at the Queens Museum, and major Korean Minjung artists were invited for the Korean section of the exhibition. Min exhibited her work *Ritual Labor of a Mechanical Bride* (1993).¹⁹⁶

The images of the Tonghak movement featured in *Half Home* specifically show Min's deeper engagement in the history of her home country. In the discourse of the Minjung movement, the Tonghak peasant uprising in the early 1890s is significant. Emphasizing the role of *minjung* in Korean history, Minjung historians celebrate the Tonghak peasant uprising as the first significant historical event marked by the Minjung spirit. Tonghak, or "Eastern Learning," was founded in 1860 by Ch'oe Che-u as a new religion to counter the spread of Catholicism, or Western learning. The aim of Tonghak was to defend the nation from the danger of foreign invasions. After the persecution of the founder Ch'oe, his follower Ch'oe Si-hyung gradually strengthened the organizational network across the country. Peasants quickly embraced Tonghak because

¹⁹⁵ Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

of its egalitarian nature. The first large-scale peasant uprising led by the Tonghak leader Chon Pong-jun took place in Kobu county of Cholla province in southern Korea in 1894. Protesting against harsh taxation and corruptive feudal officials, the uprising expanded to a large peasant army. Queen Min asked Japan and China to send troops to suppress the peasant army, which was effectively dissolved, but it formed again when Japan refused to evacuate its troops from Korea. The second peasant war supported nationalist and anti-imperialist, aiming to save the nation from being invaded by Japan.¹⁹⁷ Min has said that she learned about the Tonghak movement at the YKU study sessions and was deeply influenced by it.¹⁹⁸ Numerous Minjung artists portrayed the Tonghak leader Chon Pong-jun along with the images of the suffering peasants, which Min also knew through her association with Minjung artists. While incorporating the history of the Tonghak movement into her wall installation, Min refuses to employ the realistic style, crude forms, and colors favored by many Minjung artists. For Minjung artists, Min's use of the transparent tracing papers over the text and images, which nearly obscures the political messages, is also an unfamiliar representation of Minjung ideas. By conveying a sense of ambiguity and difficulty in relation to the history of her home, Min addresses her own position as a Korean American woman.

Min's installation *Whirl War* (Fig. 14) also exemplifies her engagement specifically with Minjung ideology. Created for New York's Jamaica Arts Center in 1987, it was Min's first large-scale installation that fills an entire room. It contains Korean and English texts, drawing, painting, and sculpture. Min covered one side of the wall with newspapers which are painted half black and half white. Huge black and white

¹⁹⁷ Yong-ha Shin, *Modern Korean History and Nationalism* (Seoul: Jimoondang Publishing Company, 2000), 101-4.

¹⁹⁸ Min, e-mail message to author, September 2, 2011.

spirals intersecting at the center are drawn over white and black areas, respectively. Over the spirals, she wrote “half the world knows not/how the other half lives,” quoting a statement she found in a fortune cookie. In the middle of the two black and white spirals are the letters “DMZ (The De-militarized Zone)” written vertically. Rendered in red, the word “DMZ” draws the viewer’s attention. On the bottom of the wall with the painted spirals is a long spiral-shaped strip of newspaper. Across the wall are the scroll-like tracing paper banners hanging over images and text related to her personal experience and the legacy of the Korean War. One of the panels contains stories about *mudang*, the Korean female shaman. On one of the panels Min attached a Lucky Strike cigarette package, a brand that became popular in Korea due to the presence of the U.S. army during the Korean War. Across the floor are the words “to live to love to live to love...” written in Korean and in English, forming a spiral. The four spherical vessels made of paper mâché are scattered on the floor. These vessels contain rice and water, referring to essential elements of Korean life. The other wall features a painted image of Min bearing a globe on her back, which echoes the Greek god Atlas, and the image of her hurtling from the ceiling.¹⁹⁹ These images of her carrying a globe and flying to the earth suggest Min’s active engagement in the sociopolitical problems in the world. The title of the work that sounds close to “war,” the fortune cookie statement, the word “DMZ,” and the images and texts under the banners all refer to modern Korean history, a history that is marked by war and division.

In an interview with the author, Min stated that in *Whirl War* she was engaged in the subject of Korean shamanism and its influence on the Korean people. The Minjung cultural movement focused on the revival of folk culture and art as related to the life of

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

minjung. Minjung historians turned to shamanism as an important folk culture that expresses the experience of common people, *minjung*. Existing since prehistory, Korean shamanism is the oldest form of indigenous religion. As Taoism, Buddhism, and other religious ideas were introduced in Korea, shamanism incorporated various religious ideas. When neo-Confucianism became the dominant doctrine that dictated political, social, and cultural life in the Choson Dynasty (1392-1897), shamanism continued to govern the spiritual lives of ordinary people. For lower-class people who were marginalized in the society and oppressed by the upper class, shamanism, which was performed in their houses and villages, was an important means of releasing their feelings of frustrations and suffering. In the discourse of Korean shamanism, the role of *mudang* is much more significant than *pansu*, the male shaman.²⁰⁰ As an intermediary between gods or spirits and human beings, *mudang* helped *minjung* solve various human problems such as bad luck, illness, failed harvest, and evil spirits, and guided the spirit of the dead to heaven through a ritualistic performance called *gut*. Korean shamanism represents the spirit of *minjung*.²⁰¹ In *Whirl War*, the image of Min holding a globe on her back and the globe vessels placed over the spirally written words visually create a planetary system. With one globe broken like a hatched egg, the images and the vessels also refer to the origin of life and the human life cycle. The main concerns in shamanistic rituals are birth, wedding, disease, death, and afterlife. By presenting rice and water—typical offering materials used in shamanistic rituals in Korea—as well as by showing the stories of

²⁰⁰ Jung Yong Lee, *Korean Shamanistic Rituals* (The Hague, Paris, and New York: Mouton Publishers, 1981), 2.

²⁰¹ Sangyil Park, *Korean Preaching, Han, and Narrative* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2008), 18.

mudang in the wall panel, Min enacts a *mudang* trying to ease the collective feelings of *han* in the minds of *minjung*.

In *Whirl War*, Min incorporated the word “DMZ” into her work for the first time and it repeatedly appeared in her later works. The DMZ (The De-Militarized Zone), a symbol of the tragic history of the division of Korea, was embraced as important subject matter by numerous Minjung artists. For example, Kim Yong Tae, one of the founding members of the Minjung art group Reality and Utterance, created a series of photographic works titled *DMZ* in 1984. The work consists of photographs he collected from commercial photo studios in the city of *Dongducheon*, the major camp town of the U.S. army. The photographs feature images of American soldiers with their friends, Korean girlfriends, or wives, forming a large letter “DMZ.” In the interview, Min stated that her use of the word DMZ was inspired by Kim’s work.²⁰²

Asian American Woman

While engaging in the specific history of her home country through the lens of Minjung ideology, Min simultaneously explores the history of Asian Americans in the U.S. Her work *Make Me* (1989) (Fig. 15) deals with issues of racial discrimination and the stereotypes imposed on Asian Americans. This work exemplifies Min’s concerted effort to connect domestic Asian American issues to those of her home country.

Shown in *The Decade Show: Framework of Identity in the 1980s* in 1990,²⁰³ *Make Me* consists of four black-and-white photographs of the artist with cut-out letters over the face. Min manipulates each photograph by splitting the image into two halves

²⁰² Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

²⁰³ *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, LIV.

and rearranging them. The photograph with the phrase “MODEL MINORITY” is in a triangular shape, featuring a mirrored image of her smiling face and clasped hands on her cheeks. Next to this photograph is the one with the phrase “EXOTIC EMIGRANT.” While it features the artist’s face without any manipulation, the photograph is consciously placed in the corner of the two walls of the gallery. Making a reference to Adrian Piper’s mixed media installation *Cornered* (1988), which dealt with the artist’s racial identity, the placement of this photograph strongly suggests the marginalized social position of Asian immigrants. The photograph with the phrase “OBJECTIFIED OTHER” shows a disjointed image of her face. The left side features Min with her eye closed, while the other half shows her pulling up her eye, exaggerating the stereotypical slanted Asian eye. The phrases “exotic emigrant” and “objectified other” further indicate the negative stereotypes of Asian women as exotic sex objects. The last photograph, with the phrase “ASSIMILATED ALIEN,” features another disjointed face of the artist. On the left side, the artist’s eye is covered with her hand, while on the right side Min covers her mouth, revealing her eye. The words are literally carved into the image of Min’s face, and they evoke a sense of violence and pain at these negative portrayals of Asian immigrants.²⁰⁴ The repetition of the images of Min’s exaggerated Asian traits on the wall, and the phrases “exotic emigrant,” “objectified other,” and “assimilated alien” refer to the long history of negative representation and cultural alienation of Asian immigrants in American culture and society, which were the major agendas in Asian American identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s.

Since the late nineteenth-century, Asians have been portrayed as a “Yellow Peril” which threatens to conquer the white world. Coined by Kaiser Wilhelm II in the late

²⁰⁴ Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

nineteenth-century, the term “yellow peril” indicated the fear of Europeans regarding the threatening Chinese military, cultural, and economic powers. The notion of East Asians as heathen hoards seeking to take over Western civilization became popular in nineteenth-century Europe. This negative image of Asians emerged in the United States with the arrival of Chinese immigrants around 1850. Chinese workers were considered “opium-addicted heathens,” and “treacherous and inassimilable coolies.”²⁰⁵ These attributions were based on white American fears of competition for employment, Asian’s alleged moral degeneracy, and potential miscegenation between whites and Asians. The anti-Chinese sentiment reached its climax when the first Chinese exclusion law was passed in 1882. Japanese immigrants who entered in the 1880s also became the subject of similarly negative stereotypes. The Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907, which limited Japanese immigration, embodies the anti-Japanese sentiment. With the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, hostile feelings toward Japan grew substantially. Japanese Americans were suspected of conspiring with their home country against the U.S. and over 110,000 Japanese were put into internment camps in 1942.²⁰⁶

The notion of treacherous and vicious Asian Americans was perpetuated through literature and early films. The dangerous villain Fu Manchu, a Chinese character created by British author Sax Rohmer in 1913, was popularized through Hollywood films in the 1930s. He was depicted as dreaming of the destruction of all the white men and their women. Another popular Asian character, a Chinese detective called “Charlie Chan” in Hollywood movies was portrayed more positively as intelligent. However, the character reinforced the stereotypes of Asians as mysterious, bound to traditions, speaking in

²⁰⁵ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York, Boston, and London: Back Bay Books, 1998), 101.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 392.

broken English, and subservient. The villainous image of Asian Americans persisted after World War II and in today's popular martial art movies.²⁰⁷

Like Asian men, Asian women have been subjected to negative stereotypes. Prior to the arrival of the first wave of Chinese immigrants in 1849 after the discovery of gold in California, the first Chinese woman arrived in New York in 1834 as an artifact for American entrepreneurs. Introduced to the American public as "Afong Moy," she was put on display as an exotic object of curiosity at exhibitions and theaters. In addition, another American business man introduced a daughter of a Chinese aristocrat, Pwan Yekoo, and her attendants at New York exhibitions. Presented as "a genuine Chinese lady," her beauty and diminutive size (her feet were reportedly only two 2 ½ inches long) fascinated the American public. A small number of the first Chinese female immigrants arrived in California along with large numbers of Chinese men who sought jobs in gold mines in the 1880s. The majority of these women were concentrated in San Francisco, most working as prostitutes. Although women with various racial and national origins began to work as prostitutes in California, Chinese prostitutes were subjected to the most hostile public criticism.²⁰⁸ The popular press condemned the immorality of Chinese women and the depravity of Asian immigrants in general. The public hostility toward Chinese prostitution led to the implementation of the Page Law in 1875. While the Law forbade the importation of convicts, coolie laborers, and prostitutes from China, Japan, and other Asian countries, the actual targets of the law were Chinese prostitutes. Anti-

²⁰⁷ Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men* (London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997), 93.

²⁰⁸ Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women*, 118.

Chinese sentiments led to the legislation of the Chinese Exclusion Law in 1882, which denied entry to Chinese laborers for ten years.²⁰⁹

The late nineteenth-century public perceptions of Chinese women as exotic and sexually immoral led to the popular stereotypes of Asian women in the early twentieth century. American popular culture and scholarly literature negatively portrayed Asian women as either the Dragon Lady or the Lotus Blossom Baby. The Dragon Lady as the female version of Fu Manchu refers to seductive, dangerous, and treacherous Asian women. First appearing in the 1924 film *The Thief of Baghdad*, the Dragon Lady stereotype became popular through the 1931 novel *Daughter of Fu Manchu*. The Lotus Blossom Baby describes Asian women as passive, extremely submissive, and available to white men. The Lotus Blossom Baby stereotype was shown in the opera *Madame Butterfly*, and persisted in films of the 1980s such as *Miss Saigon*. Both stereotypes categorize Asian women as exotic “others,” while relegating them to the passive role of helping men. Asian women have been depicted as more passive, weaker, and less independent compared to white women.²¹⁰

In *Make Me*, the phrase “model minority” refers to the more positive perception of Asian immigrants that emerged in the 1960s. However, Min’s artificial smiling and submissive hand gestures reveal a paradox in the rhetoric of the term “model minority.” Model minority refers to a belief that Asian Americans in the United States have been very successful through their hard work and intelligence. Over the past few decades, this positive stereotype has largely replaced the old negative stereotype of Asian Americans as the “yellow peril.” Articles in the popular press and television programs began to

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 126.

²¹⁰ Yen Le Espiritu, 96.

celebrate the success of Asian Americans, applauding them as the “model minority.”²¹¹ As Stacey J. Lee argues in her book *Unraveling the “Model Minority” Stereotype*, although the positive stereotype of Asian Americans as the “model minority” praises the work ethic, family values, and educational attainment of many Asians, it obscures persisting racial discrimination against Asian Americans. Upholding the idea of the American dream, the model minority stereotype also blames other unsuccessful minority groups for their own troubles. Lee points out that, having emerged in the era of the civil rights movement, the model minority stereotype was employed by whites as a tool to discredit the demands by African Americans and other minorities for racial justice.²¹² The model minority conceptualization praises Asians while simultaneously affirming their minority status in dominant white culture and society.

By representing cultural stereotypes of Asian Americans throughout the history of Asian immigration, Min addresses persistency of these old agendas for Asian Americans through this work.

Yearning for Reunification

While grounding herself in the history of Asian Americans in the U.S., Min seeks to connect her Asian American identity to the specific history of her home country. Just as Korea’s division was the most significant issue in the discourse of Minjung movement, Min adopted the same subject as the central theme for her work. While her earlier work *Whirl War* shows Min’s concern with the DMZ, her photographic work *Defining*

²¹¹ Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle and London: Univ. of Washington Press, 1994), 140.

²¹² Stacey J. Lee, *Unraveling the “Model Minority” Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth* (New York and London: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1996), 6-7.

Moments explicitly addresses her deep engagement in the subject. *Defining Moments* (1992) (Fig. 16) consists of six black-and-white silver gelatin prints. The ensemble features her body overlaid with words and images that are associated with her personal history, the history of Korea, and of Korean Americans. The first image shows a negative of Min's abdomen with important dates in her life written on it and the words "occupied" and "territory" written on her forearms. Four dates are inscribed, creating a spiral shape centered on her navel: 1953; April 19, 1960; May 19, 1980; and April 29, 1992. The year 1953 marks both Min's birth and the end of the Korean War. April 19, 1960 is the date of the massive student demonstrations that led to the overthrow of Syngman Rhee's authoritarian regime. In 1960, Min also immigrated to the U.S. The date May 19, 1980 marks the Kwangju uprising. The date April 29, 1992 denotes the beginning of the Los Angeles riots, which fell on Min's 39th birthday.²¹³ The four successive photographs in this series feature images of recent historical events in Korea projected on the artist's face and upper body: the image of soldiers moving through rice fields during the Korean War, student demonstrations protesting Rhee's regime, students and citizens of Kwangju fighting against soldiers. The fifth photograph features images of the tragic events of the L.A. riots, and the last one shows the image of a large caldera of Mount Paekdu. The four events shown in the photographs correspond to the four dates written on her belly in the first image. Written on her forehead and across her chest are the words "DMZ" and "Heartland." The fifth photograph features the images from newspaper clippings on

²¹³ Elaine H. Kim, "Bad Women": Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min," 597.

Korean Americans trying to rebuild in Los Angeles after the 1992 riot. It was the tragic events of the L.A. riots that inspired her to produce the work *Defining Moments*.²¹⁴

The L.A. riots, or *sa-i-gu* (4-2-9) had a great impact on Min, urging her to think about issues of interracial relations, urban problems, and the status of the Korean American community. Many African Americans felt resentment toward Korean grocers for moving into black communities to open businesses in South Los Angeles. The riots took place in Los Angeles after the three of the four police officers accused of beating African American Rodney King were acquitted. The verdict, coming soon after an incident in the spring of 1991 in which a fifteen-year-old black girl named Latasha Harlines was shot by a Korean American shop owner who was released shortly-thereafter infuriated many African Americans. The riot lasted six days, resulting in the deaths of fifty-three people and injuries of numerous people. During the 1992 Los Angeles riots, more than 3,000 Korean shops were vandalized or looted. The mass media focused on the racial conflict between the African American and Korean American communities, repeatedly showing images of armed Korean store owners shooting at looters. However, these reports glossed over the worsening economic conditions of South Central Los Angeles. Korean Americans suffered not only from financial loss, but from intense psychological trauma.²¹⁵

By inscribing the letters “DMZ” on her forehead and repeatedly showing them in the five photographs, Min indicates how deeply the history of the division of her home country was etched in her mind and in the minds of Korean people. The repetitive use of the word “heartland” across her chest further suggests Min’s strong nationalistic spirit.

²¹⁴ Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

²¹⁵ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, 493-4.

The words “territory” and “occupation” written on her arms in the first photograph suggest that Min presents her body as an occupied territory, identifying herself with her motherland. Min enacts the traumatic history of Korea marked by the occupations of the foreign powers, presenting the letters “DMZ” on her forehead as a scar of foreign occupation. Adding the images of the L.A. riots that are superimposed on her body to a series of photographs, Min further alludes to her own experience of internal occupation by the traumatic history of racism in the U.S.

The De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) originated from the decision made by the U.S. to draw the 38th parallel on the Korean peninsula to hold back the advancing Soviet army at the end of World War II. After the Soviets boycotted the United-Nations-supervised general elections, the two separate political regimes were established in the north and in the south in 1948, and the division of the country became permanent. The conflict between the two regimes intensified, leading to North Korea’s invasion of the South in 1950. After the three-year Korean War, the armistice agreement signed in 1953 officially established the military demarcation line near the 38th parallel and a demilitarized zone of 4 kilometer wide along the 150-mile border. Split in two by a border that was demarcated by hidden land mines, Korea is the last place in which the legacy of the Cold War still prevails.²¹⁶ The “DMZ” represents for Min the traumatic history of her homeland in the context of the Cold War. The DMZ, a physical boundary imposed on her homeland to mark different nations, represents the tragic division of the nation as well as the intense social and cultural trauma of the Korean people. The arbitrariness and intensity of the

²¹⁶ Jang Jip Choi, “Political Cleavages in South Korea” in. *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*, ed. Hagen Koo (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 23.

division symbolized by the DMZ also reflects her own sense of division in the adopted country.

The last photograph in *Defining Moments* shows an image of the large caldera of Mount Paekdu filled with water. Mount Paekdu is a symbol for Korean national identity and nationalism. Located on the border of North Korea and China, Mount Paekdu is the highest and northern-most mountain in Korea. According to the Korean foundation myth, the founder of ancient Korea, Tan'gun, was the son of the divine king Whanwoong and a woman who once was a bear. Tan'gun established Old Choson by 2333 BCE, choosing *Asadal* as the capital city, which is said to be situated in modern-day Manchuria.²¹⁷ In North Korea, Mount Paekdu signifies national independence, or the ideology of *chuche* developed by the Great Leader Kim Il Sung. According to the North Korean accounts of Kim's biography, it is the site where Kim Il Sung led guerrilla activities against the Japanese and also where his son and successor Kim Jong Il was born. For North Korea, Mount Paekdu is not only a sacred site for Korean ancestral origin, but it is also where Kim's communist regime originated. From the unification of Korea by Silla in 696 AD to the division of the country in 1948, the Korean peninsula had been a unified country. The Korean people have longed for a reunification of the nation since the severance of the country in 1948. As a symbol of the common ancestral origin of the Korean people both in the south and the north, the image of Mount Paekdu signifies a unified Korea and it expresses the Korean people's yearning for reunification of the nation. The image of Mount Paekdu in Min's work suggests a strong nationalistic desire for the reunification of the country for both South and North Korea.

²¹⁷ Hyun Il Pai, *Constructing "Korean" Origin: A Critical Review of Archaeology, Historiography, and Racial Myth in Korean State-Formation Theories* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000), 61.

While both the south and the north have long desired unification, they have provided different discourses through which to achieve unification. After the division of the country, the successive political regimes in South Korea declared anti-communism and national security as the most important state ideologies, engaging in a limited discussion of unification. Rhee's regime promoted a strong anti-communist ideology, brutally suppressing leftist oppositions. Park's regime declared the nation's economic growth as the most urgent issue, continuing the anti-communist policy. Under this anti-communist rhetoric, any forms of discussions about unification were strictly suppressed, except for government-led activities.²¹⁸ In North Korea, the state ideology of *chuche* emphasizes autonomous self-identity, as well as political and economic independence, and calls for the removal of U.S. troops in the Korean peninsula to facilitate the process of unification.²¹⁹

The division and reunification of the country were central issues for Minjung practitioners. Minjung nationalists argue that the division of Korea is the most urgent problem for Koreans since it is the source of all other political, social, and cultural problems in both South and North Korea. They contend that *minjung* should play the central role in achieving unification. They resist anti-communist ideology led by the state and the subsequent perpetuation of the division embedded in this ideology. Instead, numerous Minjung activists in the 1980s embraced the idea of self-reliance and national independence emphasized in *chuche* ideology.²²⁰ While the image of Mount Paekdu

²¹⁸ Roy Richard Grinker, *Korea and Its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 23.

²¹⁹ B.C. Koh, "Ideology and Political Control in North Korea," *The Journal of Politics* 32, no.3 (August 1970): 670.

²²⁰ Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the politics of Representation in South Korea*, 134.

suggests the artist's and the Korean people's longing for the reconciliation and reunification of North and South Korea, it also evokes the competing discourses of nationalism and unification.

The repetitive use of the letters "DMZ" and the image of Mount Paekdu indicate Min's deep engagement in Minjung ideology and highlights issues regarding the division and unification of the nation as the most urgent. In 1988, the YKU was involved in the U.S. Peace March that began at the UN headquarters in New York and ended in Washington D.C., calling for the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula. In the following year, along with peace activists in other countries, members of the YKU in the U.S. participated in the "International Peace March for Peace and Self-Determined Unification of the Korean Peninsula" which began at Mount Paekdu and ended at *Panmunjom*, the site in North Korea where the armistice was signed in 1953.²²¹ As a participant in the International Peach March, and as the representative of the National Federation of Student Councils in Korea, Lim Sookyoung crossed into North Korea from South Korea without government authorization to participate in the Pyoungyang Youth Festival and to join the Peach March. She returned to the south through *Panmunjom* and was arrested for violating the National Security Law of South Korea. Students and intellectuals of the Minjung movement in South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s actively participated in the demonstrations, calling for the reunification of the country. The incident of Lim Sookyoung had a great impact on Min, and she made her first visit to the DMZ in 1989. She also made two additional visits to the DMZ in 1995

²²¹ Steven Hugh Lee, *The Korean War* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 2001), 82. *Panmunjom* is a village located in Kaesong where the Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953. It is located on the northern side of the Military Demarcation Line, and currently the JSA (Joint Security Area) near the old site of *Panmunjom* is the place where the meetings between the north and the south take place.

and 1998.²²² Created after her first visit to the DMZ and inspired by the unification movement among Minjung activists and the UKU in the late 1980s, *Defining Moments* shows Min's deep commitment to Minjung ideology.

While the words and images in the work suggests Min's affiliation with Minjung nationalism, her work simultaneously reveals her specific Korean female identity which creates an ambivalent relationship both to the state and to Minjung nationalism. The DMZ is a zone that belongs neither to the north nor the south. By inscribing the letters on her body, Min presents her Korean American body as a site for reconciliation, a site for border-crossing. Min's American passport allows her to cross the DMZ, while most Koreans are not permitted to cross the border. Through her multiple visits to North Korea, Min observed the other half of her motherland. Her status as a Korean American imbues her with a more fluid perspective on the divisive discourses of unification and nationalism.

By featuring her naked female body with important dates on her belly and images and letters overlaid on her upper body, Min suggests that her female identity creates additional ambivalence toward the discourse of Korean nationalism. The nationalist discourse advocated by the state in Korea is dominated by masculine ideology. In the foundation myth of Korea, woman is relegated to a subordinate position, having a sub-human origin, while man is portrayed as the founder of a nation and having a heavenly origin.²²³ During Japanese colonialism, in an attempt to reclaim Korean history and tradition, historians such as Ch'oe Nam-son and Yi Nung-hwa looked to the nation's foundational myth. Other historical writings on nationalistic struggles featured patriotic

²²² Min, e-mail message to author, September 2, 2011.

²²³ Seungsook Moon, "Begetting the Nation," in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York: Routledge, 1998), 41.

male warriors and their origin in the myth of Tan'gun. In anti-colonial nationalism, the specific issues of women were considered less urgent, with the emphasis placed on the central cause of national liberation. After the liberation of the country from Japanese colonialism, Rhee's authoritarian regime advocated a masculine and militaristic nationalist ideology based on anti-communism and anti-Japanese feelings.²²⁴ Park's military dictatorship continued to uphold anti-communism and urged the Korean people to focus on the establishment of a self-reliant economy to legitimize the dictatorial regime. The nationalism of Park's regime re-emphasized patriarchal Confucian ideology and earlier national discourse rooted in the Tan'gun myth to mobilize people for economic growth. Park's regime perpetuated a masculine brand of nationalism which marginalized women's issues. Modern Korean nationalism has suppressed the development of Korean feminism until the late 1980s, when military dictatorships ended.²²⁵ Min's use of her body in relationship to Korean history disrupts the essentializing patriarchal discourse of official Korean nationalism.

North Korean nationalism embodied in *chuche* ideology and Minjung nationalism is also marked by militant masculinist ideas. While Minjung ideology provided a significant anti-hegemonic discourse against state nationalism by challenging anti-communist ideology and upholding the urgency of unification, it repeats similar masculinist ideas. *Chuche* ideology was embraced by numerous Minjung nationalists because of the central ideas of personal, political and social independence and the emphasis on the role of people. However, *chuche* promotes the idealized and heroic personality of the great leaders, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, and their strong

²²⁴ Ibid., 35.

²²⁵ Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, eds. *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, 3.

leadership.²²⁶ In the interview, Min stated that the ideology and the organizational structure of YKU were firmly based on a patriarchal hierarchy and authority of the leader. The voices of the female participants in the group were often marginalized. The group was centered on the founder Yoon Han bong, a Korean political exile, and dissident members were not allowed to stay in the group. While excited to learn about Korean history, Min was never fully affiliated with the YKU. For Min, the ideology of Minjung art seemed highly dogmatic and strongly nativistic.²²⁷ Min shares a common concern regarding the division and the unification of Korea with Minjung artists, yet she rejects the realistic style, and the direct and crude forms favored by them. By inserting the image of the L.A riots into the work, Min seeks to articulate her specific position as a Korean American woman. Building upon the essentializing notion of Korean culture and homogeneity of Korean identity, Minjung art promoted indigenous and militant masculinist subject matter and style. The 1993 exhibition “Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art” exemplifies the different perspectives of Korean and Korean American artists on political art. Korean American artists explore the complexity created by the intersecting racial, gender, and class issues, embracing various artistic styles. In the work of Korean artists, the concern for the complex nexus of identities is absent. Min refuses to embrace the dominant style and forms of Minjung art as well as its subject matter which is rooted in the homogenous, nativistic, and masculinist notion of Korean identity. While engaging in Minjung ideology and art, Min’s art reveals the specific difference of her Korean American identity.

²²⁶ Namhee Lee, 140.

²²⁷ Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

Min's Minjung-oriented engagement in the history of her home country was also shown in her installation work *deCOLONIZATION* (Fig.17), which she completed after her first visit to the DMZ. It was shown at the Bronx Museum of Art in 1991 and consists of propped tree branches, four panels containing texts and photographs, clay pots, and a dress. Upon entering the installation space, the viewer notices the large letters "DECOLONIZE" taped on the floor. The word is placed diagonally and is enlarged gradually from the far corner of the room toward the viewer entering the space. The viewer encounters a painted tree branch placed on one end of the gallery wall and then a Korean female traditional dress hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room. As the viewer moves toward the suspended dress, he/she sees the four panels on the wall, another tree branch behind the dress, and the cross-shaped structure containing a red photocopied image in the center.²²⁸

The tree branch placed on one end of the gallery wall is painted half black and half white. It is propped up by a stack of *Encyclopedia Americana* and set against a vinyl sheet that is also half black and half white. A series of black and white words are written on this large sheet; "Salvaged Savage; Civilized Benevolence; Free Trade Zone; Team Spirit; Master Canon; Right Might; Empire of Signs; Just Cause; Civilized Benevolence; Desert Storm; Over Determine; Black Face, White Mask." The left side of the sheet is painted in black and contains white phrases while the right side of the sheet is painted in white with black phrases listed on it. Some of these phrases and words refer to colonialism or books on colonialism (Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs* and Franz Fanon's *Black Face, White Mask*). Others are the military operation code names used in America's imperialist wars. Placed over the painted tree branch are the two pieces of

²²⁸ Ibid.

glass attached to each other forming a plus sign. The word “nature” is written on a vertical piece, while the horizontal piece contains the word “nurture.” The letter “t” is shared by the two pieces in the center. Using black and white together with the phrases and words that are related to colonialism and have oppositional relationships, Min points to a binary ideology that governs the logic of colonialism and neocolonialism.²²⁹

At the opposite end of the gallery stands another tree, an unpainted tree Min found on the street. This tree creates an oppositional relationship to the artificial, painted tree on the other end of the wall. It props up a broken panel of glass covered with dirt. Written on the surface of the glass is a phrase, “My gourd is heavy with stars,” from Aime Cesaire’s poem. An old Korean book is open, resting over the tree branch while five gourds are hanging from the tree branch. Small clay pots filled with rice are scattered on the floor around the tree branch. Min obtained the gourds and pots during her visit to Nicaragua. Created after her participation in the Havana Biennial in Cuba, the installation draws a parallel between the Korean history of colonialism and neocolonialism, and those of the Caribbean region. By presenting quotes from Martinique born Aime Cesaire and referring to Franz Fanon, who included Cesaire’s poem in his book *Black Skin and White Masks*, Min emphasizes their common struggles to break free from the shackles of colonialism.

In the center of the room, Min suspends a *hanbok*, diaphanous white dress, from the ceiling. While Min uses her mother’s jacket, she elongates the skirt. Min writes a poem by Korean American Won Ko on the front of the skirt and puts a translation of the poem in Korean on the back of the skirt. Quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the poem illustrates the Korean American’s sense of being split in two places. The *hanbok* as

²²⁹ Ibid.

a symbol of traditional Korean female identity, suggests Min's attempt to identify with a Korean female subject. However, the elongated form and the poem written on the skirt indicate that her American self does not fit into the ideal of the Korean female subject shaped by the patriarchal Confucian ideology of sacrifice, chastity, and fidelity. Min uses the diaphanous female dress in another work, *Dwelling* (1994) (Fig.18), expressing similar feelings of conflict and ambivalence toward the idea of a Korean female identity. The dress is suspended over a tree branch hung from the ceiling. More tree branches are put inside the dress along with texts, maps, and photographs. Lit from within, the tree branches look like human bones, symbolizing Min's search for the branches of her family tree. On the floor, books are piled up to the hem of the dress. The book on the top of the stack is open and carved out, and the little house form she used in *Half Home* is placed in the cut-out space. The open book with English text suggests Min's American upbringing, while the carved-out pages, the dress, and the tree branches refer to her constant yearning for a home, and her conflicting feelings about her two heritages.

By referring to Afro-Caribbean postcolonial scholars such as Cesaire and Fanon, Min situates the Minjung movement in the discourse of postcolonialism and decolonization. The Minjung discourse embraces the ideas of self-determination and the emphasis on the indigenous cultural values held in the discourse of postcolonial theories. Having emerged in the late 1970s long after the decolonization of 1945, the Minjung movement reveals that Korea had not achieved decolonization, instead continuing to suffer from perpetual neocolonial domination. Including the image of Minjung activist Lee Ae Ju, Min draws a parallel between the discourse of Afro-Caribbean postcolonialism and that of the Minjung movement.

To the left, in the corner of the room is a black cross form that contains a red mirrored photograph of a Korean female dancer and activist Lee Ae Ju. The photograph was taken in 1987 in front of Yonsei University on the funeral day of a student who was killed by a tear gas canister at student demonstrations against Chun Doo Hwan's regime. This incident took place after another death of a university student who was killed by torture during an investigation of his involvement in anti-government demonstrations in the same year.²³⁰ Wearing a white traditional Korean dress, Lee danced *salpuri* to the sounds of various percussion instruments, attempting to ease and comfort the spirit of the dead. The photograph in *deCOLONIZATION* shows Lee in performance, running through a long piece of white cloth held by her assistants and splitting it in half, dramatically conveying a sense of anger and sorrow. Lee visited the YKU in New York, and held workshops during which she gave the same performance. Min stated in the interview that she associated with Lee and learned the dance along with other members of the YKU. Inspired by Lee's performance, Min began to work on this installation.²³¹ Placed in the corner of the room and framed by a cross, the photograph commemorates the deaths and sacrifices of the Korean people in the modern history of Korea, and expresses *han*, or the collective feelings of sorrow and oppression of the Korean people. By using a cross around the image, Min specifically refers to the significance of the notion of *han* in Minjung theology. Developed under the auspices of the Minjung movement, Minjung theology notes that *han* epitomizes the collective emotions of *minjung* who have long been oppressed by the ruling class and foreign invasions. Minjung theology argues that

²³⁰ Chungmoo Choi, "The Minjung Culture Movement and Popular Culture" in *South Korea's Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence*, ed. Kenneth M. Wells (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 109.

²³¹ Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

the preachers should resolve *han* and thus help *minjung* achieve a new sense of identity.²³²

To the right of the suspended dress are the four wall panels. They have frosted mylar overlay and cutouts of letters. Each panel has two letter cutouts, showing the word "OCCUPIED" across the entire set of panels. Inspired by the title of Fanon's book *Black Skin White Mask*, Min lists word phrases that have contradictory relationships on the first panel. Another panel shows a photograph of Min's mother and her aunt at a U.S. army base, standing in front of an American car. The text, hand-written and printed, reads, "Ok, GI Joe, Checkpoint Charlie, I'm your first, your second, your third world girl, your mama-san, geisha, ayah, Miss Saigon, war bride, mail order bride, I'm yours." The photograph and the text explore the relationship between women and U.S. imperialism in Korea and other third world countries. Korean prostitutes who worked in U.S. camp towns are viewed as victims of neo-colonialism and often used as symbols of the victimized nation in literary writings. However, they are simultaneously condemned as "Yanggongju" or "Yankee whores." Women who were associated with and married to American male soldiers were similarly categorized.²³³ This contradictory attitude of Korean society toward camp town prostitutes resulted from the patriarchal Confucian ideology that allows for the commodification of women's bodies for national political and economic gain, even while extolling the virtues of chastity. Revealing the contradiction and ambivalence in the state ideology of nationalism toward militarized prostitution, Min addresses her own ambivalent relationship as a Korean-American woman to the patriarchal discourse of Korean nationalism.

²³² Sangyil Park, 26.

²³³ Hyun Sook Kim, 180.

Min's concern with the relationship between the position of women and colonialism and neocolonialism is most explicitly shown in *Mother Load* (1996) (Fig. 19). In this work, Min suggests that the experiences of women challenge homogenous notions of the nation and nationalism. *Mother Load* consists of four *bojagi*, the traditional Korean cloth used for covering, wrapping, and carrying various items. In the household of common people, it was made of scraps of available fabric sewn together by women. Size varies, but it retains the overall shape of a square. Taking up little space and easily folded, the *bojagi* was considered an essential household item. In addition to everyday use, the *bojagi*— with elegant design and brilliant color—was used for various ceremonies and rituals.²³⁴

The first *bojagi* is spread out and is printed with photographs from Korea's colonial period. Min mostly uses photographs of similar sizes, imitating the patchwork of the traditional *bojagi*. The smaller photographs printed on the right edge of the cloth mimic the hem of a *bojagi*. The photographs show, among others, the following five subjects: the Korean Righteous Army who fought the Japanese army during Japanese colonization, Japanese troops marching in front of the Korean royal palace *Gyeongbokgung*, the neo-classical Japanese General Government building built inside the palace to symbolize Japanese colonial rule, Korean women studying at a public school, and Syngman Rhee, the first president of the Republic of Korea, in front of the Korean national assembly building that had previously served as a key building of the Japanese occupation.²³⁵

²³⁴ Young-key Kim-Renaud ed. *Creative Women of Korea: the Fifteenth through the Twentieth-Century* (New York: An East Gate Book, 2004), 68.

²³⁵ Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

The second part of the work shows an open *bojagi* with a folded *hanbok*, the traditional Korean women's dress, in this case made of military camouflage. The *bojagi* is divided by a diagonal band of the same camouflage pattern; the four sides are also covered with a thin band of the same pattern. One half of the *bojagi* is in red, while the other is in blue, alluding to the two colors of the *taegeuk* symbol in the center of the Korean national flag.²³⁶ The diagonal line also denotes the Military Armistice Line established at the end of the Korean War and the subsequent division of the country.

Korean female dress in the patterns of a military uniform refers to the Korean "Comfort Women" who were sexually exploited by Japanese soldiers during World War II and the prostitution on U.S. military bases in South Korea. Between 1932 and 1945, the Japanese government recruited about 200,000 Asian women to work as sexual slaves for Japanese soldiers. About 80% of these women were Koreans. They were persuaded, deceived, coerced, or kidnapped by the Japanese authorities to serve at the military brothels. These women were unpaid and treated inhumanly by the Japanese soldiers and the managers of the "comfort stations." A large number of Korean comfort women were killed at the end of World War II. For those who survived after returning home, former comfort women suffered both psychologically and physically, often leading to suicides. The victims had been silenced about their traumatic experiences and the movement to address these injustices did not emerge until the 1990s. While the establishment of military sexual slavery by the Japanese government indicates Japan's colonial power over Korea, it also suggests the subordination of women to a nation that was founded upon a Confucian patriarchal ideology. The silence of former Korean comfort women and that of the Korean government over the issues of redress also indicate the subordination of

²³⁶ Ibid.

Korean women to patriarchal ideology in Korea. While the state's view of comfort women as victims of Japanese colonialism suggests women's positions as national subjects, the shame and guilt felt by these women reflect the sexual double standard that intersects the discourse of nationalism.²³⁷

The third part of *Mother Load* consists of a plain *bojagi* on which contemporary everyday clothing and female undergarments are placed. The clothes are folded and cut in half. The severed contemporary clothing refers to the perpetuation of the division of Korea today. The clothes belong to Min, suggesting the parallel between the history of the division of her home country and her own experience of being split as a Korean American, and the great impact of the history of division upon her sense of identity as a Korean American in the U.S.

The last *bojagi* is wrapped around the other half of the clothing shown in the third one and photographs from her personal collection. The outside of the *bojagi* is printed with color photographs of the L.A. riots and images of Korean Americans demonstrating against the U.S. government for its involvement in the Kwangju massacre that occurred during the military dictatorship in South Korea. These photos appear to be the typical patchwork of *bojagi*. The bundled *bojagi* containing various items suggests a strong sense of mobility: it is ready to be carried somewhere. After being untied, the *bojagi* can be reused, referring to a repetitive migration. Along with the images of contemporary Korean American experiences, the bundled *bojagi* alludes to Min's own experience of migration and her fluid and anti-essentialist sense of identity as a Korean American that challenges static and essentialist Korean nationalism.

²³⁷ Hyunah Yang, "Re-membering the Korean Military Comfort Women" in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 132.

Min produced three additional works related to her visits to the DMZ; *Kindred Distance* (1996), *Bridge of No Return* (1997), and *Bangapsubnida: Rainy Day Women #63* (2004). Min created *Kindred Distance* (1996) (Fig. 20) after her second visit to the DMZ. It consists of four photographs she took at the Unification Observatory in South Korea in the DMZ. Opened to the public in 1992, the Unification Observatory has an exhibition hall displaying various North Korean products including clothing, food, currency, stamps, and other everyday items. The first photograph features children's clothing, shoes, and toys placed in a display case. The second one shows women's clothing hanging on the wall and underwear placed in the glass exhibition case. Each item is labeled with names that are commonly used in North Korea. The other photographs show mannequins with contemporary North Korean clothing, and South Korean people looking at those mannequins. Min prints the word "whe" in the center of the first two photographs, which is phonetically written in English for the Korean word "왜(why)." She prints "where" on the third photograph, and "아워홈," phonetically written in Korean for "our home" on the last photograph.²³⁸ The images and words suggest that the division between the two Koreas has caused an irrevocable cultural gap and estrangement between North and South Korean people. For South Koreans, the design and color of the clothing seem too simple and out-dated. The name of each item also shows the gap between the languages of the north and that of the south. While North Korea replaced most foreign words with Korean ones based on *chuche* ideology, South Korea uses numerous foreign words. The North Korean language also has some differences in spelling, showing influence from Russia. This linguistic gap between the

²³⁸ Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

North and South has deepened after this long period of separation. After the severance of the country and until the 1980s, when the Minjung movement challenged the official view of North Korea, South Korean citizens were banned from listening to North Korean radio, reading North Korean books, and discussing socialist ideology. Any connection to the North led to imprisonment under the National Security Law of 1948, and the Anti-Communist Law of 1962 strictly controlled radical political organizations and dissident intellectuals. Numerous school textbooks and mass media promoted anti-communist ideology. Anti-communist slogans and posters were put up everywhere.²³⁹ Ordinary citizens were fearful of violating the National Security Law and became distrustful of one another. The South Korean government's hegemonic discourse based on anti-communism conceptualized North Korea as the Other. In *Kindred Distance*, the portrayal of South Korean people as they eagerly view North Korean products suggests their desire to know the Other, which has long been suppressed by the state. On the other hand, they seem to look at the out-dated North Korean products with a sense of superiority, indicating the economic gap between the two countries resulting from North Korea's prioritization of the growth of military power over economy. The image of people from South Korea intently and proudly looking at the products of the North invokes conflicting and ambivalent feelings of the South toward the North, which was caused by their long period of estrangement from each other. The presentation of out-dated North Korean objects as museum artifacts in display cases also denotes the South's attempts to exoticize the Other. By turning the North Korean products into tourist objects, the South perpetuates the divisive idea that capitalism is superior.

²³⁹ Namhee Lee, 85.

By placing herself outside of the photographic frame, Min positions herself as another voyeur— a Korean-American looking at South Koreans gaping at North Koreans. Her Korean American position expresses Min's own conflicting feelings about both the South and the North. The overlaid phrases "whe," "why," "where," and "아워 홈(our home)," allude to Min's feelings of frustration and pain about the reality of the division of the nation and her sense of confusion about her own place and identity as a Korean American woman.

Similarly, Min's installation *Bridge of No Return* (1997) (Fig. 21) expresses her concern about the division and the unification of her home country, and her own position as a Korean American woman in relation to the discourse of unification. The work consists of a tall S-shaped wall made of aluminum beams and wire mesh. The two sides of the wall are covered with language fragments printed on magnetic strips, and a series of rectangular clock faces on which pink and blue photocopied images are printed. One-handed clocks show a twenty-four-hour time passage from one side to the other on the wall structure; the North Korean side begins at midnight and ends at noon; the South Korean side starts at noon and finishes at midnight. Viewers can stand on either side of the wall and peer through the wire. The North Korean side contains pale blue photocopied images, while the South Korean side features pale pink images. Min places full-color tourist images of the two countries between the two sides, which are hidden behind the two sides of the metal wall. Both sides feature images of the respective national flowers— the Rose of Sharon for South Korea and the magnolia for North Korea. The North Korean side is covered with images taken from North Korean propaganda, including images of farmers, and of the placards displayed at a stadium. In addition,

there are images of malnourished children. These images refer to the totalitarian communist regime which has neglected the wellbeing of its people in its focus on military might. The South Korean side features images from Japanese colonization, the collapse of a department store in Seoul in 1995, which killed hundreds of people, and the words “rampant consumerism” and “blind ambition.”²⁴⁰ These images and texts suggest the capitalist South’s focus on rapid economic growth leading to materialistic consumerism which also disregarded the wellbeing of its people. The images on the two sides suggest the deep cultural, economic, and political gap between the two countries. The “S” shape of the wall refers to the traditional yin-yang symbol which is in the center of the South Korean flag. The yin represents the female principle and is blue, and the yang stands for the male principle and is red. But rather than polar oppositions, the yin and the yang are both indispensable parts of each other and together, these symbols represent unity.²⁴¹ The symbolic yin-yang shape of the installation, the one-handed clock connecting the two sides, and the transparency of the wall suggest the inextricably linked experiences of two Koreas, the history of the unified nation. In addition, by creating a third space in between the two sides, Min rejects the divisive rhetoric of the Cold War and the antagonistic discourse of unification. In this work, the artist seeks to reconcile the totalitarian North and materialistic South, thus expressing her deep yearning for unification.

The title of the work refers to the bridge located in *Panmunjom* that crosses the Military Demarcation Line between the North and South Korea. The bridge was one of the tourist stops during the DMZ tour that Min took in 1995. At the end of the Korean War, the bridge was used for the exchange of war prisoners between the North and South.

²⁴⁰ Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

²⁴¹ Edith Sizoo, “Moving beyond Disparities: a Yin-Yang Approach to Gender and Development,” *Development in Practice* 10, no. 1 (Feb. 2000): 46.

Captured soldiers on both sides were allowed to choose one side, though without any hope of returning to the other.²⁴² The bridge symbolizes the harsh division inflicted on the Korean soil and on the minds of Korean people. In this work, by rejecting the oppositional and divisive rhetoric of both capitalism and communism, Min envisions a bridge crossed by people from opposite sides. She turns this bridge into a passageway for both sides. Transforming the historical bridge that marks the border between the two countries into a symbol of border-crossing, Min conveys her intense hope for unification.

In 2004, Min created another installation work titled *Bangapsubnida: Rainy Day Women #63* (Fig. 22), which shows her persistent interest in the reconciliation and unification of North and South Korea. The work was based on her travel to North Korea in 1998. It consists of sixty-three photographs attached to a panel with video images projected on the photographs. The photographs were taken from a booklet of North Korean ceremonial postage stamps that Min bought at a hotel in China. They feature faces of North Korean people who were imprisoned in the South for up to forty-five years because they would not renounce communism.²⁴³

Numerous people were arrested during and after the Korean War for working as guerrillas or spies for North Korea. The long-term imprisonment was borne out of the conversion system. The ideological conversion system was devised in Japan and introduced into Korea during Japanese colonization to suppress anti-colonial forces. Although the ideological conversion system was abolished after World War II, it was revived in Korea with the division of the country and was firmly established in 1956. Under the conversion system, if prisoners refused to sign a declaration of conversion after

²⁴² Steven Hugh Lee, 86.

²⁴³ Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

completing sentences under the National Security Law, they had to remain in prison.²⁴⁴

Numerous dissident intellectuals and students in the 1960s and 1970s who were arrested for espionage were subjected to long imprisonment and they suffered torture, deteriorating health, and inhumane treatment. In addition to the cruel and inhumane treatment of the prisoners, forty-five-year prison terms are considered an infringement of human rights according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). In 1999, president Kim Dae Jung declared an amnesty for seventeen unconverted long-term prisoners, and in 2000, as a result of a summit meeting, sixty-three unconverted long-term prisoners were repatriated to the North Korea.²⁴⁵

The images projected on the photographs were recorded by Min when she visited a small village near Mount Gungang. They show North Korean women singing and dancing in traditional dresses at the entrance of an election hall on a rainy day, probably celebrating the re-election of Kim Jong Il to the Head of the Parliament. Along with other visitors from America, Min was invited to the vote. The title *Bangapsunida* means “welcome” and is also the title of the song sung by these women.²⁴⁶ The juxtaposition of the images of women welcoming with those of the faces of former prisoners alludes to the hero’s welcome these former prisoners received upon returning to North Korea. While the parallel between the stillness of the photographs and the moving images of women dancing and singing creates a visual contrast, both images denote the totalitarian nature of the North Korean regime. The strong loyalty of the sixty-three long-term prisoners toward Kim Jong Il, which caused them to sacrifice their entire youth in prison,

²⁴⁴ Namhee Lee, 102.

²⁴⁵ Samuel Kim, “North Korea in 2000: Surviving through High Hopes of Summit Diplomacy,” *Asian Survey* 41, no.1 (Jan./Feb. 2001): 19.

²⁴⁶ Min, interview by author, August 17, 2010.

and the mobilization of women for the celebration of the Great Leader refer to the totalitarian control exercised by the government. The faces of sixty-three former prisoners also remind the viewer of the three-hundred South Korean prisoners still held in North Korea waiting to return home. Min added a subtitle from Bob Dylan's song *Rainy Day Women* from the 1960s. By inserting a title of a song favored in the civil rights era in the U.S., Min alludes to her position as a Korean American woman in relation to the oppositional and antagonistic national ideologies and the suffering of the Korean people.

Min's installation *DMZ XING* (1994) (Fig. 23) addresses her concern with the division of her home country while explicitly expressing her position as a Korean American woman. The work was commissioned by Real Art Ways, a nonprofit exhibition space in Hartford, Connecticut, and shown at the Asian American Cultural Center at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. In this work, invoking the traumatic history of the partition of her home country, Min connects it to the histories of other Asian countries or the third world countries, expanding the discourse of division and unification held in Korea across the national border. While in other works dealing with the subject of the DMZ Min engages in the historical and political significance of the DMZ, in this work Min uses the DMZ as a metaphoric gesture to connect Asian countries marked by the Cold War. Reflecting her awareness of changing Asian immigrant communities, Min articulates her desire to cross borders. The work was required to deal with the history and culture of the region. Min decided to work on a piece about a Southeast Asian refugee community in Stamford. She interviewed members of the Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Amerasian ethnic communities.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

DMZ XING consists of an eight-foot-tall circular structure with a rectangular opening through which the viewer enters. The interior contains a mirrored octagonal tower in the center and sixteen glass panels propped up at an angle against the interior wall. A sequence of photographs of the refugees Min interviewed is attached vertically on the wall behind the glass panels. While some glass panels do not have photographs behind them, all the panels have texts etched onto the surfaces. The texts contain stories of the refugee families as well as the story of Min's own life. Min's stories include her visit to Korea and the DMZ, her relationship with her father, her growing political consciousness, and her reflections on geopolitical conflicts. Some panels show combat photographs of the Vietnam War, which caused disruption for the families she interviewed for this work. She intertwines their stories about war with her own personal story, making a parallel between the wars in their countries and the Korean War in her home country. On the floor of the interior are red heat lamps arranged under metal grates. The red lights flash at measured intervals as the viewer walks through the circular space. Evoking feelings of crisis and tension, the flashing red lights signify the volatile Demilitarized Zone that is marked by heavy fortification and potential military aggression, as well as the terrible experiences of war shared by the refugee families. The circular structure with a mirrored pillar in the center echoes the structure of the panopticon.²⁴⁸ The panoptic structure refers to the totalitarian government control of the lives and ideologies of people both under communist and anti-communist regimes.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1979), 200-201. The panopticon refers to a prison building design proposed by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth-century. A circular structure with a central tower allows the observer to observe all inmates without being watched by them.

Gathering the stories of the refugees from many Asian countries, and paralleling their stories with the story of her home country and her own experience as a Korean American, Min attempts to commemorate the traumatic history of the third world marked by colonialism, war, and displacement. However, the octagonal mirror reflecting the panels and the flashing lights, and the photographs blurred by the text etched on the glass as well as the shadow cast by the text all make it difficult for the viewer to grasp the meaning of the images and the text. The glass panels leaning against the wall create a sense of physical vulnerability for the viewer. Since the panels are leaning against the wall, it is hard for the viewer to see the photographs toward the bottom. The confusing and complex structure of the work suggests the difficulty of fully grasping and memorializing the traumatic history of war. The layered, complex, and circular structure of the work further portrays the diasporic experiences of Asian refugees and immigrants, who were affected by the wars in their home countries.

The title of the work, *DMZ XING*, “demilitarized zone crossing” indicates Min’s actual visit to the DMZ, and her strong desire to cross through the DMZ, one of the last vestiges of the Cold War, and to free her homeland from the shackles of division and occupation. *DMZ XING* further denotes Min’s attempt to form an alliance transnationally with other third world countries, reflecting her sense of diasporic Asian American identity. Centering on the metaphoric border-crossing, Min calls for a negation of oppositional stances, and binary and antagonistic ideologies. Rejecting oppositional stances and geographic and cultural boundaries, Min positions herself as a transnational subject. In *DMZ XING*, retaining her deep concern about the division of her home country and her affiliation with the Minjung ideology, Min articulates her position as an

Asian American in a globalized world. Critically engaging the Minjung ideology, Min rejects the nativistic and essentializing discourse of the nation and nationalism that is embedded in the Minjung theories.

In her work, Min rejects both the nationalist, essentialist idea of Korean identity and the assimilationist idea of Korean Americans as, above all, Americans. As Arif Dirlik notes in his essay “Asians on the Rim: Transnational Capital and Local Community in the Making of Contemporary Asian America,” Asian Americans in the 1960s sought to ground their identities in U.S. history, while suppressing their connections to their countries of origin. However, the new wave of immigration after 1965 challenged the old notion of Asian American identity rootedness in U.S. history.²⁴⁹ Reflecting the shifting perspective on Asian American identity, Min resists the Americanist approach to Asian American identity and diasporically connects to the history of her home country and to the history of other Asian countries. Min specifically engages the Minjung movement and ideology that flourished during the 1970s and 1980s in her home country, but, rather than simply incorporating the Minjung ideology into her work, she approaches it critically, addressing her sense of identity as a Korean American woman shaped by the changing context of Asian American identity formation.

²⁴⁹ Arif Dirlik, “Asians on the Rim: Transnational Capital and Local Community in the Making of Contemporary Asian America,” 10.

Chapter 3: A New Asian Cosmopolitan Identity: Nikki S. Lee

From 1997 to 2001 Nikki S. Lee undertook a series of performative photographs titled *Projects*. *Projects* features Lee amidst various social and cultural communities, disguising herself as a member of these groups. Based on the communities she selected, Lee created fourteen subcategories including *The Tourist Project* (1997), *The Punk Project* (1997), *Young Japanese (East Village) Project* (1997), *The Hispanic Project* (1998), *The Yuppie Project* (1998), *The Ohio Project* (1999), *The Exotic Dancers Project* (2000), *The Skateboarders Project* (2000), and *The Hip-hop Project*, (2001). The photographs appear to show Lee comfortable in each milieu, which suggests that one can easily overcome barriers that separate social and cultural groups. Critics and scholars have often observed that *Projects* addresses an idea of fluid cultural identity and multiplicity of the individual self, and calls cultural stereotypes into question. Critics have also noted the disjunctive elements that contradict the pronounced theme of her work and have rightly pointed out that Lee's work's celebratory idea of permeability of identity and boundary crossing is often disrupted by the elements that support the idea of fixed boundaries. However, no critics or scholars have given a substantial amount of scholarly, critical attention to Lee's specific experience as a new Korean immigrant and her ambiguous attitude toward the concept of fluid identity.

It is undeniable that by repeatedly creating her identity across various social boundaries including race, class, age, sexual orientation, and geography, Lee presents herself as a global, cosmopolitan subject who freely chooses her ethnic and cultural affiliations, thus challenging old essentialist notions of cultural and ethnic identity. Her

sense of cosmopolitan subjectivity is closely linked to her experience as a recent Korean immigrant in a globalized contemporary world. As a new Asian immigrant who is distinctly different from the earlier Asian immigrants, Lee freely affiliates with diverse communities in the U.S. However, as a new immigrant who maintains a close tie to her homeland, Lee simultaneously seeks to articulate her Korean identity, distancing herself from the immediate environment in the U.S. Lee's photographs show her distanced attitude through her temporary and superficial engagement in the groups, disinterested postures and compositions, and her disinterest in the specific material histories of the groups. In addition, Lee's distanced attitude is enhanced by her indulgence in ethnic and gender stereotypes, concept of commodified identity, and self-Orientalization. This chapter will examine the relationship between Lee's new Korean immigrant status and her conflicting and ambiguous perspective toward the idea of fluid identity.

Literature Review on Lee's Work

Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* was met with great acclaim from critics. The first book on Lee's *Projects*, entitled *Nikki S. Lee Projects*, was published in 2001. Numerous critics have noted that Lee's *Projects* expresses the permeability and multiplicity of identity. In the book itself, an essay written by Russell Ferguson, entitled "Let's be Nikki" states that "the cumulative effect of Lee's own mutating presence in series after series does in the end succeed in disrupting any possible confidence in social classification systems of whatever kind. They're all permeable."²⁵⁰ Likewise, in her 2000 article "Look at Me: Self-Portrait Photography after Cindy Sherman," Jennifer Dalton

²⁵⁰ Russell Ferguson, "Let's be Nikki" in *Nikki S. Lee Projects*, ed. Lesley A. Martin (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2001), 5-17.

states, "Lee's work argues that even the subcultures one is apparently born into, such as ethnic groups, are more socially fluid and self subscribing than conventionally believed."²⁵¹ In her essay "Girl with Many Selves," Alisia G. Chase also states that in Lee's work "identities are simply fleeting allegiances, shopped and slipped into as much as they are formed by one's experiences...by creating a Nikki Lee based on what people think Nikki Lee would be like, Lee insinuates that every identity, whether individual or group, eastern or western, Korean or American, is always contextual."²⁵²

Other critics contend that Lee's *Projects* reveals our stereotypes and prejudices about certain social and cultural groups. For example, in his essay "Nikki S. Lee," Mark Godfrey states, "Lee's photographs are great satires...Lee's work suggests contemporary prejudices."²⁵³ Critics such as Maurice Berger contend that Lee's *Projects* deeply engage the issues of race in U.S society. He argues that Lee's photographs effectively reveal a "whiteness," or a normative racial category in our culture. According to Berger, since "whiteness" has been considered a cultural norm, it has never been properly represented.²⁵⁴ Focusing on *The Yuppie Project*, Berger argues that the series makes whiteness visible by expressing the sense of tension and alienation between the artist and the group in which she was participating. However, scholars such as Miwon Kwon oppose the critics' view that Lee's work critiques social and cultural stereotypes. According to Kwon, Lee's approach to the idea of multiplicity of identity is based on a playful and superficial understanding of the subcultural communities, and the modernist

²⁵¹ Jennifer Dalton, "Look at Me: Self-Portrait Photography after Cindy Sherman," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no. 3 (Sept. 2000): 49.

²⁵² Alisia G. Chase, "Girl with Many Selves," *Afterimage* 34, no. 6 (May/June 2007): 2, EBSCOhost.

²⁵³ Mark Godfrey, "Nikki S. Lee," *Frieze Magazine* 52 (May 2000), 3,
http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_back/nikki_s_Lee/

²⁵⁴ Maurice Berger, "Picturing Whiteness: Nikki S. Lee's Yuppie Project," *Art Journal* 60, no. 4 (winter 2001): 55.

notion of autonomous and authoritative artist. She points out that critics overemphasize the authenticity of Lee's experience with the members of the communities, leading to the uncritical embrace of Lee's work as a critique of divisive social boundaries and stereotypes.²⁵⁵

Critics have also noted that Lee's photographs simultaneously suggest that identity is not fluid, creating a complexity and ambiguity. For example, in his essay titled "Nikki S. Lee: New Guises, New Gazes" in *The Washington Post*, Michael O'Sullivan states, "Ironically, although she makes every effort to blend in, Lee is always immediately identifiable...Lee's art has previously underscored the degree to which barriers of class, race, age, sexual orientation, geography, taste and other social markers are—and are not—permeable."²⁵⁶ Another critic, Jerry Saltz, states, "What's so creepy, and what makes this her best series, is not how Lee blends in, but how she stands out."²⁵⁷

In the section "Performing Community: Nikki S. Lee's Photographic Rites of Passing" of his 2005 book *American Exposure: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century*, Louis Kaplan contends that Lee, as a participant observer, performs community and "rites of passing." However, rather than integrating with the communities and forming a deep bond with the members, Lee's *Projects* reveals the difficulty of fully assimilating into these groups. According to Kaplan, *Projects* raises questions about what it means to fully become a member of a community as well as what causes one to be considered an outsider. He states, "...these questions that are perched at the border of inclusion and exclusion have no definitive answers. Instead, the intriguing snapshots of

²⁵⁵ Miwon Kwon, "Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tuazon and Nikk S. Lee" in *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, ed. Alex Coles (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000), 84, 86.

²⁵⁶ Michael O'Sullivan, "Nikki S. Lee: New Guises, New Gazes" *The Washington Post*, July 16, 2004, T29.

²⁵⁷ Jerry Saltz, "Decoy and Daydreamer" *Village Voice*, September 28, 1999, Tuesday. Pg. 61.

Nikki S. Lee are light-written riddles that offer no clear-cut proofs.”²⁵⁸ Cherise Smith discusses Lee’s *Projects* in a chapter entitled “Nikki S. Lee and the Repackaging of the Politics of Identity,” in her book *Enacting Others*, published in 2011. Smith contends that Lee’s *Projects* strongly invokes the rhetoric of “post-identity,” which argues that our racial and ethnic identities are simply a matter of choice. However, according to Smith, Lee’s emphasis on artistic authority and individualism disrupts the idea of post-identity, pointing to the complexity of identity formation and the relevance of identity politics in the U.S.²⁵⁹

A few theses have provided substantial academic investigation of Lee’s work. Kimberly S. Middleton’s 2003 dissertation, *You Gotta Chink It Up!: Asian American Performativity in the New Orientalism*, includes a section on Lee’s *Projects*. Middleton contends that Lee’s *Projects* calls into question new Orientalism prevalent in contemporary America. According to Middleton, although Lee’s work appears to reinforce existing stereotypes of Asian women, by performing multiples roles and self-consciously revealing her Asian identity throughout her performances it resists the idea of new Orientalism.²⁶⁰

In his thesis *Mis-Taken Identities: The Photographic Conceptualization of Identity in Nikki S. Lee’s Projects (1997-2001)*, Thu-Mai Lewis Christian also notes that Lee’s *Projects* presents the idea of fluid identity. According to him, critics’ discussions of Lee’s work as a celebration of the idea of fluid social and cultural identity are solely

²⁵⁸ Louis Kaplan, *American Exposure: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 194.

²⁵⁹ Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 230.

²⁶⁰ Kimberly Middleton, “*You Gotta Chink It Up!: Asian American Performativity in the New Orientalism*,” (PhD diss., Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2003), 242.

based on the visual evidence of Lee's inclusion in each respective group, thus failing to recognize the fallacy of the photographic medium in delivering accurate representations of the subjects. He contends that critics' discussions of the main theme of Lee's work should emphasize the ways in which her work reveals the disruption between the photographic image and the lived experience of the members of the communities.²⁶¹

Hyun Joo Lee's 2008 dissertation *Staging "Fictive" Ethnicity: Asian American Performance after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965*, includes a chapter on Nikki S. Lee's *Projects*. Hyun Joo Lee notes that Lee's work suggests the limitations of visual markers in discussing one's sense of identity and belonging. While focusing on the relationship between the issues of racial and cultural identity and the city, the dissertation points out that her repeated masquerade challenges the stereotypes of Asian Americans.²⁶² In her 2010 thesis *Picturing the Asian Diaspora in North America: A Study of Liu Hung, Jin-me Yoon, and Nikki S. Lee*, Jingjing Zheng explores the idea of fluid identity in Lee's work in the context of globalization. Zheng contends that Lee resists any essentialist approach to defining racial and cultural identities while critiquing stereotypes of Asian women through her repeated role-plays.²⁶³

As illustrated above, some critics and scholars have praised Lee's *Projects* for expressing the permeability of social boundaries and the fluidity of cultural identities in an increasingly globalized world. Others have embraced Lee's work as critically engaging issues of racial and socio-cultural stereotypes. Some critics have highlighted the

²⁶¹ Thu-Mai Lewis Christian, "Mis-Taken Identities: The Photographic Conceptualization of Identity in Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* (1997-2001)," (master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 2007), 25-6.

²⁶² Hyun Joo Lee, "Staging 'Fictive' Ethnicity": *Asian American Performance after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965*," (PhD, diss., New York University, 2008), 115.

²⁶³ Jingjing Zheng, "Picturing the Asian Diaspora in North America: A Study of Liu Hung, Jin-me Yoon, and Nikki S. Lee," (master's thesis, University of Alberta), 87.

complexities and ambiguities created by the disrupted elements in her work. However, no critics have conducted an in-depth exploration of the relationship between Lee's ambiguous perspective and her new Korean immigrant experience. By examining the ways in which Lee positions herself as a new immigrant in relation to the theme of fluid cultural identity, this chapter will reveal the specific impact of Lee's Korean immigrant identity on her work. The chapter focuses on several selected series from *Projects*, including *The Tourist Project*, *The Punk Project*, *Young Japanese (East Village) Project*, *The Hispanic Project*, *The Yuppie Project*, *The Ohio Project*, *The Exotic Dancers Project*, *The Skateboarders Project*, and *The Hip-hop Project*. Rather than following a chronological order, the discussion of the selected works will be based on the significance of the work in relation to the major thesis of the chapter.

Lee's Background

Nikki S. Lee was born in 1970 in Geochang, a small rural village in the southern part of South Korea. Her given name is Seung-hee Lee. She grew up in Seoul until the age of ten when she moved back to Geochang. She spent most of her youth there until she began college in Seoul. During her youth, Lee loved cinema and wished to become an actress. Believing she was not physically attractive enough to be an actress, Lee decided to study photography, and she earned a BFA at Chung-Ang University in 1993. Struggling after graduation to choose a field for her career, the twenty four year-old Lee moved to New York in 1994 and began to study fashion photography at the Fashion Institute of Technology. Around this time Lee adopted an American name after the model Niki Taylor, whom she had seen in *Vogue* magazine. At FIT, Lee planned to work toward

a career in fashion photography, and she took a position as an intern for fashion photographer David LaChapelle. Although she enjoyed working for LaChapelle, Lee gradually lost her interest in fashion and had a strong desire to work alone on her own projects. After finishing her studies at FIT, earning an AAS in 1996, Lee decided to pursue a master's degree in fine art photography at New York University and in 1999 earned that degree.²⁶⁴

She began to work on *Projects* to fulfill an NYU curriculum requirement, and it quickly drew attention from Leslie Tonkonow, a gallerist who offered her a solo exhibition in 1999 at the Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects gallery. The exhibition garnered considerable critical acclaim. From 1997 to 2001, Lee's *Projects* focused on thirteen different social and cultural communities in the U.S. and one in Seoul, South Korea. In 2001, *Nikki S. Lee Projects* was published. Lee produced *Parts*, another series of performative photographs between 2002 and 2005. While assuming various female roles such as party girl, college girl, and business traveler, Lee shifts subjects from an individual's relationship with communities to that of romantic relationships. Each photograph features Lee with a man who is cropped out of the frame and whose presence is only suggested by a small glimpse of his body. The vestige of a male companion urges the viewer to speculate about his identity and the entire narrative of the scene. In 2005, *Nikki S. Lee Parts* was published.²⁶⁵

In 2006, Lee created a film titled *A.K.A. Nikki S. Lee*, which was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. While the film purports to be a documentary of the artist, it features Nikki One, who is serious and introverted, making a documentary about

²⁶⁴ Nikki S. Lee, interview by author via telephone, November 20, 2011.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

Nikki Two, an outgoing and ambitious artist, thus blurring the lines of what about the artist is fact, and what is fiction. In 2008, Lee created *Layers* featuring a blurred image of her own face. During her extensive travels to various cities around the world, Lee asked streets artists to draw her face on light-sensitive paper. She collected three charcoal drawings done by three different streets artists from each city. She then layered the drawings on a light box before photographing them. Lee had numerous solo exhibitions in various international exhibition venues such as Galerie Anita Beckers (Frankfurt), Gallery Gan (Tokyo), Stephen Friedman Gallery (London), the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago. Her work was included in the permanent collection of major art museums such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., the San Francisco Museum of Art, and the Fukuoka Asian Museum in Fukuoka, Japan. In 2011, Lee's first solo exhibition in South Korea was held in One & J Gallery in Seoul. Unlike her exhibitions in the U.S., her Seoul show garnered only limited critical attention. Since 2010, she has resided in Seoul, where she is working on two films. She has finished writing scenarios and plans to release her films in 2012. Lee is not performing in these films; the main character for one of her films is a Korean actress.²⁶⁶

Desiring Assimilation?

A few critics have noted the relationship between Lee's Asian immigrant identity and her work *Projects*, contending that by blending into the different communities in the U.S., Lee reflects the average immigrant's desire for inclusion. For example, Mark Godfrey states, "Lee plays with ideas about immigrant fear and the newcomer's desire to

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

blend into their environment...Lee is engaging with her own ethnic identity—her position as ‘the Korean’ is the subtext of all the images.”²⁶⁷ According to Godfrey, while Lee’s photographs express a Korean immigrant’s desire to assimilate to the new country, her immigrant status causes her to critically engage in the issues of cultural stereotypes in the U.S. On the other hand, some writers generally ascribe an Asian American identity to Lee. For example, Jingjing Zheng characterizes Lee’s position as an “Asian North American diasporic subjectivity” in the context of an increasingly globalized world. She contends that by assuming an Asian American diasporic identity, Lee resists establishing a strong affiliation with Korean culture or with racial and gender issues rooted in American culture.²⁶⁸

However, these brief discussions of the relationship between Lee’s Asian immigrant status and her artistic production gloss over Lee’s specific immigrant experience and the history of immigration in the U.S. The critics’ discussions are largely based on the rhetoric of assimilation embraced by earlier generation of Asian immigrants, or a flawed interpretation of Lee’s status as an Asian American. Rather than expressing senses of insecurity, fear, and a desire for inclusion, this chapter will argue that Lee’s *Projects* expresses a new-found confidence of the Asian immigrant in the context of changing economic, cultural, and political conditions of Asian countries in the Pacific region and their relationship to the U.S. While exploring diverse cultural groups in her new country, Lee does not focus on criticizing racism and other prevalent cultural stereotypes in U.S. society as many critics contend. In a recent interview, Lee stated, “I am not interested in the issues of racism and minority, since I was not exposed to those

²⁶⁷ Godfrey, 1.

²⁶⁸ Zheng, 25.

issues growing up in highly homogenous Korean society.”²⁶⁹ Although some critics further suggest that Lee’s work invokes the rhetoric of post-identity, it does not deeply engage the idea of overcoming racial and ethnic boundaries. As Lee asserts in numerous interviews, her work is based on the binary opposition between Eastern and Western cultures that is embedded in the discourse of Orientalism. Lee’s self-Orientalization reflects her new-found confidence in Asian culture and identity in the context of a changing world’s economic structure. On the other hand, Lee emphasizes her position as a global cosmopolitan subject who is familiar with Western culture and willing to learn about and merge with different communities. While her work appears to celebrate the crossing of boundaries, Lee’s act of cultural crossing is always limited to the superficial level. Lee’s ultimate goal in her work is not to deeply explore the experiences of others and communities, but rather to investigate her new Korean immigrant identity in a globalized contemporary world.

For all of the *Projects*, Lee selected and researched a group that interested her. Then she asked the group for permission to join them while revealing her status as an artist and explaining her project. Lee spent weeks or months with various social groups, learning their codes of dress and appearance and assuming their gestures and postures. She did all the transformations herself except for one project—*The Seniors Project*. She even changed her body type, plumping her body or shedding pounds. Simultaneously, she participated in the group’s typical activities. Once she has successfully assimilated to the group, she asked either her friend who regularly accompanies her, a passersby, or other members of the group to take snapshots of her in the group of which she has, to some extent, become a part. In many of the resulting photographs, Lee’s social and cultural

²⁶⁹ Lee, interview by author via telephone, November 20, 2011.

migrations appear successful, suggesting the permeability of identity. In *The Drag Queen Projects*, *The Skateboarders Project*, *The Punk Project*, and *The Hip-hop Project*, Lee infiltrates diverse subcultures in New York City. In *The Lesbian Project*, she appears to cross over barriers of sexual orientation. In the *Hispanic Project*, she crosses over barriers of race and ethnicity, and in the *Yong Japanese Project*, she claims nationality is permeable. In *The Ohio Project*, she transforms herself into a resident of an Ohio trailer-park, assimilating into a rural, white, American community. In *The Yuppie Project*, Lee transforms herself into a young professional on Wall Street. *The Seniors Project*, in which Lee dons a mask and joins elderly women, and *The Schoolgirls Project*, in which the artist poses with a group of uniformed teenage girls in her native Korea, appear to demonstrate that the barrier of age is also permeable.

Lee's work has often been discussed in relation to that of Cindy Sherman in that both involve an artist dressing up and participating in her own work. In the black-and-white photographs of her *Untitled Film Still* series (1977-1980), which simulates stills from movies of the 1940s and 1950s, Sherman poses for the camera in various female disguises typical of the roles played by actresses in 1950s Hollywood movies. Actresses, housewives, business women, and working-class women are all present. By repeatedly presenting herself as different types of women portrayed in Hollywood movies, Sherman proposes that female identity is fundamentally masquerade. Paralleling poststructuralist theories, Sherman's work suggests that female identity is shifting rather than essential, while simultaneously criticizing the stereotypical representations of women in popular

mass-media.²⁷⁰ While the performative aspect of Lee's work bears strong similarities to that of Sherman, Lee's work is not limited to issues of gender, but instead engages in the broader social and cultural boundaries. In addition, while Sherman's work is studio-based and focuses on her solo self-portrait, Lee takes her work out of the studio and into public contexts, engaging a wide range of communities and her relationships to them.

Lee's work bears resemblance to Adrian Piper's performance work *The Mythic Being* (1972-75). In *The Mythic Being* series, Piper performed in public places, transforming herself into a young black man in order to challenge racism and our conceptions about the other.²⁷¹ While both Piper and Lee's works involve an interaction with the public, Piper's work strongly challenges the viewer to reflect on his/her own racial stereotypes. Lee's work, by comparison, is not limited to issues of racism and racial stereotypes, and it lacks Piper's strong confrontational elements. Rather, Lee's work foregrounds on the affection and empathy created between her and the other members of the group she joined, exploring various social and cultural boundaries.

Another comparable work is Tseng Kwong Chi's project entitled *East Meets West* (1972-1990). In this work, Tseng dressed in a Mao suit, sunglasses, and an identification badge, and posed at famous landmarks and tourist sites such as the Eiffel Tower, Niagara Falls, and the Statue of Liberty. Like Lee, Tseng uses his own Asian identity to explore the subject of Orientalism and the alienation of Asian Americans in the U.S.²⁷² However, in his photographs, Tseng wears the same attire and is always alone

²⁷⁰ See, for example, Laura Mulvey, "Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977-87" in *Cindy Sherman*. October Files 6, ed. Johanna Burton (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2006), 68.

²⁷¹ John P. Bowles, "Adrian Piper as African American Artist," *American Art* 20, no. 3 (fall 2006): 111.

²⁷² Irene V. Small, "Spectacle of Invisibility: The Photography of Tseng Kwong Chi and Nikki S. Lee," *Art Asia Pacific* 28 (Oct. 2000): 50.

without much interaction with the environment, which emphasizes his status as an outsider, the Other. Lee emphasizes her empathetic relationships with people from different social and cultural backgrounds.

Lee's snapshot style and her engagement in the subcultural communities also bear resemblance to photographic works by Nan Goldin and Catherine Opie. While adopting a snapshot style, Goldin's work *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986) shows the artist's deep and intense involvement in the gay and transgendered communities in the 1980s. Opie's 1990s work employs a more formal and traditional studio portrait style to document her friends and artists in the Los Angeles and San Francisco gay, lesbian, and transgendered communities.²⁷³

In many of Lee's photographs, it is at first difficult to distinguish her from others in the group. Numerous critics laud the effect of realism conveyed in Lee's photographs. For example, RoseLee Goldberg states, "With faultless realism in her dress and manners, she made her way into various crowds."²⁷⁴ Russell Ferguson also notes, "Even after one understands the basic premise of her projects, it can still be difficult at first to distinguish Lee from the other people in the pictures."²⁷⁵ As critics have noted, Lee's keen eye for the details of the cultural norms causes the viewer to first perceive her as one of the members of the group. In addition to her ability to discern detailed cultural nuances, Lee's perfectly natural and comfortable demeanor convinces the viewer that the scene is real. More importantly, the fact that Lee actually spends weeks or months forming a real bond with the members of the community adds a realistic element to her photographs.

²⁷³ Larry Qualls, "Performance/Photography," *Performing Arts Journal* 17, no. 1 (Jan. 1995): 31.; Jean Dykstra, "Opie: The Community of Difference," *Art in America* 96 (Dec. 2008): 132.

²⁷⁴ RoseLee Goldberg, "Only Part of the Story" in *Nikki S. Lee Parts*, Nikki S. Lee (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), 50.

²⁷⁵ Ferguson, 11.

The effect of realism in Lee's work results from her adoption of the style of documentary and snapshot photographs. Documentary photography emerged in the Progressive Era in the work of artists such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine and continued during the Depression with artists such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lang. Snapshot photography had emerged in the late 1880s with the invention of the Kodak hand camera. With low cost and more advanced technology, the Brownie camera in 1900 further popularized amateur snapshot photography. Embraced at midcentury by artists such as Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand, snapshot photography encourages a spontaneous style while utilizing ordinary subject matter.²⁷⁶ In the 1960s and 1970s, Conceptual artists adopted photography as a means to record their ephemeral works and works that focus on process. Some Conceptual artists intensely and self-consciously engaged in photography, conveying complex and ambiguous narratives. Artists such as Dan Graham, Ed Ruscha, and Martha Rosler adopted the banal quality of snapshot photography to challenge the refinement of modernist photography and the supposed objectivity of documentary photography.²⁷⁷ Lee follows the tradition of these artists who challenged the traditional truth-claim embedded in documentary photography.

Drawing on Conceptualists' method of anonymity and nonchalance, Lee uses a point-and-shoot camera and allows someone else around her to take pictures of her in the group. Lee then enlarges the photographs to 21¼ by 28¼ inch C-prints for a museum exhibition. Her work features typical elements of the snapshot aesthetic, embracing

²⁷⁶ Sarah Greenough, introduction to *The Art of the American Snapshot 1888-1978*, exh. cat., by Sarah Greenough and others (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2007), 2.

²⁷⁷ Steve Edwards, "Photography out of Conceptual Art" in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, eds. Gill Perry and Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 304.

careless framing, lack of finish, and harsh flash light.²⁷⁸ Her work often shows poorly composed shots. In some photos, the figures are clumsily cut off by frames and appear to have been unready for the camera's flash, and other photos show flat and banal compositions. In the lower corner of each photograph, Lee consciously displays the conspicuous red date printout which was common to point-and-shoot cameras of the time. By embracing compositional flaws and the date stamp Lee emphasizes the casualness, spontaneity, and vernacular quality of the snapshot photograph. Lee intended her work to appear as "real" amateur snapshots to the viewer. She considers a convincing scene to be an important indicator of her successful assimilation into the groups.²⁷⁹

Lee has said that she draws on Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacral, which problematizes the ideas of authenticity and truth that photography purports to deliver.²⁸⁰ In Lee's work, the snapshot method was consciously chosen by an artist who had studied photography for ten years. Although she hands over her camera to someone else, Lee carefully selects the images for the final list from the piles of snapshots. While emphasizing the anonymity and impersonality of her photographs through the use of the snapshot aesthetic, Lee nonetheless maintains control over her photographs. Like other Conceptual artists, Lee challenges the truth-claim of documentary photography and the seeming neutrality of snapshot photography even while employing these modes herself.

In her work, Lee appears to prove visually that her social and cultural migrations are successful and to celebrate the permeability of identity. In the *Hispanic Project* (1) (1998) (Fig. 24), Lee poses with a group of Latina girls at New York City's Puerto Rican

²⁷⁸ Sarah Greenough, 1.

²⁷⁹ Lee, interview by author, November 20, 2011.

²⁸⁰ Ibid. In the interview, Lee stated that prior to undertaking *Projects*, she read books by Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes and became interested in the idea of copy and original and fake and real.

Parade. Lee is wearing a white top, large golden hoop earrings, necklaces, and false nails, and applying dark lip liner, imitating the other girls in the group. For this project Lee tattooed her breast and wore a heavy gold name plate of her adopted Latina name, Genie. She had her skin tanned and hair dyed brown, and she wore a brown ponytail hair extension to match the other girls. She seems to have gained weight for this project in an attempt to cover her petite stature. Confidently mirroring the postures and facial expressions of those around her, the artist appears to be completely at home in the milieu. In another photo (2) (Fig. 25), Lee poses with another Latina girl while mingled in a crowd. Lee is staring at the camera, with her left hand on her waist and the other resting on the stone wall. The Latina girl is similarly looking at the camera and resting her right arm on the wall. In addition to mirroring the girl's stern, aggressive facial expression, Lee is also wearing a revealing white top, large earrings and necklaces, as well as long curly hair matching that of the other subject. In *The Punk Project* (1) (Fig. 26), Lee poses with a group of young men in St. Mark's Place in the East Village. These boys are wearing studded leather jackets, with spiked hair colored with unnatural red, green, and brown dyes. Lee also dyed her hair red and wore a studded leather motorcycle jacket and shredded tights over patterned tights which are similar to red plaid pants worn by the two men next to her. Holding the arms of two of the men while leaning on the man to her right, she appears to be comfortable and relaxed. In another photo (2) (Fig. 27), Lee is with three young men who are pressed together. They look dazed, possibly due to drug use. She is standing near the back with a cigarette in her right hand, copying the man next to her while cradling the head of another man. Just like the man next to her, she has a pierced lip. She is wearing a spiked chain around her neck and dark brown makeup

mirroring the man at the far right. The unfocused look on the man's face is also evident on Lee's face. With her convincing facial expressions and bodily gestures, Lee appears to fit in with the punk community.

In *The Seniors Project*, with the aid of a professional make-up artist and a wig, she transforms herself into an elderly woman. In one photo (10) (Fig. 28), Lee poses with an elderly woman in front of an apartment building. Both are wearing black sunglasses and bags across their chests. In another photo (19) (Fig. 29), Lee is sitting on a bench with a group of elderly women, wearing glasses, a baggy jacket, and comfortable shoes, mirroring the women next to her. Lee's ability to blend in was so successful in *The Seniors Project* that some of the elderly women, when told that she was a young artist, believed that her youth was a delusion caused by dementia. In *The Schoolgirls Project*, Lee poses with a group of high school girls at a toy store, a fast food restaurant, and on a school bench. The series was done in South Korea while she was visiting in 2000. Lee did not have to overcome racial and ethnic barriers in this series and the school dress code helped the artist easily blend in with the teen-agers. In one photograph (22) (Fig. 30), Lee is sitting with a group of girls on a bench at school, intimately chatting with a girl next to her while looking at her cellular phone. Like the other girls, she is wearing a dark blue jacket, a grey knee-high skirt, and black stockings. Copying the girl next to her, Lee has her hair down and her leg is crossed. Her innocent facial expression and the sense of intimacy between her and the other girls make the scene appear completely natural.

Actively participating in their daily activities Lee actually developed a degree of camaraderie with some of the groups. For *The Skateboarders Project*, Lee had to learn to

skateboard and ended up skinning her knees and scraping her arms. She states that the project was the most physically challenging.²⁸¹ For *The Ohio Project*, Lee spent a summer in a mid-western community, visiting a trailer park, residential houses, and community festivals. For *The Seniors Project*, she had to walk around the street in the summer wearing thick makeup. Lee states that when she approached people and introduced herself as an artist, most of them welcomed her. She enjoyed swing dance when she learned it for *The Swingers Project* and continued to dance after the project was finished.

By visually proving an artist's successful assimilation into different social and cultural groups, Lee's work seems to invoke the notion of "postethnicity." David Hollinger presents the concept of postethnicity in his 1995 book *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. Focusing on the racial and ethnic formation in the U.S., Hollinger contends that we are approaching a "postethnic America," and he calls for a civic nation that all members of communities can join regardless of their ethnic heritage. He argues that the discourse of multiculturalism focuses too much on the differences between members of racial and ethnic groups and that we need to move beyond ethnicity. He contends that the idea of postethnicity allows for broad and voluntary affiliations between ethnic communities, rather than the limited solidarities afforded by communities of multiculturalism. The notion emphasizes one's broad, voluntary, and multiple community affiliations. It perceives our ethnic and racial affiliations as simply one of many affiliations we make, advocating affinity over identity and choice over destiny.²⁸²

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 7.

A New Asian Immigrant

While seemingly demonstrating her successful membership in the groups, Lee's work simultaneously reveals her distanced, disengaged attitude toward her subject. Her distanced attitude is marked by a temporary and superficial engagement in the groups, a disinterested posture and composition, as well as a disinterest in the specific material history of the groups. Lee's distanced attitude is inextricably linked to her experience as a recent Asian immigrant in the U.S. In an interview, Lee states that she does not consider herself Asian American but rather Korean only. Lee rejects the idea that her work engages issues of race, ethnicity, or gender, arguing that she is interested in the multiple possibilities of expressing her own subjectivity.²⁸³ While the first large-scale Asian immigration took place in the mid-nineteenth century with the gold rush, the second large scale influx of Asian immigrants started in the mid 1960s with the new immigration law that eliminated quotas based on national origin. The liberalization of immigration policies resulted from the shifting economic and political conditions in the U.S and worldwide. At the domestic level, the civil rights movement challenged racism embedded in U.S. immigration policies, and the shortage of educated labor forced the government to adopt a new stance on immigration. More importantly, in the context of Cold War politics, the U.S. needed to maintain its image as the leader of the free world. In addition, changes in the relationship between the U.S. and Asian countries led to the relaxation of immigration policies toward Asians. The rise of U.S. military activities and multinational corporations in Asian countries likewise influenced on the passage of the new immigration act. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 allowed for the annual entry of 170,000 immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere and 120,000 from the

²⁸³ Lee, interview by author, November 20, 2011.

Western Hemisphere. The law gave preference to family members, professionals and artists, skilled and unskilled laborers, and refugees.²⁸⁴ As a result, the number of Asian Americans in the U.S. dramatically increased from one million in 1965 to five million in 1985. Prior to 1965, Europeans accounted for the majority of immigrants to the U.S, but by the 1980s Asian immigrants constituted about thirty-eight percent of the total legal immigration to the U.S. In addition to the increased number of Asian immigrants, the new law resulted in the ethnic diversification of the Asian American population. While prior to 1965 Asian immigrants came mostly from China, Japan, and the Philippines, the new immigration act brought about the entry of Asian immigrants from South Korea, India, Vietnam, and the Pacific Islands, which were formerly numerically marginal groups. While U.S.-born and educated Asians had accounted for about two-thirds of the Asian American population, the new immigration law meant that by 1980 seventy three percent of the Asian American population was foreign-born. The new law also brought about the entry of a high number of educated professionals, managers, and entrepreneurs.²⁸⁵

While a small number of Korean people arrived in American in the late 1880s, the first wave of Korean immigration to the U.S. began in 1903 when 120 people came to Hawaii to work in sugar plantations. In the following two years, more than 7,200 Koreans emigrated to Hawaii. Although the first wave of Korean immigration stopped in 1905 when it was banned by the Japanese colonial government, an additional 2,000 Koreans came to Hawaii and California by 1924, many seeking to escape the devastating

²⁸⁴ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, 419.

²⁸⁵ Arif Dirlik, "Asians on the Rim: Transnational Capital and Local Community in the Making of Contemporary Asian America," 10.

economic conditions of the Choson Dynasty or the oppression of Japanese colonialism. Considered “cheap labor,” these Korean migrants had to endure difficult conditions and harsh treatment by the plantation owners. Koreans were also subjected to a series of exclusive laws enacted by the U.S. The 1907-08 Gentlemen’s Agreement restricted Japanese immigration and Koreans who were considered to be Japanese nationals under colonialism. The Immigration Act of 1917 or The Asiatic Exclusion Act barred entry of immigrants from Asiatic Barred Zone, which included most East Asian countries and the Pacific Islands. The Immigration Act of 1924 further restricted the entry of immigrants from East Asia. The next major influx of Korean immigration took place between 1961 and 1979 during Park’s military dictatorship. While farmers and the working class previously constituted the majority of immigrants, the second wave of Korean immigration was marked by the entry of the college-educated middle class and professionals.²⁸⁶ Post-1965 Korean immigration rapidly increased until the early years of the 21st century with the exception of the 1990s. The Korean American population has experienced dramatic growth from 70,000 in 1970 to 1.1 million in 2000.²⁸⁷

In an increasingly globalized world, the new immigrants generally adopt a cosmopolitan perspective which suggests a broad understanding of cultural differences. With rapid global transportation and communications they can easily gain multicultural experiences and multinational ties, leading to a positive attitude toward foreign cultures. On the other hand, many of the newer Asian immigrants tend to maintain distinctive cultural and religious heritages, believing that their roots are in Asia. With the improved social and economic conditions in their home countries, the educated professionals often

²⁸⁶ Takaki, 272.

²⁸⁷ Pyong Gap Min, “Korean Americans” in *Asian Americans: Contemporary Trends and Issues*, ed. Pyong Gap Min (Thousand Oaks, California and London: Pine Forge Press, 2006), 234.

plan for a temporary stay in the U.S. Even after deciding to permanently reside in America, some new immigrants still relocate to their home country. For them, the U.S. is simply one of many possible places to reside.²⁸⁸ Globalization has enabled new immigrants to have a closer relationship to societies of Asian origin. Improvements in international air travel make it feasible to have regular trips between the home and the host countries. Advanced telecommunications technology and mass media help new immigrants to maintain strong ties to their home languages and cultures while distancing themselves from their immediate environments in the U.S., including other minority groups. While some new immigrants may find it easier to adjust to life in the U.S. than earlier groups did, due to their exposure to American culture in their globalized home countries, they often do not strive to assimilate. Rather, they proudly maintain their connection to their own culture while selectively adding a new culture from the host country. The experiences of new immigrants challenge traditional domestic perspectives of Asian American identity based on the assimilationist model, thus blurring the distinction between Asian American and Asian identity categories.²⁸⁹

Although Lee had been familiar with American culture growing up in South Korea, she had limited knowledge of the myriad subcultural scenes present in America when she came to the U.S. in 1994. She learned about American popular culture through films and T.V. shows. Language was another obstacle in the way of becoming a full member of her target groups. Lee's distanced position as a new immigrant is closely tied to her temporary and superficial engagement in the chosen communities. Except for a few series, Lee's *Projects* were undertaken in her neighborhood in lower Manhattan, and she

²⁸⁸ Sau-Ling C. Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," 6.

²⁸⁹ Dirlik, 10.

could easily commute between her residence and the target communities. Lee never stayed in one group for more than several months and quickly moved to other groups. For the first two or three series, she spent the least amount of time with the groups. She has commented that, although she enjoyed spending time with them, she was not able to maintain friendships with them once each project was completed.²⁹⁰ Despite the apparent camaraderie shown in the photographs, Lee never intended to become deeply engaged in the groups. Her temporary membership and the shallow engagement in the groups undermine the verity of her lived experience with them. Lee's interest in the subject of various communities and their cultures lacks intensity and depth. While her use of snapshot style resembles that of Nan Goldin, Lee's work does not offer Goldin's trademark emotional intimacy. Lee states, "I can see how to make a picture romantic, like a Nan Goldin, but I don't want that, I want something more raw."²⁹¹ For another example, Catherine Opie's portrayal of the subcultural communities is marked by her intimate relationships with the subjects and her attempt to represent the pain and struggle of these marginalized groups. While Lee's work shows her submersion into various communities, it fails to show the feelings of intense intimacy.

The Tourist Project epitomizes Lee's stance as a new, cosmopolitan immigrant. While the use of term "cosmopolitanism" traces back to ancient Greece, it gained a new significance in the late twentieth century. Despite its flexible usage, the term generally denotes a reflective distance from restrictive forms of identity, a broad understanding of other cultures, and a belief in universal humanity. It also suggests mobility, and multiple,

²⁹⁰ Lee, interview by author, November 20, 2011.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

voluntary affiliations.²⁹² The term enjoys great popularity in the context of contemporary globalization. Globalization generated massive cultural flows across national borders, intensifying not only the exchanges of goods, images, and information, but also mass tourism and global migration. As a result, many people adopt cosmopolitan perspectives, being attentive to the diversity of cultures and worldwide events. These cosmopolitans tend to free themselves from their rooted identities characterized by their familial, cultural, and national loyalties. The cosmopolitan perspective is mostly shaped by travel experiences and exposure to different cultures. Thus, cosmopolitans are generally perceived as global travelers. In *Projects*, Lee travels through various social and cultural communities, immersing herself in the life of the chosen community. She then captures her adventures in snapshots. For a traveler, taking pictures is a highly important activity, since snapshots are the souvenir that accounts for his/her travel experience, and they are also the evidence of the authenticity of the travel experience. Lee's snapshots are the evidence of her authentic experience with the members of the group. Her engagement in the snapshot aesthetic is closely tied to her sense of being a global cosmopolitan immigrant. She states, "Most people only have snapshots when they go traveling. They don't really take a look at the details."²⁹³ Her goal in *Projects* was thus not a deep engagement with different communities.

Lee began *The Tourist Project* three years after she arrived in the U.S. She was a foreign traveler who was eager to learn about and experience different cultures, and she intended to return home after she earned her degree. In this series she did not have to

²⁹² Bruce Robbins, "Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism" in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1.

²⁹³ Gilbert Vicario, "Conversation with Nikki S. Lee" in *Nikki S. Lee Projects*, ed. Lesley A. Martin (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2001), 103.

enact others since she was in fact a traveler. In the series, Lee visits the typical tourist sites in New York City such as the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, and Rockefeller Center. In one photograph (13) (Fig. 31), she stands in front of the Statue of Liberty, raising her arm to mimic the Statue's upraised arm and torch. She is wearing sunglasses and outfits herself in a "New York" T-shirt, shorts, and tennis shoes. She is carrying both a backpack and a fanny pack, and a Nikon camera draped over her neck. The Statue of Liberty in the background is cut off at the neck, making Lee the focal point of the photograph. Proudly smiling for the camera, she is presented as a typical Asian tourist who is showing off her encounter with the famous tourist site. By mirroring the Statue's raised arm and torch, she appears to celebrate her own mobility and freedom as a cosmopolitan traveler, while celebrating the American ideal of freedom associated with this monument. In doing so, she appears to distance herself from the painful material history of Asian immigration, which nevertheless disrupts this image. In another photo (10) (Fig. 32), Lee poses for the camera on a crowded observation deck of the Empire State Building. She looks at the camera confidently, with her left hand resting on coin-operated binoculars and her right hand on her waist. She is wearing sunglasses, a "New York" T-shirt, and a backpack, and is carrying the same Nikon camera. Unlike typical tourists who tend to pose in front of the great view of the city of Manhattan offered by the 86th-floor observation deck of the New York's iconic building, she is posing amidst the crowd looking into the binoculars in an attempt to get a better view of the cityscape. The upper half of the photograph is filled with somewhat dull curved white fences. Rather than expressing enthusiasm and curiosity about the site typical of tourist, the composition and Lee's pose and gaze in the photograph show a disinterested attitude of a global

tourist who is already familiar with the images of these famous sites. Tourists always compare the newly visited site with their previous experiences at home or at other tourist sites.²⁹⁴ Growing up in Seoul, a global city with a population of over ten million, Lee was accustomed to seeing soaring skyscrapers. In this photograph, Lee is not engaged in capturing a great view of the site, but rather in displaying her confident Asian presence in a foreign site. In another photograph (9) (Fig. 33), Lee poses with three white female tourists in front of Rockefeller Center. They wear similar white sneakers, socks, and shorts. Lee and another woman standing in the center are both wearing fanny packs. The other two women wrap their sweaters around their waists. They are smiling for the camera. The woman at the far right is wearing a “South Dakota” T-shirt. Lee’s wide smile indicates a celebration of arriving at another tourist site and encountering white tourists. The flags of United Nations members flown outside Rockefeller Center enhance her role as a cosmopolitan traveler. She is the only Asian among the group and is holding free pamphlets. By affiliating with white travelers rather than with a group of Asian tourists, Lee presents herself as a cosmopolitan traveler who emphasizes a universal humanism, world citizenship, and a loosened bond with her nation and ethnicity. While expressing a cosmopolitan sensibility, Lee— along with the group— casually blocks the fountain and an art deco style bronze-gilded Prometheus sculpture, which is a tourist highlight. Lee reveals the upbeat and uncritical attitude typical of a cosmopolitan traveler. On the other hand, by posing with white tourists, Lee emphasizes her Asian identity and her confidence as an Asian.

²⁹⁴ Rhona Jackson, “Converging Cultures: Conversing Gazes” in *The Media and the Tourist Imagination: Converging Cultures*, eds. David Crouch, Rhona Jackson, and Felix Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2005), 191.

In *The Exotic Dancer Project* Lee adventures into the life of strippers in adult entertainment clubs. For this project, after explaining her art project to the manager, Lee was allowed to work in a suburban Connecticut strip club for two weeks. She lost weight to get a better body shape.²⁹⁵ In this series, Lee features herself as completely relaxed and comfortable in the role of the stripper. One photograph (4) (Fig. 34) shows Lee in a pink bikini checking her buttocks in the mirror before going on stage. In another photo (31) (Fig. 36), Lee is in a dressing room making a phone call. She is in a metallic silver bikini with her hair up, holding a cigarette. In another photo (23) (Fig. 35), she is relaxed backstage at the club with her breasts exposed. Wearing heavy makeup, she rests her legs on the table while holding a cigarette. She is looking sideways toward the camera, expressing her exhaustion caused by the harsh working schedule of a stripper. While seemingly comfortable with the role of an exotic dancer, Lee never smiles in these photographs, revealing her distanced attitude. A group of photographs emphasizes the sense of friendship and solidarity between her and her fellow dancers. One photo (29) (Fig. 37) shows Lee posing with a white co-worker in front of the club, dressed in street clothes. Wearing heavy makeup, the white girl has a wide grin on her face, but Lee's face is stern. Another photo (13) (Fig. 38) shows Lee with her white co-worker, shopping for outfits. While in this group of photographs Lee focuses on the camaraderie between her and her fellow dancers, her stern facial expression reveals the distance between her and the white dancers.

Lee's assumption of the identity of a stripper or sex laborer serving white men invokes the history of Korean military brides. The presence of the U.S. military in Korea after the severance of the country in 1945 caused a massive sex industry around U.S.

²⁹⁵ Nikki S. Lee, interview by author via telephone, February 29, 2012.

camp towns. Stigmatized as “Yankee whores,” who sold their bodies for foreign men in a patriarchal Korean society, they tried to escape the social condemnation as well as their grim economic conditions by marrying U.S. service men. Those women who were associated with and married to U.S. service men also received a similar stigmatization. However, upon arriving in America, they often faced additional marginalization and discrimination particularly inflicted on Asian immigrants in the U.S. These women are paradoxically labeled both as victims of U.S. neocolonialism and a national shame. While they constitute a majority of Korean immigrants who came to the U.S. after the Korean War, their presence and stories have been suppressed in the history of Korean American immigrants.²⁹⁶ By indulging in the role of a highly sexual Asian stripper, Lee appears to distance herself from the specific experiences of Korean American women in the U.S.

In the *Hip-Hop Project* Lee explores a subcultural group in an attempt to show she can successfully become a part of the community. For this project, Lee asked her friend who was a hip-hop musician to introduce her to the hip-hop community in New York. Lee has said that, as with other people she worked with, most members of this group showed a strong interest in her art project and welcomed her warmly.²⁹⁷ Hip-hop as an American subculture emerged in the 1970s from marginalized African American and Puerto Rican youth in the Bronx, New York. The four elements that characterize hip-hop include rapping (MCing), DJing, graffiti art and break dancing.²⁹⁸ Rap music is considered to have inherited African oral tradition that dates back to slavery. Hip-hop typically expresses the urban condition of African American youth and their resistance to

²⁹⁶ Elaine H. Kim, “Bad Women”: Asian American Visual Artists Hanh This Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min,” 577.

²⁹⁷ Lee, interview by author via telephone, February 29, 2012.

²⁹⁸ Jeff Chang, “It’s a Hip-Hop World,” *Foreign Policy* 163 (Nov/Dec. 2007): 61.

the dominant culture. Numerous youth groups of all ethnic backgrounds have absorbed and appropriated hip-hop music to express their identities. Early Asian American rap groups such as the Seoul Brothers, Fists of Fury, and Yellow Peril focused on addressing issues in their own ethnic communities while the younger generation rappers such as Key Kool and Mountain Brothers dealt with more diverse themes in their songs.²⁹⁹ Beginning in the 1980s, hip-hop rapidly expanded to other countries, turning into a huge global phenomenon.³⁰⁰

In *The Hip-hop Project*, by inserting her Asian identity into African American hip-hop community, Lee challenges the notion of hip-hop as an authentic black cultural expression. She celebrates the elusiveness of racial identity, proposing that hip-hop is a global phenomenon that does not exclude individuals on the basis of race, nation, or class. For *The Hip-Hop Project*, Lee changed her hair color and texture, tanned her skin, and sported the typical dress and make-up of African American hip-hop musicians that she probably had seen in hip-hop music shows and videos. *The Hip-Hop Project* (1) (Fig. 41) features Lee sitting in the back of a limousine with four African American youth. Two of them are the successful African American rap duo Mobb Deep, whom the artist met through her friend.³⁰¹ The group is crammed into a car and the frame cuts off all the figures except for Lee. Lee wears a revealing black dress and sits between the legs of a man, leaning her head to her left. The man is wrapping his arm around her waist while pointing toward the camera, making a gesture typical of a hip-hop musician. Lee wears a wig of straight blond hair, a white bandanna, and heavy makeup, while holding

²⁹⁹ Oliver Wang, "Between the Notes: Finding Asian American in Popular Music," *American Music* 19, no.4 (winter 2001): 458.

³⁰⁰ Chang, 62.

³⁰¹ Lee, interview by author, February 29, 2012.

up her trendy sunglasses. The bodies that are crowded in the frame, touching one another, and Lee's comfortable demeanor suggest a sense of solidarity in the group. However, this solidarity is undermined by Lee's indifferent facial expressions. Unlike other members of the group she looks dazed with her lips parted. Additionally, her body is somewhat awkwardly positioned between the legs of the man and in the center of the picture. Lee's stiff body posture is emphasized by the gesturing hand of the man, the reflective glare of her belt, and the camera flash highlighting Lee's tanned facial skin; Lee seems to be disconnected from the rest of the group.

By inserting herself as an Asian woman into the numerous scenes of hip-hop communities, Lee alludes to an Asian and Asian American embrace of hip-hop culture and the spirit of hip-hop that connects young people all around the world. Lee celebrates hip-hop as a globalized popular cultural form that embraces all racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. However, Lee's celebration of the hip-hop community as a hybrid cultural and racial scene is disrupted by the specific history of racial tension between African Americans and Asian Americans. In the musical space of hip-hop, Los Angeles rap artist Ice Cube addressed the real-life problems of interracial conflict. Ice Cube produced a song titled "Black Korea" in 1991 after a Korean American grocery owner named Soon Ja Du shot and killed a fifteen year-old African American girl named Latasha Harlins during a dispute over a bottle of juice. The song illustrates a confrontation between Ice Cube and Korean American grocery owners, furiously condemning them as "Oriental, one-penny counting" shop owners. His rap continues, "Don't follow me up and down your crazy little market, or your little chop suey ass will be the target of a nationwide

boycott.”³⁰² Ice Cube’s song caused a huge controversy in the African American and Korean American communities.

The tension between Korean merchants and African American urban residents has been an ongoing problem. In 1990, a dispute between a Haitian born resident in Flatbush, a community in Brooklyn, New York, and a Korean American grocery manager turned to a citywide boycott of the two Korean American groceries that lasted sixteen months. The Red Apple and Church Fruits boycott also caused smaller boycotts in the area. During the Red Apple Grocery boycott, many young African Americans used rap to express their antipathy for Asians. Rappers such as Queen Mother Rage and Chubb Rock directly expressed feelings of anger and resentment toward Asians.³⁰³

Ice Cube's narrative in his song “Black Korea” foreshadowed the violence that took place in Los Angeles in 1992. A few weeks before the killing of Latasha Harlins, an African American man named Rodney King was beaten by four white L.A. police officers while being arrested for a speeding violation. In the following year, a not-guilty verdict was announced for the four police officers, which was followed by a probation sentence for Soon Ja Du. These two incidents were two of the main catalysts for the L.A. riots led by African Americans in South Central L.A. Expressing their anger, African Americans began to burn and loot Korean American businesses. During the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, hundreds of African Americans looted Korean markets.

With the deindustrialization of urban areas in 1970s America, African Americans in South Central Los Angeles had experienced job loss and increasing poverty. As Korean Americans had mostly replaced Jews, Chinese, and Japanese as operators of

³⁰² Quoted in Jeff Chang, “Race, Class, Conflict and Empowerment: On Ice Cube’s ‘Black Korea,’” *Amerasia Journal* 19, no. 2 (1993): 87.

³⁰³ Ibid.

small businesses in the African American urban neighborhoods, African Americans suffering from poverty and racism developed a sense of resentment towards Korean shop owners. African Americans felt exploited since these Korean American stores sold products to black consumers, but seldom hired blacks and often treated them rudely. Many poor African American consumers had to rely on these stores in their communities, even while feeling hostile toward the Asian shop owners.³⁰⁴

While in Korea, Lee was familiar with American popular music and Korean hip-hop musicians appropriating the African American hip-hop style. However, she has stated that “I am not Korean American so I don’t have all the problems and issues about race that other Americans do.”³⁰⁵ Positioning herself as a new immigrant, she refuses to engage in the deeper political meanings of the hip-hop culture and issues of racial tensions between African American and Asian communities.

In *The Ohio Project* (1999), Lee explores the white lower and middle class residents of the suburban Midwest. She has said that as someone born in a relatively rural area in South Korea, she was always curious to know about rural America. For this project, she simply picked state of Ohio because one of her friends had a relative living there. After getting some information about the area, she went to a village in Ohio and approached strangers. According to her, everyone she asked to take a picture with welcomed her.³⁰⁶ In *The Ohio Project* (8) (Fig. 45), Lee is trying to blend into a poor trailer park community. Lee is wearing a pink cutoff T-shirt, flip-flops, denim shorts, and a headband, and her hair is dyed blond. She is standing confidently at the door of a trailer home while holding the edges of the door. A camouflage jacket is hung on the wall next

³⁰⁴ Takaki, 495.

³⁰⁵ Lee, interview by author, November 20, 2011.

³⁰⁶ Lee, interview by author, February 29, 2012.

to her. Another photo (9) (Fig. 46) shows a white woman at the doorstep of a trailer home, together with a similarly dressed Lee. The ripped rug placed on the ground and the broken pipe next to the mobile home suggest poor living conditions. While Lee is lying on the doorstep, the white woman is sitting with legs closed and hands on her lap. Lee seems to emphasize her comfortable feelings and relaxed attitude, but the white woman's stiff body posture and her artificial smile disrupt the sense of solidarity between her and the artist-visitor. In another photo (6) (Fig. 47), Lee is posing for the camera with a white man. She is lying down, supporting her head with her hand on the hood of a yellow car parked in front of a middle class house. The man is standing next to her and leaning against the car, wearing a cap and a mustache. Lee is wearing similar shorts, a T-shirt, and a headband, and is confidently looking into the camera. In contrast to Lee's relaxed and confident demeanor, the white man's facial expression is somewhat artificial and he is shyly standing with his hands and legs together. The photograph shows a sense of distance between them.

Another photo (7) (Fig. 48) features Lee posing with a white man in a living room. She is wearing a strapless top, shorts, and a headband with bleached blond hair and is sitting on the arm of an armchair. The white bearded man is wearing a white T-shirt, denim pants, and brown leather boots. Lee is leaning toward the man, neutrally looking at the camera. The man is holding a shotgun and looking sideways toward the gun. His face looks tense. Beer cans and an opened potato chip bag are placed on the coffee table in front of them. Behind them hanging on the wall is a Confederate flag with the slogan "I AIN'T COMING DOWN." In this project, Lee attempts to cross over into the heart of whiteness, providing these photographs as tentative proof of her inclusion into a rural

white community. However, her characteristic Asian physical traits and her somewhat stiff facial expression as well as the white man's stern face disrupt the sense of assimilation. In addition, the potential for violence suggested by the shotgun and the history of racism indicated by the Confederate flag seem to undermine the idea of a mutable, fluid identity. Lee's otherness as an Asian woman is apparent, and the unrealistic scene in which an Asian woman is comfortably sitting next to a white man with a gun and a Confederate flag points to the impossibility of crossing over certain racial and social barriers in contemporary American society.

Lee has said that she explained her art project to this man, asking him to pose with her. He reportedly invited Lee into his living room where she found the Confederate flag on the wall and a shotgun. Lee then asked him to hold the gun for the camera. Lee was not aiming to engage the specific history of racism in the U.S., but instead superficially adopted visual cues of the members of the community she encountered.³⁰⁷ Even while glossing over the specific history pertaining to the community, Lee reveals the exclusivity of a particular group and impenetrability of identity.

In *The Young Japanese (east village) Project*, Lee attempts to blend into a young Japanese hipster community. The series features Lee with the young, stylish Japanese girls and boys that inhabit the East Village in New York. The East Village has been considered the artistic and musical center of New York, a community of cultural diversity, bohemian life, and cutting-edge fashion. Lee's project shows her blending into the lives of young Japanese hipsters in the East Village. Hipsters are characterized by their eclectic style of clothing that appropriates various styles of subcultures.³⁰⁸ In one

³⁰⁷ Lee, interview by author, November 20, 2011.

³⁰⁸ David E. James, "L.A.'s Hipster Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 63, no.1 (fall 2009): 58.

photograph (1) (Fig. 49), Lee dyed her hair blond and is seen hanging out with Japanese girls wearing funky clothing. They are smiling for the camera. Lee is wearing a red sweater, a scarf, and a red headband. One girl with green hair is wearing a green backpack and has a chained strap slung over her shoulder. Another girl with heavy makeup and partially bleached hair is wearing a black bikini top, a green mini skirt, and long boots. In another photograph (10) (Fig. 50), a green-haired Lee is at a Japanese restaurant with stylish Japanese young men. One is wearing a black hat and red scarf, and the other is in a purple silk shirt, holding a cigarette. It is difficult for the viewer to recognize Lee as distinct from the girls and boys with whom she is pictured. Lee appears to be completely at home with the group in the milieu of the New York City hipster subculture.

Lee proves in this milieu of liberal and diverse cultural communities that she can easily cross over the barrier of nationality. For American audiences, the solidarity between Lee and the Japanese hipsters seems highly convincing. For them, the Japanese and Koreans look quite similar, while for both Japanese and Koreans, it is easy to discern physical differences. For Americans, these two communities are similarly grouped as “Asian American” with similar immigration histories.

However, Lee’s successful assimilation into the young Japanese hipster community is complicated by the colonial history of Korea. From the perspective of colonization of Korea by the Japanese from 1910 to 1945, assuming a Japanese identity presents a loaded subject. Lee’s assimilation into the Japanese community refers to the Japanese assimilation policy during colonization. Under the assimilation policy, Koreans were forced to speak Japanese and to adopt Japanese names. The goal of the assimilation policy was not to incorporate Korean people as equal to Japanese citizens, but to

eradicate Korean culture and identity.³⁰⁹ Despite the normalization of relations in 1965 and increasing cultural and economic exchanges between the two nations, anti-Japanese sentiments stemming from thirty-six years of Japanese colonization persists for the Korean people. While celebrating a hipster culture that bonds young people across the globe through fashion, Lee distances herself from the history of Korean colonization and the ambivalent feelings of Korean people about the Japanese.

In *The Yuppie Project*, Lee seeks to be part of a group of young professionals in the financial world of Manhattan. In one photo (17) (Fig. 51), Lee is posing with two white male colleagues while eating lunch. They are sitting with their lunches on their laps. Lee is wearing a red turtleneck sweater and a simple grey suit, while her male companions are in dark business suits. Although she is positioned in the center of the picture, the tilted ground and her position behind the two men along with her small body size isolate Lee in relation to the other members of the community. The two men are smiling, but Lee is stiffly looking at the camera. Her uneasy facial expression further disconnects her from the rest of the group. Another photo (14) (Fig. 52) features Lee in an office. The office is occupied predominantly by male colleagues. The man sitting on the left of the picture turns his back toward the camera and is engaging in a conversation with another man in a light grey business suit. Another man behind them is working on a computer and the other two men far behind Lee are engaged in conversation. There is only one other female worker in the office; she stands and talks with a man across her desk. Lee is wearing a blue shirt and a dark blue suit. Her coat is resting over the chair and papers are scattered on the desk. Her hair is short and business-like, parted at the

³⁰⁹ Mark E. Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*, 81.

front. No one is sitting in the chairs next to hers, making Lee isolated from the rest of the group. While she is posing for the camera and looking directly into it, her passively clasped hands on her lap and her stiff facial expression undermine the typically confident demeanor of Wall Street professionals.

Indulging in Popular Stereotypes

Another element that creates a sense of distance between Lee and community members in her photos is her indulgence in the stereotypes of the communities. Lee selects social and cultural groups characterized by idiosyncratic stereotypes. Simultaneously, Lee often embraces existing gender stereotypes as related to the selected groups. Although Lee argues that she is not invested in issues of race or a social critique of prevalent cultural stereotypes, it is undeniable that her work involves cultural stereotypes as the main framework. While Lee's blending into the subcultural communities appears to be highly convincing, her depiction of the communities is based on pre-existing mass media images of those groups that frequently appear in TV programs, films, and advertisements.³¹⁰ This section will reintroduce a few of the projects to examine Lee's use of stereotypes.

For example, while *The Lesbian Project* involves more intimate relationships between the artist and the members of the community, it is largely based on the visual markers of stereotypes of the community. *The Lesbian Project* explores issues of normative heterosexuality. The series shows Lee as a typical "butch" lesbian with short hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and men's clothes. In one photo (3) (Fig. 54), she is wearing a leather jacket and posing with her partner on a balcony. She puts her left arm around the

³¹⁰ Lee, interview by author, November 20, 2011.

partner's shoulder and uses her right arm to pull her partner's arm toward her. The partner is leaning toward Lee while passively looking at the camera. In another photo (11) (Fig. 55), she is holding a beer bottle with her left hand and a cigarette with her right hand. She is looking directly at the camera with her legs spread. In a series of more intimate photos (5) (Fig. 56), (6) (Fig. 57), (4) (Fig. 58), (15) (Fig. 59) Lee is wearing a men's sleeveless undershirt, revealing a tattoo on her right arm, while lounging with her partner on the sofa or helping her partner remove her pants. In another photo (14) (Fig. 60) in the series, the couple is kissing, tongues in each other's mouths. Accompanied by stereotypical visual cues, the banal, closely-cropped image of the couple kissing fails to render any intense emotional attachment between them.

Some photos from *The Hispanic Projects* also draw on the popular stereotypes. In one photo (17) (Fig. 61) Lee is frowning and holding a Hispanic infant while putting out laundry in the backyard of a dilapidated apartment building in a section of poor Spanish Harlem. Two Hispanic girls are standing around in the back. More interconnected clotheslines are shown behind her, suggesting the ill-equipped laundry facilities and a lack of privacy in the neighborhood. In another photo (18) (Fig. 62), she engages in a conversation with neighbors outside of a tenement apartment complex. Two Hispanic girls are peering out an open window. The sidewalk is crowded with people, indicating a poor air-conditioning system in the apartment. A group of men is sitting at a table playing poker. More people are sitting on the stairs in front of the apartment door or standing while in conversation. Lee's focus on the poor and overcrowded neighborhood in Spanish Harlem is based on the mass-media stereotypical portrayal of Hispanics as

being poor and of low socioeconomic class.³¹¹ Another photo (Fig. 63) shows Lee eating a hamburger at McDonalds. Two Hispanic girls are eating at the table next to Lee's. She appears to be with a child, since there are two soda cups on the table and the handle of a kid's meal box is shown in the photograph. Lee is wearing a revealing black top and large golden earrings. She has her hair up and her nails are painted red. She is eating intently. Showing Hispanic families dining at a cheap fast food restaurant, Lee draws on the stereotypes of Hispanics as being from a lower socioeconomic class.

Lee's photographs also rely on widely-circulated gender stereotypes. One photo from *The Hispanic Project* (27)(Fig. 64) features Lee with two Hispanic men leaning against a railing at a beach. The two men are wearing shorts, revealing their bare upper bodies. Lee is wearing shorts and a light green bikini top exposing a rose tattoo on her breast and donning a gold name plate with her Latina name, Genie. A slightly rotund Hispanic man is smiling and lifting Lee's thigh toward him, showing a tattoo on his right arm. Another man is perched on the railing holding a boom box on his lap. While the photograph draws on a stereotype of Hispanic men as being macho and controlling, it reinforces the stereotypes of Hispanic women as passive, sensuous, and promiscuous.³¹²

A group of photographs from *The Exotic Dancer Project* highlights popular stereotypes of the woman's body as an object of male desire and fantasy, in particular those of the Asian woman's body. Premised on consumption and commodification of woman's body and sexuality for male customers, exotic dance clubs are a highly gendered space. The clubs promote the sexualized female body and behavior to cater to hegemonic male desire and fantasy. In one photo (1) (Fig. 39), Lee is wearing a skimpy

³¹¹ Clara E. Rodriguez ed. *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 28.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

pink bikini, platform shoes, and a garter, exposing her breasts for the male customers sitting in front of her. She is passively looking down, stretching the strings of her bikini and approaching the male customers. The photo presents a woman's body as an object of sexual desire for the male customer. In another photo (34) (Fig. 40), Lee poses with a white dancer. They are in blue skimpy dresses, platform shoes, and heavy makeup, holding the pole on stage before they start pole dancing. The camera flash highlights Lee's dark skin and the reflective glare of the pole, and she is shown as a highly sexual Asian stripper. While perpetuating the stereotypical representation of a woman's body as an object of male sexual desire, these photographs invoke the stereotypes of Asian women as exotic sex objects. As discussed earlier, American popular culture has circulated the stereotypical perception of Asian women as extremely sensuous and submissive, readily available to serve white men. This image of Asian women has been represented by the notion of Lotus Blossom Baby, China Doll, Geisha Girl, or Mail-order Brides. The other seemingly contrary perception of Asian woman as Dragon Lady presents Asian woman as dangerous and untrustworthy. However this other stereotype is also associated with a promiscuous Asian prostitute who is trying to put white men in danger.³¹³ These two stereotypes of Asian women, whether submissive or dangerous, relegate them to exotic sex objects existing to serve white men.

Some photos from *The Hip-hop Project* reiterate popular stereotypes of the subcultural community. Materialism is considered to be a prominent aspect of a hip-hop culture. The photograph (25) (Fig. 42) features Lee with a group of men outside a limousine, who are shown in the photo mentioned earlier (Fig.41). Along with a luxurious limousine, the diamond-encrusted medallions of the gold chains worn by the

³¹³ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 112.

two men point to the materialism in the hip-hop community.³¹⁴ Another photo (6) (Fig. 43) shows Lee posing with two African American men in a night club. She is wearing a tight-fitting tank top, heavy make-up, a blond wig, and a dark-colored bandanna on her head. The two men are leaning toward her while looking at the camera. She is drinking champagne while the two men are proudly holding the diamond-encrusted medallions on their gold chains. In another photo (26) (Fig. 44), Lee poses with four African American women. She is in the center and her hair is braided. She wears a low-cut top and a gold chain. Imitating a woman next to her, she is wearing trendy sunglasses and lifting up her chin. The other women have wide smiles on their faces. Lee is holding a glass of cognac, which, along with expensive jewelry, is a symbol of wealth and prestige in the hip-hop community.

Many photos from *The Hip-hop Project* simultaneously address gender stereotypes prevalent in the hip-hop community. It has been noted that the hip-hop community is marked by the objectification and marginalization of women.³¹⁵ In the photograph mentioned earlier (Fig. 41), directly imitating the other female member of the group who is sitting on a man's lap, Lee emphasizes her sexualized style with a passive gaze and posture, heavy makeup, and a blond wig. In another photo (Fig. 42) mentioned above, Lee is wearing sunglasses and turning her body to her right while touching the leg of the man to her left. Twisting her body, she reveals her upper body even more. The man on her left rests his hand on her buttocks while another man on her right wraps his arm around her waist. Two of the men hold their crotches. In this photo, the perception of women as sex objects within a hip-hop community is strongly emphasized. Lee has said

³¹⁴ Margaret Hunter, "Shake It, Baby, Shake It: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip-Hop," *Sociological Perspective* 45, no. 1 (spring 2011): 16.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

that she never intended to criticize the negative stereotypes of the hip-hop community, or to offend the community by assuming stereotypical visual markers of the group. She simply tried to copy hip-hop culture in general.³¹⁶ By indifferently reiterating negative stereotypes of hip-hop community in her attempt to demonstrate her inclusion into the group, Lee distances herself from the deeper lived experiences of the group.

One photo from *The Yuppie Project* (5) (Fig. 53) serves as another example that shows Lee's indulgence in gender stereotypes. In this photo, Lee is with a white man at a restaurant. She is wearing red lipstick, a red sleeveless sweater, and a pearl necklace. The man is wearing a blue shirt with a neck-tie and grey pants. His grey jacket is resting over the chair. Lee is leaning toward him while the man is holding her shoulder with his right arm and her hand with his left hand. The camera is angled down toward the couple. The photo features Lee sitting behind the table, showing only her upper body, and the man turning his chair toward her revealing his lower body for the camera. The camera flash-light and the downward camera angle direct viewer's attention to the objects scattered on the table. Food-stained dinner plates, coffee cups, and a small light blue Tiffany jewelry box are on the table. A Tiffany shopping bag is placed on the floor next to the man. It appears that the man has just given her a gift. A lit candle and a pink rose in a glass vase on the table suggest a romantic dinner, enhancing a sense of intimacy between the couple. However, the downward camera angle highlights Lee's diminutive upper body, creating senses of submissiveness and passivity. Lee's uncomfortable facial expression further evokes a sense of uneasiness embedded in this act of gift giving. Gift giving involves a construction of an unbalanced power relationship between the giver and the recipient as indicated by Lee's diminutive body, submissive posture, and stiff facial expressions.

³¹⁶ Lee, interview by author, February 29, 2012.

While the gift suggests the opulence and materialism of the young professionals, it perpetuates the stereotypical representation of women as superficial, materialistic, and vain.

As shown in these examples, Lee's portrayal of the diverse subcultural communities in America relies on clichéd stereotypes that circulate in popular culture. Lee's indifferent and uncritical approach to cultural stereotypes disrupts the apparent bonds between her and the members of the group, while ultimately reflecting her new Asian immigrant sensibility.

Commodified Identity

Lee's utilization of stereotypical visual markers picked up from mass media invokes a notion of commodified identity. Commodified identity denotes a status of identity that resulted from phenomena of intensified commodification and consumerism in a globalized capitalism. Some critics have expressed concerns about commodified identity, arguing that in a globalized world marked by expanded commodification of things that were not previously commodified, our sense of identity is increasingly affected and shaped by commodities and consumption. This conceptualization of identity formation leads to a disintegration of meaningful social relations, rendering our relationship to others individualistic and isolating.³¹⁷ Growing up in South Korea, which has experienced a rapid globalization and increase in consumerism, Lee forges a social and cultural identity shaped in the context of consumerism and commodification. This

³¹⁷ Robert G. Dunn, "Identity, Commodification, and Consumer Culture" in *Identity and Social Change*, ed. Joseph E. Davis (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 116.

section will reintroduce some projects as examples of Lee's engagement in the idea of commodified identity.

Globalization brought about an unprecedented exchange of goods and communications technologies, which led to the expansion and intensification of commodification and consumerism. Numerous transnational corporations advertise not simply products, but taste, lifestyle, and cultural differences to serve to global consumers. In South Korea, the process of globalization was expedited by the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The South Korean economy has been shifting from a state-led, export-oriented structure to a more advanced industrial one. In 1993, former President Kim Young Sam formulated the "Internationalization (*seggyehwa*)" policy to open Korea's door to foreign capital while calling for a restructuring of the Korean government and corporations to meet the needs of a competitive international market in an increasingly globalized world. The establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 further led to the Korean government's reduced regulations on the influx of commodities, capital, images, and people. The government agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also resulted in increased foreign investment.³¹⁸ The advancement of the global communications system enabled the Korean people to experience an unprecedented rapid influx of foreign culture and information. Fashion, popular music, movies, videos, and ideas are constantly exchanged through the global communication systems. Over the last century, the globalization process drastically altered the Korean people's way of consumption, their collective value system, and their daily lives. Following the influx of foreign capital in the early 1990s, Western-style wholesale stores such as Wal-Mart and

³¹⁸ Jeong Duk Yi, "Globalization and Recent Changes to Daily Life in the Republic of Korea" in *Korea and Globalization: Politics, Economics, and Culture*, eds. James Lewis and Amandu Sesay (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 11.

Costco were introduced in Korea. Western goods and consumption have greatly increased. Teenagers often eat at McDonald's and Burger King, watch MTV, and adopt hip-hop fashion. The hybridization of goods, styles, and food is commonly seen in urban areas in Korea.³¹⁹ Lee also grew up enjoying McDonald's, as well as American movies and T.V. shows. She states, "growing up in Seoul, I loved American culture in Korea: I ate at McDonald's, I roller-skated and watched Hollywood movies. I watched *Wonder Woman* and *Starsky & Hutch*. Upon arriving in the U.S. I did not have to think about American culture."³²⁰ Lee's familiarization with American culture in Korea is based on the homogenized consumption brought about by the globalization process.

The globalization process in Korea greatly intensified consumption. People are increasingly indulging in consumption which has become a significant part of everyday life for Korean people.³²¹ Consumption is closely tied to the way people present themselves to others. The prevalence of consumer goods and the shopping experience has led people to purchase goods in a way that allows them to fashion their identities as they desire. By glamorously advertising products and lifestyles, the mass-media strongly affects the way consumers construct their identities.³²² In her *Projects*, by invoking the intensified relationship between consumers and the formation of identity in globalized capitalism, Lee suggests that forging a certain social and cultural identity is a simple act of purchasing. By heavily engaging in the repackaging of the existing mass-media images of subcultures, Lee's work points to the idea of commodified identities. She is fascinated

³¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

³²⁰ Lee, interview by author, November 20, 2011.

³²¹ Yi, 11.

³²² Michael Storper, "Lived Effects of the Contemporary Economy: Globalization, Inequality, and Consumer Society" in *Millennium Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, eds. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 105-6.

by a consumer culture. In the interview, Lee states that she came to the U.S. to study fashion photography because she loved clothing. After she arrived in the U.S. she adopted an American name after a fashion model. She also stated, “I think I have good instincts when it comes to different lifestyles, I just go to the shops that those people go to and check them out.”³²³ She purchases lifestyles commodified in a globalized society. For *The Hispanic Project* in 1998, guided by a woman she met at the parade, Lee went to stores in Spanish Harlem to purchase a white top, a bronze ponytail hair extension, jogging pants, and gold earrings and other jewelry. Lee shopped for *The Ohio Project* at the thrift shops in East Village. For *The Yuppie Project* in 1998, Lee went to stores such as Max Mara, Tods, Hermès, Coach, Bergdorf Goodman, and Takashimaya.³²⁴

The idea of the inextricable relationship between consumption and the construction of one’s identity is shown in her consistent use of shopping scenes in the project. In *The Yuppie Project* (4) (Fig. 65), she poses with a young white woman in front of the Tiffany & Co. jewelry store on Wall Street. In her right hand, Lee is holding the leash of a small dog and with her left hand she holds a light blue shopping bag from the Tiffany store. As mentioned above, a small light blue Tiffany jewelry box reappears in another photo (5) (Fig. 53). Another photo (Fig. 66) features Lee wearing a Burberry scarf and shopping for a handbag at a store. While she is carefully examining the bag, another white woman is looking sideways toward the bag Lee is holding as she passes by. In *The Tourist Project* (4) (Fig. 67), Lee is consulting a map with a man who is dressed in tattered jeans and a black shirt. In the background there is a giant billboard advertising women’s fashion brand “Ellen Tracy.” The billboard features a white woman in a red

³²³ Lee, interview by author, November 20, 2011.

³²⁴ Ibid.

silk blouse with short brown hair. Behind the billboard is another advertising sign promoting the women's hair product brand "Pantene." It features the silky hair of a white woman. In another photo (Fig. 68), Lee poses for the camera on a sidewalk. Buses and taxis pass by behind her. Across the street is a tall building with a Fendi boutique occupying the lower stories. While Lee is off center toward the left, the black-colored brand name "Fendi" is seen in the upper center of the picture, directly drawing the viewer's attention.

Lee selects many youth subcultural communities that are marked by commodification and consumer culture, such as punk and skateboarders. As discussed above in *The Punk Project*, Lee dressed in torn tights and a leather motorcycle jacket while wearing dark makeup and a spiked chain. Emerging in the 1970s, "subcultures" were viewed as groups of youth that resisted the conformist ideas of mainstream society. Members of the subcultures expressed their ideas through shared costumes, behaviors, and music. As Dick Hebdige claimed in his 1979 book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, the style constructed by subcultural groups symbolized a revolt against dominant culture and society.³²⁵ However, through the globalization process, subcultures became highly commodified, merging into consumer culture. Subcultures no longer have a critical voice. The image of rebellion, and punk style and music are used by marketers for selling music, clothing, cosmetics, and cars. Punk fashion is well-established in mainstream culture. Many fashion designers appropriate punk style in their designs. A young person

³²⁵ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979), 3.

can choose a prefabricated subcultural style from a store for certain occasions. Punk rock has also become a style found in the mainstream music industry.³²⁶

Although members of subcultural groups purchase consumer goods to manifest their differences from mainstream society, they are complicit with consumer culture.³²⁷ Skateboarding has often been considered a form of rebellion against mainstream society. However, just like the punks, skateboarders have been highly susceptible to commodification. Since its emergence in the 1970s, skateboarding has created a multi-billion-dollar industry dealing with sporting goods, equipments, clothing, and various events.³²⁸ *The Skateboarders* series illustrates the ways in which members of the subcultural community form memberships by purchasing consumer goods such as boards and fashionable gear. One of the series (29) (Fig. 69) features Lee sitting on a ledge, resting her feet on a skateboard. She is watching a white young man doing an ollie on a skateboard. Another young man is crouching on a ledge. In the background there are stores selling brands such as Levi's and Nike. Levi's has been an iconic brand symbolizing youth culture in the postwar era, while Nike has promoted an image of athletic youth. The brands are two of the biggest multinational corporations with which Lee was familiar growing up. Another photo (22) (Fig. 70) shows Lee posing with a young white man in front of a wall covered with brand-name T-shirts of skateboard manufacturers. She is wearing a DLX-brand T-shirt and holding a Real skateboard, a brand of the DLX company. In another photo (Fig. 71), Lee is purchasing skateboard

³²⁶ Dylan Clark, "The Death and Life of a Punk, the Last Subculture" in *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, eds. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2003), 226.

³²⁷ Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton, "What is 'Post-Subcultural Studies' Anyway?" in *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, 8.

³²⁸ Duncan Humphreys, "Shredheads Go Mainstream? Snowboarding and Alternative Youth," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 3, no. 2 (1997): 152.

gear at a skateboarding shop. She is holding a packaged item placed on a glass display window which is filled with T-shirts bearing skateboard company logos. Behind her is a wall filled with a variety of skateboards.

Some of the series of *The Hip-hop Project* provide more examples that illustrate the commodified subcultural identities. Created by poor urban youth of the South Bronx in the 1970s, hip-hop culture has often been viewed as an expression of the hardships and social conditions of the urban minorities, but hip-hop now accounts for more than \$10 billion worth of sales every year including movies, shoes, clothing, junk food, cars, and computers while American rappers such as 50 Cent and Jay-Z are well known for their involvement in commercial enterprises.³²⁹ People purchase those commodities associated with famous rappers to assume a lifestyle of hip-hop. Similarly, Lee appears to adopt hip-hop lifestyle by purchasing appropriate commodities for her project. In one photo (Fig. 72), Lee is in a party with two young African American DJ's, one of whom is holding the albums of L.L. Cool J, a rapper, entrepreneur and actor, proudly showing the rapper's commercial success. By hanging out with or celebrating these successful hip-hop entrepreneurs, Lee reveals the commodified identity of the hip-hop community.

The Schoolgirls Project (22) (Fig. 30) which features Lee sitting on a school bench with a group of teen age girls is another example of the commodification of identity. In the photograph, three of the members of the group, including Lee, are holding mobile phones. Lee and a girl are chatting and looking at text messages while another girl is talking on the phone. Mobile phones are a major global commodity, and they have become an indispensable part of our daily lives. Since the financial crisis in 1997, Korea and Japan have focused intensely on the information and communication technologies

³²⁹ Chang, 61.

industry to overcome the economic downturn. The rapid development of mobile technology in Korea created a vast media culture.³³⁰ Currently in Korea, people do many tasks with mobile phones including banking, paying credit cards, watching T.V., paying bus fare, reading books, etc. Youth groups in particular are extremely sensitive to new technology, passionately adopting mobile phones and purchasing cutting-edge models. Teenage girls obsessively purchase various accessories for the mobile phones. By consuming new technology and the images associated with them, young mobile phone users construct their unique identities. Korean marketers promote positive images related to mobile phone for youth, enticing them to buy the most expensive products.³³¹ This photograph from the series of *The School Girls Project* addresses the entrenched connection between the construction of youth identity and commodification. By indulging in the idea of commodified identity, Lee reveals her superficial and distanced attitude toward the community she is trying to explore.

East-West: Self-Orientalization

Lee's work demonstrates that she has the typical sensibility of a new immigrant marked by a distant and apolitical relationship to the host country. While works by Cha and Min express the artists' desires to connect to their home countries, they simultaneously emphasize artists' experiences of cultural displacement in the adopted country and the sense of pain and trauma associated with the acculturation process. While enthusiastically creating and refashioning the artist's identity across various social

³³⁰ Larissa Hjorth, *Mobile Media in the Asia Pacific: Gender and the Art of Being Mobile* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.

³³¹ Kyoungwon Yoon, "The Making of Neo-Confucian Cyberkids: Representations of Young Mobile Phone Users in South Korea," *New Media & Society* 8, no.5 (Oct. 2006): 762.

boundaries, Lee's work, however, does not reflect on the painful experiences of an immigrant. Lee further addresses her new immigrant status and sensibility through self-Orientalization. She frames her work on self-Orientalizing notions that are based on generally defined Asian characteristics in relation to Western ones.³³² In an interview, Lee has stated that the concept behind *Projects* is "identity understood as a relationship to others." She notes that our perceptions of our identities are always changing with the context and affected by what other people think of us. She constantly emphasizes that this notion of identity in relation to others is based on Eastern philosophical ideas. She states, "in the Eastern countries, the notion of communal identity, an identity in relation to others, is emphasized, while in the West, one's identity is based on individualism." Her idea of the Eastern notion of identity is generally based on the Buddhist concept of the illusory nature of self and the Confucian emphasis on communal identity. Lee also states in the interview that "the ultimate goal in my art is to combine Eastern ideas with those of West."³³³ Numerous critics have challenged the traditional binary concept underlying Lee's idea.³³⁴ However, her attempt to combine East and West is not so much based on the traditional binary opposition between the two. Her attitude is instead based on the new-found confidence of recent Asian immigrants who perceive Asia as a parallel to the West in the context of a changing world's economic structure. This section will reintroduce a few of the projects in order to examine Lee's complicity with self-Orientalization.

³³² Dirlik, 14.

³³³ Lee, interview by author, November 20, 2011.

³³⁴ See for example, Louis Kaplan, *American Exposure: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century*, 176; Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith*, 244.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War, American involvement in the Asia-Pacific region began to intensify in an attempt to halt the communist advance. Simultaneously, the U.S. greatly helped Japan to recover from economic devastation of World War II. The Korean War further helped Japan restore its economy. Japan became a world economic power in the 1960s. With the aid of the U.S., the totalitarian rulers of Taiwan, South Korea, and the Philippines concentrated on economic development in their countries as well. Effectively using foreign aid and strengthening the domestic manufacturing industries, Taiwan and South Korea rapidly achieved economic successes in the Pacific Rim.³³⁵ The robust economic development of the four East Asian Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs)—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan—became a model for other Asian countries. Through rapid economic growth, these countries came to challenge U.S. economic domination of the Pacific. Pacific Asia was no longer considered a group of countries in the Pacific that heavily depended on foreign aid, but rather a group of countries that were independently generating economic growth in the global economy. In parallel with the economic boom in these Asia-Pacific countries, the idea that “Asian values” were the driving forces for this economic success began to popularize. Political leaders of these countries advocated Confucian idea of communitarianism as one of the defining attributes of “Asian values” while denouncing Western individualism. Although this belief in the superiority of Asian values and the concurrent revival of Confucianism

³³⁵ John M. Liu and Lucie Cheng, “Pacific Rim Development and the Duality of Post-1965 Asian Immigration to the United States” in *The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring*, eds. Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Chneg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 77.

were challenged with the 1997 financial crisis of Asian countries, they still survive in many of Pacific Asian countries.³³⁶

After liberation from Japanese colonial rule, the Korean economy was devastated. Syngman Rhee's regime failed to resolve the problem of poverty and economic backwardness due to political turmoil. Park Chung Hee's regime formulated a "Five - Year Economic Plan," adopting the nation's economic growth as the most urgent national policy. The state-led economic development plan which relied on foreign loans and export brought about tremendous economic growth. By the 1970s, South Korea had become a newly industrialized country, and by the middle of the 1980s, it was fully industrialized. Although the 1997 financial crisis caused an economic downfall in Korea, with the bailout from IMF, the South Korean government began to restructure the financial sector and managed to maintain global economic competitiveness. In 2004, the Korean economy became the eleventh-largest in the world.³³⁷

Confucianism has often been considered one of the causes of Korean economic backwardness. However, like in other East Asian Newly Industrialized countries, in Korea, the revival of Confucian ideas was initiated in the 1970s for the national cause of economic growth. While Park's regime promoted Confucian ideas to mobilize Korean people for the cause of the national economic growth, it is undeniable that Confucianism has been the most significant philosophical ideology that governs the social and cultural systems in Korean society. Confucian values such as loyalty to the organization and family, self-sacrifice, respect for authority, and an emphasis on diligence and education

³³⁶ Mark R. Thompson, "The Survival of 'Asian Values' as 'Zivilisationskritik,'" *Theory and Society* 29, no. 5 (Oct. 2000):655.

³³⁷ Yin Bao Yun, "Labor, Capital, and the Globalization of the Korean Economy" in *Korea and Globalization: Politics, Economics and Culture*, eds. James Lewis and Amada Sesay (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 52.

all contributed to the achievement of rapid economic growth.³³⁸ The increased visibility of Korea as one of the new economic powers in the Pacific region stimulated the growth of the Korean people's confidence in their culture and society. The beginning of globalization in the early 1990s caused an unprecedented influx of foreign goods and culture into Korean society. The Korean people have been proud of ethnic homogeneity and their concept of nationhood is firmly based on a shared ancestry. While welcoming various foreign cultures and the emergence of hybrid cultural forms resulting from globalization process, the Korean people expressed a sense of anxiety toward globalizing forces. In the midst of rapid globalization in the 1990s, the Korean people actively participated in the government policy called *sint'obulli* (body and soil are inseparable) which promoted the use of Korean food and products. While Korean mass media promoted programs about Korean traditional music, costumes, and food, various local folk festivals and cultural activities celebrated unique local cultures. Advocating Confucian ideas as a significant part of Korean cultural heritage, the Korean government organized numerous cultural activities to revive Confucianism. The government celebrated major Choson Confucian philosophers such as Yi Toegye and Yi Yulgok, and designated Confucian relics as National Treasures. An international Confucian cultural festival was held in Andong in 2001, presenting Confucianism as an essential part of Korean national culture.³³⁹ As Confucian scholar Tu Weiming at Harvard University has noted, the revival of Confucianism in South Korea is bound to efforts to preserve and redefine the Korean national identity against overwhelming Western influences in the

³³⁸ Sang M. Lee and Sangjin Yoo, "The K-Type Management: A Driving Force of Korean Prosperity," *Management International Review* 27, no. 4 (4th quarter, 1987): 69.

³³⁹ Jeong Duk Yi, "Globalization and Recent Changes to Daily Life in the Republic of Korea," 26.

global era.³⁴⁰ While embracing globalization, Korea has adopted what might be called self-Orientalization, in an effort to revitalize its cultural identity. As Gi-Wook Shin and Joon Nak Choi note in their essay “Paradox or Paradigm? Making Sense of Korean Globalization,” Koreans embrace globalization as a nationalist goal. For Koreans, globalization is viewed as a nationalistic agenda and globalization enhances nationalistic sensibility.³⁴¹

In an interview, Lee has stated that “I feel extremely comfortable with American culture and I consider myself to be highly westernized. However, at the same time, I am very interested in Korean traditional music such as *pansori*, and various traditional religious and philosophical ideas such as Confucianism and Buddhism.”³⁴² Lee actually learned *pansori* and *kayagum*, a Korea traditional musical stringed instrument. When viewed in its entirety, Lee’s *Projects* shows that the consistent element that connects all the photographs is indeed Lee herself, and especially her Asian identity. In her projects, Lee explores her Asian immigrant identity and her experiences with a variety of communities. Lee states, “my project starts with the concern with my own identity and it extends to the others, since they strongly affect the way I construct my identity.”³⁴³

One example that shows Lee’s self-Orientalization is *The School Girls Project*. In one photo (28) (Fig. 73) Lee is standing in a school auditorium. Shown behind her is an empty stage with *tageukki*, the Korean national flag, hung at the top of the curtained wall. Below the flag is a cross indicating that the school is affiliated with a Christian

³⁴⁰ Yun-shik Chang, “In Pursuit of Modernity” in *Transformation in Twentieth Century Korea*, Steven Hugh Lee and Yunshik Chang (New York: Routledge, 2006), 366.

³⁴¹ Gi-Wook Shin and Joon Nak Choi, “Paradox or Paradigm? Making Sense of Korean Globalization” in *Korea Confronts Globalization*, eds. Chang Yun-Shik, Hyun-Ho Suk, and Donald L. Baker (New York: Routledge, 2009), 252.

³⁴² Lee, interview by author, November 20, 2011.

³⁴³ Ibid.

foundation. The parallel of the two symbols of East and West and her naïve facial expressions point to Lee's confident attempt to combine East with West. Another photo (5) (Fig. 74) shows Lee posing with a group of high school girls outside of the school building. They appear to practice the Korean traditional fan dance (*buchachum*), holding pink fans with peony patterns in both hands. The open fans create an elegant curved line which is typically enhanced by the dancers' movements. In this photo, the high school girls are standing stiffly while looking at the camera. Lee, standing in the center, is confidently smiling for the camera. This traditional dance often appears in the tourist books, symbolizing Korean cultural pride. Another photo (Fig. 75) features Lee with other Korean girls, displaying the three top parts of mini-*hanbok*, the Korean traditional female dress, in their hands. Korean high school girls are required to make a sample *hanbok* in "home economics" class. They are smiling and proudly making V-shaped hand gestures. By showing the Korean fan dance and *hanbok*, Lee participates, at least imaginatively in self-Orientalization.

As a new immigrant who arrived in the cosmopolitan city of New York in 1994, Lee expresses her disengaged attitude toward the members of the communities of which she is trying to be part. At first glance, Lee's meticulous imitation of the cultural mores of the target groups combines with her extraordinarily natural demeanor to make the viewer perceive her performance as a genuine defiance against the old notion of fixed cultural boundaries. Moreover, the fact that her work involves the artist's authentic experience with the groups enhances a sense of camaraderie, rendering her work effective visual evidence of the fluidity of our social and cultural identities in a globalized

contemporary world. However, as some critics note, Lee's work is in fact much more complex. Further observation of her work enables us to recognize some of the elements that complicate and disrupt the idea of mutable social and cultural boundaries. Her work shows a superficial engagement in the groups, disinterested postures and compositions, and a disinterest in the material histories of the groups. Lee's work is also based on the superficial and indifferent embrace of the existing gender and cultural stereotypes of the communities, the idea of commodified identity and self-Orientalization. These elements have an inseparable relationship with Lee's perspective as a new Asian immigrant in the U.S. Lee's work reflects the new Asian immigrant's increased ties to his/her home country and distanced relationship with American domestic issues as well as the new-found confidence of an Asian-Pacific immigrant in the context of a changing world economic structure. Lee's work exemplifies the approach of a new Asian immigrant toward issues surrounding the formation of ethnic identity in an increasingly globalized world.

Conclusion

This dissertation analyzes the ways in which three Korean American women artists, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Yong Soon Min, and Nikki S. Lee, articulate their senses of hybrid cultural identities in a globalized contemporary world through their art work. While the works by the three artists are built on a common ethnic and cultural heritage, they reveal different approaches toward issues of ethnic and sexual identities.

Both Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Yong Soon Min were born in the early 1950s in South Korea and emigrated to the U.S. in the early 1960s. Their immigration was motivated by the severe economic conditions after the Korean War and the ensuing political turmoil in Korea. After settling in the U.S., both artists experienced racial discrimination and marginalization in their adopted country while the civil rights movements and anti-war movement of the 1960s spurred them to draw attention to the position of Asian Americans in the U.S. Both grew up and attended college in California, where the Asian American movement emerged and college student demonstrations led to the establishment of an Ethnic Studies program including Asian American studies at the San Francisco State University in the late 1960s.³⁴⁴ Cha and Min embraced issues of identity and belonging in the U.S. as their central concern and began to address these issues in their art work. They simultaneously sought to express their concerns about female identity and position in a patriarchal society which are intricately linked to the issue of ethnic identity.

³⁴⁴ Karin Aguilar-San Juan ed., *The State of Asian American: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 25.

Belonging to a generation of Asian Americans that witnessed the Asian American cultural movement, Cha and Min recognized the historical significance of the assimilationist rhetoric upheld by Asian American activists and scholars. However, they were also intensely attuned to the culture and histories of their home country, adopting a diasporic perspective. They considered themselves as members of the 1.5 generation—Korean Americans who were born in Korea and immigrated to the U.S. at a young age. Although Cha and Min both identified themselves as the 1.5 generation Korean Americans, they held different levels of acculturation and ethnic attachment. Cha arrived in the U.S. at the age of twelve, carrying memories of her home country and managed to maintain a degree of fluency in Korean. Strongly affected by the members of her family including her mother and brother, Cha also preserved deep emotional ties to her homeland despite the difficulty of frequent air traveling at the time. Min, who immigrated at the age of seven, did not have strong emotional attachment to her home country and lost fluency in her native language. It was only during her later years that she developed an intense emotional and intellectual affinity with her home country. Currently, Min travels back and forth between the U.S. and South Korea as well as other countries, defining herself as a highly transnational or diasporic Asian American. Their conscious act of relating to Korea resulted from the realization that the position of Asian Americans in the U.S. was deeply connected to the situation of their countries of origin and their socioeconomic relations to the U.S. It also reflects a shifting cultural terrain in the context of globalization, which promotes a new concept of transnational or diasporic identity that goes beyond the national borders. Their attitudes also reflect distinct characteristics of the Korean immigrant community, which is mainly composed of new immigrants who

manifest a pronounced ethnic attachment. However, their attempts to connect to the history of their country of origin cannot be equated to another old essentialist approach. Rather, what they strive to achieve is to reconfigure the meaning of Asian American identity in an increasingly globalized world by firmly grounding their hybrid cultural identities as Korean American women in the specific material histories and thus excavating the specific difference of their hybrid identities.

While critics and scholars have managed to thoroughly investigate Cha's literary work and its relationship to the specific history of Korea, they have not yet provided in-depth art historical research on the relationship between Cha's visual work and Korean history and its relation to the U.S. Despite its use of postmodern style, Cha's visual work strongly addresses her affiliation with the colonial and postcolonial history of Korea. Scholars and critics have paid considerable attention, on the other hand, to Min's engagement in Korean history. They have not, however, examined Min's specific approach to the history of Korea. Min's work seeks to connect to the history of her home country through her engagement with the Minjung ideology, a social, political, and cultural movement of the 1980s in South Korea. While Cha and Min adopt different visual languages to express their concern about their hybrid identities, their works commonly feature the deep feelings of pain and loss associated both with the traumatic history of their home country and with their own experiences as immigrants.

By contrast, Nikki S. Lee, born in 1970 in South Korea, belongs to a generation that is far-removed from the traumatic history of colonization, the Korean War, and the ensuing social and political turmoil in her home country. This generation greatly benefited from an enormous economic growth and globalization. As a new immigrant

who settled in the U.S at the age of twenty four, Lee challenged the old idea of rootedness in the U.S. embedded within the Asian American assimilationist discourse. She positioned herself as a transnational subject who proudly maintains multiple ties and networks across national borders. Lee's photographic work *Projects* exemplifies how she conceptualizes her identity as a new Asian immigrant in a globalized contemporary America. While critics and scholars failed to explore the relationship between her new Asian immigrant identity and her work, this dissertation argues that rather than showing her desire to merge into the new country, Lee's work expresses her confidence in her Asian identity, which resulted from the growing economic power of Pacific Asian countries. Unlike the works of Cha and Min, Lee's work is not stricken by senses of pain and loss. Rather, it often shows a celebratory stance toward fluid identity. While Lee's work addresses her concern with issues of female sexuality and gender stereotypes, it often reveals a reiteration of the pre-existing gender stereotypes. Lee's work concurrently deploys a distanced attitude of the artist toward the subject of her work through the visual elements such as composition, postures, and facial expressions, and by relying on ethnic and gender stereotypes, the idea of commodified identity, and self-Orientalization.

Cha's work often features images and texts that seem abstract and disjunctive. Her work uses multiple sources of narration, medium, and languages, addressing postmodern ideas of multiplicity and indeterminacy. However, Cha's work simultaneously shows her obsessive search for the history of her home country. For example, in her works *Aveugle Voix* and *Mouth-to Mouth*, Cha explores the structure of

language as a central subject of her work, but she goes beyond the abstract realm of language and moves to the historical and material aspects. By invoking the silencing of her mother tongue during Japanese colonization in *Aveugle Voix*, and by featuring Korean letters along with an image of her mouth struggling to enunciate them in *Mouth-to-Mouth*, Cha connects her postmodern visual language to her intense search for the forgotten colonial history of her home country. Simultaneously, these works allude to the marginalized and invisible voices of women in the system of language and in Korean cultural history. In *A Ble Wail*, Cha explicitly shows her desire to affiliate with the painful history of Korea by enacting *han*, or the deep-seated sorrow and anger of Koreans by referring to the traditional Korean dance *salpuri*. Cha's multi-media work *Exilée* is yet another example that shows her concern with specific aspects of Korean history. By featuring images and text about trans-Pacific passages together with images of a *Shinto* temple and traditional Japanese doors and flooring, Cha connects her exiled status as a Korean American in the U.S. to the Japanese colonialism that forced many Koreans into exile.

Similarly, Min expresses her sense of being and belonging through her constant attempts to come to terms with the history of her home country and its relation to her adopted country. Like Cha, Min refuses to embrace Asian American identity politics that emphasize domestic issues and boundaries. As she began to work actively in the 1980s, Min, like other Asian American scholars, noted that the essentialist approach to Asian American identity is no longer valid due to the shifting demographics of the Asian American community. Realizing the inextricable relationship between Asian American issues in the U.S. and the history of countries of origin, Min grounds her sense of hybrid

identity as a Korean American woman in the specific material history of modern and contemporary Korea. Min was awakened by the Minjung ideology about the history of Korea, but she adopted it critically, revealing her specific identity as a Korean American woman. Min's works *Defining Moments*, *deCOLONIZATION*, and *Bridge of No Return* show her concern for issues of Korea's division and reunification which are the central agendas in Minjung ideology. In *Defining Moments*, she pronounces her Korean American subjectivity by juxtaposing an image of the 1992 L.A. riots with an image of Mount Paekdu, a symbol of both hope for reunification and the conflicting discourses of reunification. In doing so, she reveals her complex position as a Korean American woman within the history of Korean nationalism. In her installation work *deCOLONIZATION*, by paralleling text and images associated with Minjung ideology with those of Korean American women's experiences in relation to Korean nationalism, Min complicates patriarchal nationalist discourses.

Lee's performative work entitled *Projects* features Lee in various disguises with members of different subcultural communities, mainly in the United States. With Lee's natural facial expressions and behavior as well as her meticulous imitation of cultural norms of the group, *Projects* appears to celebrate the idea of permeability and mutability of identity in a globalized contemporary world, challenging the notion of fixed cultural and ethnic boundaries. However, rather than simply celebrating social mobility, her work simultaneously reveals the impermeability of identity. Lee's work shows her indifferent and distanced attitude toward the community with which she is trying to merge. As a new, cosmopolitan Asian immigrant, Lee is not bound to the idea of claiming America. Like other recent immigrants, she carries with her a distinct cultural heritage. The

advancement of communications technology and improvements in international air travel enabled recent immigrants to enjoy greater mobility and to maintain closer ties to their home countries. Rapid economic growth in Asian Pacific countries allowed new immigrants a sense of pride about their countries. Having been relatively familiar with American culture, Lee freely affiliates with diverse communities in the U.S., but her engagement with the groups visibly remains on a limited and superficial level. Some of the photographs show her disinterested facial expressions, postures, and composition. Lee's deliberate and telling disengagement is also revealed in her superficial embrace of pre-existing ethnic and gender stereotypes of the communities. Furthermore, Lee's work presents identity as shaped by the intensified commodification and consumerism of globalized capitalism; this points to her depoliticized and disengaged immigrant identity. Simultaneously, her work reflects the confidence of an Asian Pacific immigrant by constantly displaying her Asian self throughout her projects and seeking to combine Eastern ideas with those of the West, thus invoking the idea of self-Orientalization.

The three Korean American women artists, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Yong Soon Min, and Nikki S. Lee, reflect upon the changing contemporary cultural terrain of globalization by embracing the new Asian American identity politics that calls for a transnational or diasporic perspective. Their works commonly challenge the old assimilationist rhetoric by heavily engaging in the history of their home country. The three artists' work embraces the idea of contingency and permeability of identities, yet they nonetheless reject the abstract and celebratory notion of hybrid cultural identity. They express their concerns with the pitfalls of ahistorical notion of hybrid identity by

affiliating with the specific histories of their countries of origin. While Cha, Min, and Lee repudiate all too more celebratory stances, they reformulate their senses of hybrid cultural identity differently. Cha and Min seek to situate their hybrid identity in the specific historical context of their home country such as colonialism, neocolonialism, and war, and their relation to the adopted country, while also critically engaging gender issues that intersect with those of ethnic identity. Lee, on the other hand, situates her sense of cultural and ethnic identity within the history of rapid economic growth of Asian Pacific countries in an increasingly globalized world. Lee addresses this new immigrant sensibility in her distanced attitude, use of existing ethnic and gender stereotypes, commodified identity, and self-Orientalization. In this sense, Cha, Min, and Lee commonly call for a reformulation of the old concept of Asian American identity, rather than a complete abandonment of the notion. Although numerous scholars embrace the notion of post-identity as a positive term, the dissertation seeks to attest to the continued relevance of identity politics and in particular, Asian American identity politics by examining the works by the three artists Cha, Min, and Lee.

Appendix: Chronology

1392-1897	Choson Dynasty
1897-1910	Korean Empire
1910-1945	Japanese colonization
1948	The First Republic of South Korea is established on August 15 th , with Syngman Rhee as the first president, and Democratic People's Republic of Korea is established on August 25 th , with Kim Il Sung as Premier.
1950-1953	The Korean War
1960	Student demonstrations lead to the April Revolution, which overthrows Syngman Rhee's regime.
1960-1961	The Second Republic of South Korea is established. Military forces led by Park Chung Hee overthrow the Second Republic in 1961.
1963-1972	The Third Republic of South Korea, with Park Chung Hee as the president.
1972-1979	President Park Chung Hee launches the Fourth Republic of South Korea by promulgating the Yushin Constitution in 1972.
1979-1987	President Park Chung Hee is assassinated in 1979, which is followed by Coup d'état led by Major General Chun Doo Hwan in 1979. The Fifth Republic of South Korea, with Chun as the president.
1980	The Kwangju Uprising breaks out on May 18 th .
1987	The June Democracy Movement begins, which leads to the overthrow of the Fifth Republic. The ruling party of the Fifth Republic declares democratic elections.

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