

Upending the Melting Pot: Photography, Performativity, and Immigration Re-Imagined in the
Self-Portraits of Tseng Kwong Chi, Nikki S. Lee, and Annu Palakunnathu Matthew

By

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Abstract

Tseng Kwong Chi, Nikki S. Lee, and Annu Palakunnathu Matthew each employ our associations with photography, performativity, and self-portraiture to compel us to re-examine our views of immigrants and immigration and bring them up-to-date. Originally created with predominantly white European newcomers in mind, traditional assimilative narratives have little in common with the experience of immigrants of color for whom “blending in” with “white mainstream America” is not an option. Through self-portraiture, then, Tseng, Lee, and Matthew significantly confront the issue of the “raced body” directly, such that their work reveals as much about their adoptive country’s attitudes towards each artist’s perceived group—Chinese, Korean, and Southeast Asian—as the individuals themselves. In approaching their imagery as case studies of the contemporary immigrant experience, this dissertation argues that Tseng’s *East Meets West* (1979-89), Lee’s *Projects* (1997-2001), and Matthew’s *An Indian from India* (2001-07) share affinities with trends in contemporary literature in that the three artists’ self-portraits, like the writings of their author counterparts make a claim for the immigrant’s rightful place within the U.S.

The first chapter contextualizes the three artists’ series by providing an overview of the history of Asian immigration in the United States. Each of the subsequent chapters explores one of the photographic series of interest, beginning with Tseng’s *East Meets West*; this chapter delves into the intersectionality of identity, by looking at how the artist cleverly employs Western stereotypes of the “inscrutable Chinese” to promote a worldview in which is is regarded as an artist first, gay Asian man second. Amongst Lee’s larger photographic series, her *Schoolgirls* and *Young Japanese (East Village) Projects* have been paid little scholarly attention. By addressing this lacuna in the third chapter, this dissertation claims that the the two

“subprojects” play a key role in understanding Lee’s *Projects* as a whole. The fourth and final chapter looks to Matthew’s *An Indian From India* as providing the most “personal” glimpse into the immigrant experience by noting her use of audiences’ associations with nineteenth-century portraiture of Native Americans to affirm her South Asian Indian identity within the U.S.

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Chapter 1: The Old Pieties of Immigration No Longer Hold

Within the United States, turn-of-the-twentieth century images of European émigrés awaiting processing at Ellis Island continue to endure as emblems of the immigrant experience. This persists despite the leading immigrant groups in America today being comprised of Hispanic and Asian individuals.¹ Interestingly, Indian-born American writer Bharati Mukherjee makes a similar observation during her naturalization ceremony when noting:

The old pieties of immigration no longer hold. A Norman Rockwell would have been hard-pressed to find the immigrant-icons of an earlier era—the hollow-eyed and sunken-cheeked were not in evidence. There was a notable lack of old ladies in babushkas. ... A Dominican man next to me joked as we sat down after pledging the allegiance, “Hey, now we can make a citizen’s arrest!” Behind me, Chinese teen-agers passed copies of *The New Yorker*. I don’t think we’re on Ellis Island any more. Such energy, such comedy, such sophistication and struggle and hunger to belong—yet who tells their stories?²

This dissertation looks to three artists whose works provide a visual response to Mukherjee’s call. Tseng Kwong Chi (1950-1990), Nikki S. Lee (b. 1970), and Annu Palakunnathu Matthew (b. 1964) have each explored the changing faces of U.S. immigration through their performative self-portraits. By approaching their photographs as case studies of the contemporary immigrant experience, this dissertation argues that Tseng’s *East Meets West* (1979-89), Lee’s *Projects* (1997-2001), and Matthew’s *An Indian from India* (2001-07) compel audiences to reexamine their views of immigrants and immigration and bring them up-to-date. More specifically, it

¹ In fact, Asians have surpassed Hispanics as the largest wave of immigrants to the U.S., pushing the population of individuals of Asian descent to a record 18.2 million, thus making them the fastest-growing racial group in the U.S. “The Rise of Asian Americans,” Pew Research Center, last modified April 4, 2013, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2013/04/Asian-Americans-new-full-report-04-2013.pdf>; Timothy P. Fong, *The Contemporary Asian American Experience: Beyond the Model Minority*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2008), 21. This dissertation will refer to as “Asian” any individual whose origins link them to peoples located in the Far East, Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent—for example, the Chinese, Filipino, South Asian Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese.

² Bharati Mukherjee, “Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!” *New York Times Book Review*, August 28, 1988.

posits that Tseng's, Lee's, and Matthew's series share affinities with trends in contemporary literature in that the three artists' photographs, like the writings of their author counterparts, make a claim for the immigrant's rightful place within the U.S.

Relevant to the present research are accounts of the immigrant experience penned during the last three decades. Assimilation theory predicts that successful integration into mainstream society follows a linear trajectory, whereby an individual's previously held behaviors, customs, and attitudes are exchanged for those in line with their new home.³ As a consequence, traditional immigrant narratives often measure success by newcomers' full assimilation into the host society.⁴ Created with predominantly white European newcomers in mind, such assimilative

³ Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood, "Transforming Asian America: Globalization and Contemporary Immigration to the United States," in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood (New York; London: New York University Press, 2007), 131.

⁴ William Boelhower, "The Immigrant Novel as Genre," *MELUS* 8, no. 1 (1981): 5-7. For a broader and more comprehensive outlining of the general features of immigrant fiction, please refer to David Cowart, *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 7-8. Although my research focuses primarily on photographic interpretations of the immigrant experience, much of my current understanding of the three artists' works looks to literary theory. I do this for several reasons. First, museum exhibitions organized around photographic portrayals of the immigrant experience provide only a cursory view of this rich topic of investigation. Perhaps the best example to date was the collaborative endeavor titled "Points of Entry" (1995), comprised of three related exhibitions co-organized by different photographic institutions. "A Nation of Strangers" chronicled American immigration's influence on photography from the 1840s to the present day. *A Nation of Strangers* (San Diego, CA: Museum of Photographic Arts, 1995). "Reframing America" featured seven postwar immigrant photographers who employed their "outsider's eye" in their photographic critique of American society. *Reframing America* (Tucson, AZ: Center for Creative Photography, 1995). "Tracing Cultures" exhibited contemporary artists engaged in photographic explorations of their cultural backgrounds within an American context; many of the artists featured were not immigrants themselves, but their descendants. *Tracing Cultures* (San Francisco, CA: Friends of Photography, 1995).

Second, art historical scholarship on immigrants and photography does not interrogate the newcomer's experience. Instead, it focuses on the photographic documentation of the immigrant experience or, if photographers are immigrants, what is being communicated about the American social and cultural landscape given the photographer's perceived outsider status. Lastly, scholars exploring the links between immigration and photography often mistakenly do not distinguish between "first generation" immigrants and American-born children of immigrants in terms of ethnicity, culture, and race. The two groups, with varying backgrounds (i.e., growing up in the U.S. versus growing up elsewhere), likely possess differing viewpoints on issues, such as English-only instruction in public schools. "First-generation," Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/first-generation>. The term "first-generation" can refer to either the American-born children of immigrants or the naturalized immigrants themselves; for clarity, I reserve the term for immigrants to the U.S., since the issues faced by native-born and newly immigrated individuals, although related are different in character. Further complicating the issue are the multiple categories of identity based on birth, age at the time of immigration (if not born in the United States), language ability, and number of generations the family has

models have little in common with the experience of immigrants of Asian (or African) descent for whom “blending in” with “white mainstream America” is *not* an option.⁵ Furthermore, contemporary immigrant literature oftentimes addresses how race complicates the standard assimilation plot for non-European immigrants.⁶ Literary scholar Georgina Dodge, attributing the impossibility of complete assimilation for individuals of color to the visible reality of their “raced body,” has come to interpret “becoming American” today as the negotiation of “individual and community identities within [a] racist culture.”⁷ Through self-portraiture Tseng, Lee, and Matthew confront the issue of the “raced body” directly, whereby their photographic series provides a social commentary that reveals as much about the adoptive country’s attitudes towards each artist’s perceived group as the individuals themselves.

Useful to our understanding of the raced or “racialized body” is American sociologists and race theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s theory of racial formation.⁸ Racial formation theory approaches race as a constantly changing socially constructed phenomenon, such that race relations are dynamic and continuously being redefined. Influencing racial formation and race relations are a combination of both *micro* (discourse, meaning) and *macro*

lived in the U.S. Also, adding to the complexity, for example Korean American communities distinguish a first generation (born in Korea, immigrated as an adult), a “1.5” generation (born in Korea, immigrated in their teens), a second generation (born in the U.S. of first generation parents), a third generation, and so on. In Eun-Young Jung, “Transnational Migrations and YouTube Sensations: Korean Americans, Popular Music, Social Media,” *Society for Ethnomusicology* 50, no. 1 (Winter 2014), 56.

⁵ Susan Sachs, “American Dream, No Illusions; Immigrant Literature Now About More Than Fitting In,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2000.

⁶ Georgina Dodge, “Visualizing Race in American Immigrant Autobiography,” in *Complicating Constructions: Race, Ethnicity, and Hybridity in American Texts*, ed. David S. Goldstein and Audrey B. Thacker (Seattle, WA; London: University of Washington Press, 2007), 158. Like Dodge, I will be applying the term “non-European” to immigrants of non-European *racial* ancestry; for example, immigrants from Australia whose white ancestors came from England would not be included in this categorization, while immigrants of color who come to the U.S. from England would.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

(governmental policies, social institutions) levels of conflict and cooperation. Essentially, racial formation theory attempts to explain why Asian Americans' experiences within the U.S. have varied over time, from periods of relative calm, to periods of intense hostility, to heightened racial antagonism being expressed towards one particular Asian-American group but not another. Significant to this dissertation, the theory accounts for how one's perceived group affiliation—as defined by race, culture, and/or nation of origin—influences one's experiences within the U.S.

For Tseng, Lee, and Matthew, immigrant artists of color denied full acceptance by the majority culture, the creative act of making performative self-portraits fulfills several aims. Returning to recent scholarship on immigrant fiction, for non-white authors the act of writing (and by extension for artists the act of making art) achieves the following: it asserts subjectivities; it draws attention to those occupying the margins of society; and it forces audiences to reconsider what constitutes an American, “effectively displacing whiteness as the sole category for citizenship.”⁹ Underlying these objectives, the creative act comes to symbolize the immigrants' sincere desire to engage with the places, people, and history of their adoptive home.

Of particular relevance to my own research is Georgina Dodge's astute observation that immigrant authors of color respond to America's visual culture by portraying “themselves and America.”¹⁰ The three artists do so in the form of artist-America pairings: Tseng and *American* places as tourist photo ops, Lee and *American* people as informal group snaps, and Matthew and *American* history as archival photographs. Assuming the persona of the “ambiguous” or “unofficial” Chinese ambassador in *East Meets West* (Figure 1), Tseng photographs himself

⁹ Dodge, “Visualizing,” 159.

¹⁰ Ibid.

against an ever-changing background of American tourist sites, from man-made monuments like the Statue of Liberty to natural wonders like the Grand Canyon. For *Projects* (Figure 2), South Korean Lee infiltrates American subcultural groups that differ from her in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, socio-economic status, leisure time activity, age, and even sexual orientation and then has herself photographed engaged in a stereotypical in-group activity, or posed singly as a member of the group. And in *An Indian from India* (Figure 3), Matthew couples turn-of-the-twentieth-century American photographs featuring Native Americans with a meticulously rendered corresponding digital representation of herself, an individual from the subcontinent of India.

Tseng's, Lee's, and Matthew's impulse to photograph what Omi and Winant would refer to as the artists' "racialized bodies" within the context of richly coded American signifiers demonstrates that rather than view themselves as outsiders, the three see themselves as being "a part of" and "part of what's new in America."¹¹ Analogous to contemporary Korean-American author Chang-rae Lee's fictional immigrant characters, Tseng, Lee, and Matthew by means of their photographic series seem less interested in exploring change occurring at the individual level (as in the case of traditional assimilation narratives) and more concerned with addressing the broader social and cultural change that characterizes America today. For example, in this chapter I argue that the three artists assert their *Americanness* through a shared reliance upon a conspicuous American signifier: Old Glory. Furthermore, this dissertation contends that by drawing upon audiences' existing associations with the American flag when creating their self-portraiture Tseng, Lee, and Matthew become part of what Chang-rae Lee describes as "the new

¹¹ Chang-rae Lee, quoted in Sachs, "American."

sense of multiculturalism in this country,” where newcomers are no longer saying, “I’m becoming an American,” but instead “I am American.”¹² To grasp the true significance of the three artists’ adoption of our nation’s symbol and lifeblood—a source of American strength and vitality—we must first develop a working understanding of the history of Asian immigration in the U.S.

Temporary Visitors

The collective experience of Asians in the U.S. is inextricably linked to how dominant Anglo-American culture defines immigration in racial terms. As a result of American imperialist ambition in Asia, all individuals of Asian descent may at times find themselves in a vulnerable position, since historically “anti-Asian moods” have generally led “to anti-Asian actions.”¹³ Moreover, it is not uncommon for individuals of Asian descent living in America to find themselves in the position of unwitting stand-ins for “Asians in Asia.”¹⁴ For example, during the 1980s when Japanese automakers were perceived as an economic threat to their U.S. counterparts, Asian Americans served as convenient targets of the anti-Asian sentiment du jour. Notably, in a 2001 study investigating common perceptions of and attitudes toward Chinese Americans, researchers found that very few participants reported being able to distinguish between Chinese and other Asian-American groups.¹⁵ Therefore, due in part to individuals of Asian descent being commonly lumped together within the American psyche, it is important to

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 11.

¹⁴ Wu, *Yellow*, 13.

¹⁵ Results revealed that almost half of the respondents believed that Chinese Americans passing secret information to China was a problem; one-quarter thought that Chinese-Americans were taking too many jobs from Americans; and two-thirds forecast that China would be a menace to the U.S. The Committee of 100, *American Attitudes Toward Chinese Americans & Asian Americans, including Conversations with Americans About Chinese Americans, and Asian Americans* (New York: Committee of 100, 2001); see also, Thomas B. Edsall, “25% of U.S. View Chinese Americans Negative, Poll Says,” *Washington Post*, April 26, 2001; quoted in Wu, *Yellow*, 12-13.

highlight historic events which, despite being specific to a particular Asian group's experience, I would argue have significance for *all* individuals of Asian descent, regardless of ethnicity and/or nation of origin.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, oftentimes for many Americans what first comes to mind when asked *to picture American immigrants* are the sepia-toned photographs of careworn European émigrés posed beside their belongings at the Ellis Island Immigration Station.¹⁶ This tendency can be traced back to early scholarship on immigration and ethnicity in the U.S. in which researchers used the words *European* and *immigrant* interchangeably.¹⁷ Another contributing factor may stem from the prevalence of cultural and societal biases held against non-Europeans by the first immigration historians, which led them to exclude Asian groups from the immigrant canon altogether. For example, by classifying the first Asian immigrants, the Chinese, as “sojourners” or temporary visitors, scholars rendered them irrelevant to the study of immigration altogether.¹⁸ Today, historian Richard Daniels readily ascribes his predecessors' reluctance to identify nineteenth-century Chinese as immigrants to a “false and essentially *racist* [emphasis mine] notion that they—and other Asians in that period—were, somehow, different from the other [i.e., European] immigrants.”¹⁹

To the world the U.S. promotes itself as a *nation of immigrants*. In reality, however, the seductive simplicity of this statement belies our country's beliefs regarding whom we

¹⁶ “Rise of Asian Americans,” Pew Research Center.

¹⁷ Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 238.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 239. A “sojourner” is defined as an individual who comes to the U.S. with the expectation of making their fortunes before returning home. Daniels is, also, quick to add that it is “beyond dispute” that the Chinese and their successors came, like so many Europeans, with the intention of sojourning and returning home with a “nest egg.” At the same time, however, Daniels states that despite European and Chinese sojourners' shared actions, some scholars in his words, “do not like to call these Chinese immigrants.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

collectively regard as “real Americans” and ultimately whom we allow into our communities.²⁰ Consequently, immigration policy grants the U.S. a legal means of keeping out those who do not conform to our idea of who is American and of welcoming those who do.²¹ Overlooking the long-standing presence of America’s native inhabitants, the racial make-up of the first group to establish homes on America’s shores and to populate the country (at the expense of its native inhabitants) went on to form the basis of whom we continue to view up to today as “real Americans.”²² Primarily an eighteenth-century undertaking that lasted until 1803, this first wave brought to the North American continent white, predominantly English-speaking, mainly Protestant-European individuals (i.e., White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, or WASPs). This belief in and propagation of the existence of “real Americans” went on to influence three discreet historical phases of anti-immigrant activity, or nativist movements.²³ Of particular interest to the present investigation is the second, anti-Asian phase that accompanied the first influx of immigrants from Asia to the U.S.

Within this first influx of immigrations from Asia, between 1848 and 1924, hundreds and thousands of immigrants from China, Japan, the Philippines, Korea, and India came to the U.S.

²⁰ Bill Ong Hing, *Defining America Through Immigration Policy* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2004), 3. Citing Benjamin Franklin’s opposition against the influx of German immigrants as early as 1751, Hing adds that although immigration laws did not become a permanent fixture in federal statutes until the mid-1880s, debate over newcomers was, in his words, “a part of the political and social discourse even before the Declaration of Independence.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²² Daniels, *Coming*, 265.

²³ *Ibid.* The first phase of anti-immigrant or nativist activity had a religious basis: anti-Catholic, it was aimed at Irish and to a lesser extent German Catholic immigration that flourished from the late 1830s to the mid-1850s. The second phase accompanied the first influx of immigrants from Asia to the U.S. And, the third phase, anti-*all* immigrants, began in the mid-1880s when wide support for a general restriction of immigration gained popularity and finally triumphed in the Immigration Act of 1924, which dominated American policy for the next forty years. In reality, however, Daniels notes that there has never been a time in America’s history when nativist (i.e., pro-WASP) attitudes were entirely absent.

in search of a better life and livelihood.²⁴ The beginnings of the Asian immigration boom can be attributed to two concurrent events: the opening of China to trade with the West and the discovery of gold in California in 1848. More specifically, the California gold rush led to a growing demand for the import of Chinese men to work as cheap labor in the fields of railroad construction, laundries, and domestic service.²⁵ The large-scale immigration of Asians, however, did not truly begin in earnest until 1852, when 52,000 Chinese arrived within this one-year alone.²⁶ To understand the significance of their numbers, previously between 1820 and 1850, of the 2.5 million newcomers who emigrated to the U.S. almost 90% were Europeans, whereas, only 132 individuals could be classified as Asian.²⁷ With the collapse of the U.S. economy during the 1870s, the rapid influx of Chinese to the U.S. came to an abrupt halt. At this time for many Americans (particularly, astute politicians) the racially distinct Chinese provided the perfect scapegoat for the nation's financial downturn. Unsurprisingly, shortly thereafter, public sentiment led to Congress passing the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.²⁸

The Exclusion Act of 1882 suspended immigration of Chinese laborers for only ten years; however, the Act was continued in 1892 and 1902, before being extended indefinitely in 1904.²⁹ Significant to all people of color, whether native-born or not, is that the passage of the

²⁴ Fong is quick to note that although this period represents the first significant wave, the immigrants were by no means the very first Asians to come to America. See Shin-shan Henry Tsai, *The Chinese Experience in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 1; Stan Steiner, *Fusahang: The Chinese Who Built America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 24-35; Elena S. H. Yu, "Filipino Migration and Community Organization in the United States," *California Sociologist* 3, no. 2 (1980): 76-102; and Joan M. Jensen, *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 12-13; quoted in Fong, *Contemporary*, 18.

²⁵ Hing, *Defining*, 29.

²⁶ Fong, *Contemporary*, 18.

²⁷ Hing, *Defining*, 4.

²⁸ Fong, *Contemporary*, 21. Fong points to the massacre of twenty-one Chinese in Los Angeles in 1871 and twenty-eight Chinese in Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885 as examples of the worst incidents.

²⁹ Stanford Lyman, *Chinese Americans* (New York: Random House, 1974), 55-85.

1882 Act marked the first time in the history of the U.S. that a group's entry was *prohibited on the basis of race alone*.³⁰ In researching the social, cultural, and historic origins of anti-Asian immigration policy, legal scholar Bill Ong Hing wryly observes: "It's no accident that the Statue of Liberty faces Europe and has her back to Asia."³¹ His remark points to this idea of the *ideal immigrant* possessing a set of requisite racial, cultural, and physical characteristics consonant with those favored by mainstream America: Western-aligned, as opposed to Eastern. Hing further adds that passage of the Act reveals the "racism and xenophobia" underlying the "extremes to which the nation would go to keep out groups that simply did not fit into the prevailing image of community and *true* Americans [emphasis in the original]."³² Mirroring his impassioned views, Roger Daniels poetically describes the Exclusion Act as "the hinge on which American policy turned, a hinge on which Emma Lazarus's 'golden door' swung almost completely shut."³³ Daniels is, of course, recalling the hallowed lines of Emma Lazarus's ode to the Statue of Liberty, ironically published a year after the passage of the Act, that states: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, ... Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"³⁴ It was not long before anti-Asian exclusionary practices were extended from individuals of Asian descent being denied entry into the country to their being denied American citizenship altogether.

³⁰ Angelo N. Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998): 19-34, 82-104.

³¹ Bill Ong Hing quoted in William R. Tamayo, "When the 'Coloreds' are Neither Black Nor Citizens: the United States Civil Rights Movement and Global Migration," *Asian Law Journal* 2 (1995): 1. The Statue of Liberty was dedicated in 1886, long after Asian immigrants started arriving in large numbers.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Daniels, *Coming*, 271.

³⁴ Excerpt from the famous 1883 poem by Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," which is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty in its entirety.

Ultimately, the withholding of American citizenship from individuals of Asian descent provided an added precaution by more decisively barring those fortunate enough to have gained entry into the U.S. prior to the Act's passage from pursuance of any legal recourse within their adoptive country. Prior to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, for the first time established a uniform national citizenship stating that, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States...are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside."³⁵ In 1870, Congress chose to broaden the law to allow the naturalization of "white persons and persons of African descent," whereby individuals of Asian descent were pointedly excluded.³⁶ This meant that for the thousands of Chinese already living in the U.S. and the hundreds of thousands of additional Asians who followed them over the next eight decades a new federal category of classification had to be created specifically just for them: "aliens ineligible to citizenship."³⁷ Without citizenship, individuals of Asian descent were legally restricted from owning land, obtaining professional occupations, sending for family members from their country of origin to join them, and marrying white Americans; essentially, they were being denied equal participation in American society.³⁸

The constitutionality of naturalization based on race was first challenged in the Supreme Court case of *Ozawa v. United States* (1922). Born in Kanagawa, Japan, on June 15, 1875, Takao Ozawa emigrated to the U.S. as a student in 1894. Within his case, the Court unanimously ruled against Ozawa on two grounds. First, the Court decided that the initial

³⁵ Daniels, *Coming*, 270-71.

³⁶ Ibid. Following the Civil War, the Fourteenth Amendment was enacted to protect the rights of the former slaves. Daniels continues that with regards to the broadening of the Amendment in 1870, while the courts would later haggle about what the phrase "white persons" really meant, the intent of Congress was clear: "Whites and blacks could be naturalized, yellows could not."

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Zhou and Gatewood, "Transforming," 116.

framers of the law and its amendment did not intend to *exclude* people from naturalization, but instead, only determined *who would be included*. Second, the Court also ruled against Ozawa’s argument that Japanese were more “white” than other darker skinned “white people,” namely Italians, Spanish, and Portuguese; the Court further settled the matter by defining a “white person” as a “person of the Caucasian race.”³⁹

Interestingly, prior to the Ozawa case, South Asian Indians had enjoyed the right of naturalization. Although the Supreme Court had determined that South Asian Indians were Caucasian in *United States v. Balsara* (1910), when the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) challenged this decision in the case of *United States v. Thind* (1923), the Supreme Court went on to reverse its earlier ruling. The Court stated that Bhagat Singh Thind could not be a citizen, because he was not “white”—despite South Asian Indians being classified as Caucasian racially; the Court ultimately concluded that “Caucasian” was a *scientific* term “inconsistent with popular understanding.”⁴⁰ Rather significantly, the Court’s final ruling stated that, “It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are *unmistakable differences* [emphasis in the original] between them today.”⁴¹ In the wake of the *Thind* decision and the legal acknowledgement of these “unmistakable differences” the INS went on to pursue cancellation of the citizenship of South Asian Indians retroactively.

Even today, as a point of comparison, although African Americans may be viewed as economically marginalized, they are not considered foreign. Whereas Asian Americans, despite

³⁹ *Takao Ozawa v. United States*, 260 U.S. 178 (1922); from Fong, *Contemporary*, 22-23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 U.S. 204 (1923); *Ibid.*

being viewed as “much better integrated economically,” continue to face “an assumption of foreignness” that prevents them from being fully accepted as Americans.⁴² The ignoble event in our nation’s past that best illustrates the perceived foreignness of individuals of Asian descent within the American psyche was the U.S. government’s decision to relocate and intern in camps more than 110,000 Japanese Americans two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.⁴³ Significantly, by way of contrast, only a fraction of the German- and Italian-American population experienced detention and relocation during the period of U.S. involvement in World War II, whereas, Japanese-American men, women, and children—of whom two-thirds were U.S. citizens—were forcibly removed to remote locations based within the interior states of the West and as far east as Arkansas. Amongst their numbers were individuals with “as little as one-eighth Japanese blood.”⁴⁴ Again, the primary motivation behind U.S. policy’s differing treatment of German and Italian individuals from that of the Japanese is that Asians were viewed by and large as being *essentially* and therefore biologically distinct from white mainstream America.

The reasoning behind the refusal to confer American citizenship to individuals of Asian descent, who immigrated to the U.S. or were born within its borders and the allowance of only a limited number of Asians entry into the U.S. annually arose from the same impulse: a firm belief in “the essential, racial separation of Asians from ‘Americans.’”⁴⁵ Comparative literature scholar

⁴² Mai Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian American Experience Today* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 18.

⁴³ William Petersen, *Japanese Americans* (New York: Random House, 1971), 66-100; Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps, U.S.A.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1971), 75, 81-82; and Jacobus tenBroek, Edward N. Barnhart, and Floyd W. Matson, *Prejudice, War, and the Constitution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 118-20.

⁴⁴ Fong, *Contemporary*, 24.

⁴⁵ David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 3. One example of the American imagination insisting upon essential differences held by

David Palumbo-Liu maintains that this separatist nativist “belief system” is deeply entrenched within the American mindset.⁴⁶ This dissertation’s understanding of the attitude towards and the treatment of Asians within the U.S. has been further informed by Asian studies’ professor Timothy Fong’s erudite observations, notably that the *othering* of Asians is evinced in their continued *permanent visitor* status, such that racial slurs hurled against Asian-American individuals (whether born in the U.S. or not) are oftentimes coupled with anti-immigrant insults such as “go home” and additional “obvious phrases” that convey an underlying animosity against those not recognized as Americans.⁴⁷ I would be remiss not to acknowledge how much both scholars, as well as myself, with our shared reliance upon the oft-combined concepts of *essentialism* and *othering*, owe a great debt to the pioneering work of Palestinian American literary theorist Edward W. Said.

Laying down the foundation of post-colonial studies, Said’s seminal book *Orientalism* (1978) outlines how the West’s positive—moral, advanced, humane, Christian, logical—view of itself has been sustained and perpetuated through the production and dissemination of imagery, descriptions, and attitudes that present a contrasting, negative—immoral, primitive, savage, heathen, sensual—view of the East (Orient), or “Other.”⁴⁸ Said further likens Orientalism to a

various races is that since the 1970s, Asian Americans have been depicted as “overachievers,” and thus successful in certain ways. Yet that achievement (in both domestic and international economies) can be (and has been) recoded variously as unfair competition or as success gained by subjects unfit for social integration because of one sort of “flaw” or another—lack of “broad interests” or “people skills.” Palumbo-Liu concludes this passage by noting that economic success and class ascension do not necessarily erase racial distinctions that leave Asian Americans susceptible to being redefined as “foreign” at specific historical moments.”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Fong, *Contemporary*, 163. A personal example of an “obvious phrase” from the author’s life occurred when some unseen individuals from a nearby residence yelled, “I Chink I know you!” as my brother and I were walking through an affluent neighborhood in St. Louis, Missouri in the middle of the afternoon. Since I consider us to be acculturated *Filipino*-Americans, who were born and grew up in Illinois, I also bring up this incident as an example of how Asians are commonly grouped together within the American psyche.

⁴⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

Western “corporate institution,” whose “practices and discourse” are historically tied to its exercising power aimed at “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the ‘Orient.’”⁴⁹ At its heart, as a system of thought founded on racial essentialism, Orientalism champions European civilization, dynamism, and creativity, over a biologically rooted Oriental decadence, backwardness, and mimicry. Consequently, Said’s discursive formulation of Orientalism encourages Westerners to believe indisputably that their cultures, policies, ethics, and aesthetics are distinct from and therefore inherently superior to those of the Eastern Other.

Furthermore, by dehumanizing the Orient as an antitype to the West—as a zone of barbarism, irrationality, and cultural inferiority, Orientalism ensures that non-Western peoples be held accountable for not living up to human and/or civilized Occidental standards. As a result, Said points out that Orientalism makes acts of Western aggression directed towards the East seem far less objectionable, even laudable, being pursued ultimately *for the Other’s benefit*. Stressing the importance of Said’s work, ethnic studies scholar Gary Y. Okihiro cites Orientalism as “the oldest Western master narrative of Otherness,” the “prototype” for all subsequent Western perceptions of the Other, including that of Native Americans, Blacks, and every other non-White group within the U.S.⁵⁰ Borrowing from and adapting Said’s concept of Orientalism to the U.S., Asian American studies professor John Kuo Wei Tchen has gone on to coin the term “American Orientalism” to describe the Othering of individuals of Asian descent living in America today.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁰ Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 20.

⁵¹ John Kuo Wei Tchen, “Believing is Seeing: Transforming Orientalism and the Occidental Gaze,” in *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, ed. David Sternbach and Joseph N. Newland (New York: Asia Society Galleries/New Press, 1994), 18.

Fundamentally, the attitudes embodied within American Orientalism, Tchen argues, may be found in our nation’s immigration and civil laws, court cases, foreign policies, and the continuation of racially and culturally segregated work and residential landscapes.⁵² I would add that American Orientalism informs the making and promulgation of stereotypes—Asians as permanent visitors (i.e., “foreigners”) mentioned earlier, the “yellow peril,” and the “model minority”—that continue to play a role in preventing Asian individuals from full participation in U.S. society, culture, and life.⁵³ For example, the Asian as yellow peril has surfaced repeatedly throughout American history, particularly on those occasions when the U.S. is engaged in open conflict with a group’s ancestral homeland in Asia. This was the case with Pearl Harbor, the Communist takeover of China in the late 1940s, and the subsequent Cold War in the 1950s, during which Chinese Americans were identified as prime suspects in domestic cases of treason and espionage.⁵⁴ The *model minority* stereotype, despite having the appearance of recognizing the academic and professional strides being made by Asians in America today, only serves to reinforce perceptions of the group’s otherness.⁵⁵ Significantly, as part of a much broader political agenda, American Orientalism works to undercut other minorities’ “claims for equalization of outcomes as opposed to equalization of opportunities,” providing justification for public policy having to pay little to no attention to America’s Asian inhabitants’ needs.⁵⁶

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Zhou and Gatewood, “Transforming,” 132.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ The “model minority stereotype” is defined as the cultural expectation placed on Asian Americans *as a group* (emphasis mine) that each individual will be: “smart (i.e., ‘naturally good at math, science, and technology’), wealthy, hard-working, self-reliant, living ‘the American dream,’ docile and submissive, obedient and uncomplaining, spiritually enlightened and never in need of assistance!” Adopted from “Model Minority Stereotype for Asian Americans,” University of Texas at Austin Counseling and Mental Health Center,” accessed March 4, 2016, <http://cmhc.utexas.edu/modelminority.html>. The site provides additional information on the harmful effects of the model minority stereotype on Asian American students.

⁵⁶ Zhou and Gatewood, “Transforming,” 132-33. The 1992 report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights discussed four ways in which the model minority myth is harmful to Asian Americans: (1) it “diverts attention from real and

Lastly, at its most extreme, American Orientalism can take the form of anti-Asian violence. Asian American leaders commonly cite the brutal 1982 killing of Vincent Chin in Detroit, Michigan, as the incident that briefly brought the issue of anti-Asian violence to national attention.⁵⁷ Holding Japan responsible for America's faltering automotive industry in the 1970s and 1980s and erroneously mistaking Chinese American Chin for Japanese, auto plant supervisor Roland Ebens and his unemployed stepson Michael Nitz bludgeoned Chin to death with a baseball bat. A Michigan judge sentenced each assailant to three years probation and a fine of \$3,780. After intense pressure, the U.S. Department of Justice brought federal civil rights charges against the two men. Two years after Chin's murder in June 1984, Nitz was acquitted of the civil rights charge, whereas, Ebens was found guilty and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. Remarkably, two years later, Ebens's conviction was overturned on appeal, and his second trial in April 1987, ended with him being judged not guilty of the crime with which he had been originally charged.⁵⁸

Roland Ebens's acquittal sent a chilling message to the Asian American community at large. Its members interpreted the federal court's decision as a legal exercise that firmly established Asian Americans' subordinate position within U.S. society. At best, Americans of

very serious social socioeconomic problems that plague many segments of the Asian American population"; (2) it "distracts public attention away from continued, often times overt, racial discrimination faced by Asian Americans"; (3) as a stereotype, it "places undue pressure and anguish on young Asian Americans who think they have to achieve in school"; and (4) it "serves to fuel competition and resentment among other racial minorities who are asked, if Asian Americans can succeed, why can't they." U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Civil Rights Issues Facing Asian Americans in the 1990s* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992), 19; quoted in Fong, *Contemporary*, 62-63.

⁵⁷ Fong, *Contemporary*, 153.

⁵⁸ Ebens's conviction was overturned by the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in September 1986. A new trial was ordered in part because of prosecutorial misconduct. Evidence of prosecutorial misconduct included references by the prosecutor to impermissible hearsay statements in the closing argument. A new trial was also ordered because critical evidence had not been admitted at the trial court. The critical evidence included tapes of the main witnesses being questioned and potentially coached in their responses. See *United States v. Ronald Ebens* 800 F.2d.1422 (6th Cir. 1986); excerpted from Fong, *Contemporary*, 188.

Asian descent were to be viewed and therefore treated as second-class citizens—tolerated, as long as they behaved as a quiet and passive model minority, but patronized, or worse when they attempted to exercise their legal rights.⁵⁹

In response to the verdict, Asian American legal and civil rights organizations across the country came together and formed the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium (NAPALC). With the creation of NAPALC, the Asian American community began to carefully document and monitor incidents of hate violence involving Asians in America.⁶⁰ Since 1993, the group has annually published an *Audit of Violence Against Asian Pacific Americans*. The highest reported number of anti-Asian hate incidents occurred in 1995 with 534 incidents; and they spiked again in 2001 with 501 incidents. NAPALC attributes the more recent rise of hate incidents to the backlash against not only Arab Americans and Muslims after 9/11, but also “against immigrants in general” and “anyone who looked like they might be a Muslim or of Middle Eastern heritage.”⁶¹

Scholarship has attributed anti-Asian sentiment and violence to two possible sources.⁶² The first relates directly to public perception of the existing economic and political relationship between the U.S. and Asian countries, as in the case of the murder of Vincent Chin. The second results from animosity and jealousy being directed toward those Asian Americans who are believed to have achieved model minority status at the expense of other groups.

The attribution of Korean shop owners’ success at the expense of others may have played a role in the events leading up to the Los Angeles riots that quickly ignited following the jury

⁵⁹ Fong, *Contemporary*, 154.

⁶⁰ The National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium changed their name to the Asian Americans Advancing Justice Center; their website is <http://www.advancingjustice-aajc.org>, accessed January 23, 2016.

⁶¹ Fong, *Contemporary*, 154.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 165.

acquittal of four Los Angeles Police Department officers in the beating of Rodney King on April 29, 1992.⁶³ Not long after the disturbance began, it became immediately clear that Korean American businesses were being targeted by mobs made up of predominantly African-American and Hispanic individuals.⁶⁴ In response to the media coverage of the week-long violence that began in South Central before spreading throughout the Los Angeles area, Elaine Kim, a Korean American professor of American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, published a searing critique of our nation's leaders and her fellow Americans in a popular weekly news magazine. The impassioned scholar excoriated *Newsweek's* readers stating, "Korean American newcomers must feel utterly betrayed by what they had believed was a democratic system that would protect life, liberty and property."⁶⁵ Her piece took a personal turn when she continued, "The shopkeepers who trusted the government to protect them [in the form of assistance from the police and fire departments] lost everything. In a sense, they may have finally come to know what my parents knew more than half a century ago: that the American dream is only an empty promise."⁶⁶

⁶³ The riots began after a trial jury acquitted four Los Angeles Police Department officers of assault and use of excessive force; the officers—three white, one Latino—had been videotaped beating Rodney King, an African American, following a high-speed police pursuit. A man living nearby had videotaped the incident; his tape provoked condemnation around the world and enraged an already frustrated Los Angeles African American community, which felt that racial profiling and abuse by the police was going unchecked. The riot was the "worst single episode of urban unrest in American history," before ending, it left 53 people dead and \$1 billion in damage. Madison Gray, "The L.A. Riots: 15 Years After Rodney King," *Time*, April 25, 2007.

⁶⁴ As the primary targets of looters and arsonists, Korean businesses suffered more than \$350 million in damage; the economic blow suffered by the nation's largest Korean-American community was so severe that for some residents the "classic immigrant pattern" was reversed: people in Korea were taking up collections to send aid to their loved ones in America. Seth Mydans, "Korean Shop Owners Fearful of Outcome of Beating Trial," *New York Times*, April 10, 1993.

⁶⁵ Elaine Kim, "They Armed in Self-Defense," *Newsweek*, May 18, 1992.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Rather significantly, the true threat of the “perpetual foreigner syndrome” lies in its power to deprive individuals of Asian descent their civil rights.⁶⁷ In addition to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, which law professor, author, and public intellectual Frank H. Wu refers to as confirming far more than any other episode in U.S. history that “Asian Americans are not accepted,” he also singles out “Asia Gate,” or the financial scandal that surrounded President Bill Clinton’s re-election campaign in 1996 as another glaring example of their rejection.⁶⁸ More specifically, Wu highlights the significant role that the media played in fanning public fears of “the Yellow Peril taking over the U.S. Presidency” with news outlets’ focus on the monetary contributions supplied by high-profile Chinese fundraisers for the Democratic party being coupled with the unrelenting cry for campaign finance reform.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, in the end “Asia Gate” ended up overshadowing the positive inroads then being made by Asian Americans in the political arena in 1998.⁷⁰ More devastating, perhaps, is how the false media attention fed into public fears regarding the loyalty and reliability of individuals of Asian descent.⁷¹

Why dredge up examples of anti-Asian sentiment from U.S. history? How does this contribute to our understanding of artists as immigrants? I posit that for the majority of non-European newcomers to this country issues concerning race and ethnicity are unavoidable, where those from more homogeneous cultures may find themselves recognizing for the first time the physical reality of their raced body. How one’s group has historically been regarded by and treated within American society, as well as the current relations between the U.S. and one’s

⁶⁷ Wu, *Yellow*, 95.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Morrison G. Wong, “Chinese Americans,” in *Asian Americans: Contemporary Trends and Issues*, 2nd ed., ed. Pyong Gap Min (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2006), 138.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 138-39.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

country of origin are factors that influence one's reception in the U.S. As a result, once in America, immigrants of color may be subjected to the encounter of being pinned down by *a gaze* that perceives their colored body as an object.

Taking this concept that *the gaze* can drain the colored body of its humanity and adding to it the idea that one can be shocked into seeing one's previously unseen racial self is evinced by a story borrowed from the life of psychiatrist, philosopher, revolutionary, and writer Frantz Fanon. It had been during the 1940s, while walking down a street in Marseille that the Martinique-born Afro-French Fanon's cosmopolitan view of himself was forever shattered by the anxious reaction of a little boy. Upon first encountering the black author, the startled child cried out to his mother: "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" In an instant, as Fanon vividly recounts, "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning that white winter day."⁷² Immigrants of color may be able to share experiences similar to that of the celebrated writer. I even would argue that the fact that Tseng's, Lee's, and Matthew's projects each address issues concerning the artist's embodied Chinese, Korean, and South Asian Indian ethnic identities, respectively, through a series of performative self-portraits following their arrival to the U.S. points to the three artists' sharing analogous experiences to some degree.

It was the passage of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act that cleared the way for the three artists' entry into the U.S. During the 1960s, with U.S. entanglement in the unpopular war in Vietnam and the concerted efforts of the Civil Rights Movement, a combination of international and domestic crises forced Congress to address any remaining discriminatory immigration legislation. The 1965 Immigration Reform Act and its amendments significantly increased the

⁷² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles L. Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 112-13.

quotas established after World War II, allowing the Eastern hemisphere a maximum of 20,000 individuals per country and setting a ceiling of 170,000 individuals total.⁷³ Between 1971 and 1995—a period of time that covers Tseng’s arrival in 1978 and Lee’s and Matthew’s in 1994—approximately 17.1 million immigrants came to the U.S., nearly matching the total number of immigrants who arrived during the first quarter of the twentieth century (17.2 million admissions between 1901 and 1925) when immigration was at its peak.⁷⁴ In contrast to their turn-of-the-century predecessors, however, more recent newcomers hail predominantly from non-European countries and are more highly educated. The share of immigrants from Asia, as a proportion of the total admissions, grew from 5% in the 1950s to 33% in the 1970s, and has remained at around 35% since 1980, with the Philippines, China/Taiwan, Korea, India, and Vietnam being among the top-ten countries of origin since 1980.⁷⁵

This dissertation contends that by visually asserting the three artists’ Americanness, *East Meets West*, *Projects*, and *An Indian from India* compel American audiences to reexamine their views of immigrants and immigration and bring them up-to-date. I will explore this topic further in later chapters, but for now in the section that follows I will focus on a single work by each artist that draws upon American audiences’ existing associations with a shared patriotic icon: the American flag.

⁷³ Fong, *Contemporary*, 27.

⁷⁴ “The number includes 1.6 million formerly unauthorized aliens and 1.1 million Special Agricultural Workers who were granted permanent-resident status under the provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986.” Zhou and Gatewood, “Transforming,” 115.

⁷⁵ “The number of immigrants excludes those from Israel and Turkey. The exception to the statement in the text is 1991, when the Asian share dropped to 18% due to the sudden increase in the legalizes under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, most of whom were Mexicans or Central Americans.” Zhou and Gatewood, “Transforming,” 115.

Stars, Stripes, & Immigration

The power of the Stars and Stripes as a national symbol is illustrated most recently in the visual prominence of the American flag in the days and weeks following 9/11.⁷⁶ For a country that viewed itself as being under attack, Old Glory provided its anxious citizens a powerful means to demonstrate publicly their defiance against terrorism, to incite fellow Americans to rise together toward a common purpose, and to offer as a balm “a soothing security blanket for a wounded nation.”⁷⁷ The importance of the flag to the American psyche is captured in an insightful comment made at this time by Carolyn Marvin, a communications professor at the University of Pennsylvania, who stated, “Every time there’s some kind of national emergency, we put up flags. ... The flag represents the life of the country.”⁷⁸

Prior to turning to the three artists’ portrayals of *themselves and America* in imagery featuring Old Glory, I will begin by outlining a structuring premise that underlies the present research. All three artists originally embarked upon their photographic series while living in the U.S. and with an American audience in mind. Due to my interest, then, in probing the typical American viewer’s response to the three artists of interests’ works, I must look to one of the three positions that audiences, or receivers, may assume when decoding the meanings within cultural texts, as outlined in cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s reception theory, specifically his

⁷⁶ Within hours of the attacks all over the country, one encountered the Stars and Stripes fluttering on the breeze from front porches, emblazoning hat visors, and adhering to car bumpers oftentimes coupled with catchy slogans like “these colors don’t run.” Associated Press, “Post-9/11, a security blanket for a wounded nation,” *USA Today*, updated July 2, 2011, accessed January 23, 2016, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2011-07-02-911-anniversary-flag_n.htm.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

“dominant-hegemonic position.”⁷⁹ Within this position, the viewer or audience member (receiver) is located within the parameters of the dominant point of view, such that little to no misunderstanding or miscommunication occurs between sender and receiver, since both are presumably operating within the same set of rules, assumptions, and cultural biases.⁸⁰ In this case, for example, by relying upon the American flag, Tseng, Lee, and Matthew adopt Hall’s dominant-hegemonic position and invite audiences (receivers) to examine their own—and, by extension mainstream society’s—role in constructing representations and understandings of the Other. At the same time, the three artists endorse subjectivities that bring much needed attention to those occupying their adoptive country’s margins, thus hopefully forcing a reconsideration of who or what constitutes an American.

Pursuing this idea further and taking into account Hall’s idea of the dominant-hegemonic position, how would an American audience interpret the insertion of the Stars and Stripes into the self-portraiture of contemporary immigrant artists? To address this question, let us next explore below a few turn-of-the-century photographs that illustrate the flag’s role in communicating to new arrivals to the U.S. the message that, “Whatever nation you belong to by birth, ... whatever tongue your mother taught you, whatever your color or race, no matter, there is only one flag,” where *one* flag implies *one* nation and a realignment of *one*’s allegiance.⁸¹

⁷⁹ The three different positions that can be assumed by the decoding subject are: the dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional positions. Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. S. During (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 101.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 102-03.

⁸¹ “Origin of Flag Presentation to Educational Institutions,” in Ceremony of Flag Presentation to Columbia University of the City of New York, May Second, 1896, and May Seventh, 1898, by Lafayette Post No. 140, Department of New York, Grand Army Republic (privately printed by Lafayette Post, 1899), 105-07; quoted in, Richard Ellis, *To the Flag: The Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 4. Ellis notes that the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was a politically active organization that in 1890 counted over four hundred thousand Union army veterans as members. Lafayette Post No. 140 was among the most active of the local branches of the GAR in New York; the branch presented the “dear old Flag” to the City College of New York in an elaborate ceremony in June 1888.

Relevant to my research, a guiding premise that informed the development of the Pledge of Allegiance during the late-nineteenth century was that by having newcomers (or their children) pledge allegiance to one nation—the U.S.—in the guise of the flag, any differences possessed by the immigrant group and/or individual may be effectively erased.

Assimilation, then, shares affinities with the idea of America as “melting pot,” where “to assimilate” is to absorb into the culture or mores of a population, such that any connections to one’s previous membership, defined by language, customs, and beliefs—cease to exist.⁸² Both of the photographs selected as examples hew to this traditional immigrant narrative of assimilation. We begin, first, with a photograph made by the reformer Jacob Riis, who emigrated to the U.S. from Denmark while in his twenties and is remembered today for his compelling images documenting the squalid living conditions of individuals, predominantly immigrants, forced to reside in New City’s tenement slums. In Riis’s *Saluting the Flag in the Mott Street Industrial School* (Figure 4; c. 1890), we encounter a young girl holding an upraised flag before an attentive class. Opposite her stand orderly rows of children, right hands raised respectfully at their brows. Standing off to the side, two women—presumably teachers, observe their pupils, comprised of recent arrivals to the U.S. or their offspring, ensuring that each student as prospective American citizens assumes the proper attitude of reverence toward the esteemed national symbol.

The American flag also features prominently in a later photograph of immigrants (Figure 5; c. 1904) made by Augustus F. Sherman, who worked as a registry clerk for the Immigration Division of Ellis Island. Here, we encounter boys and girls ranging in age from infants and

⁸² “Assimilate,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assimilate>.

toddlers to children in their early teens accompanied by mothers and staff while posing for the photographer beneath the harsh glare of the noonday sun. The motley group are photographed within the confines of the brightly illuminated immigrant inspection station's roof garden, a large outdoor area that provided fresh air and exercise for those being detained for further examination, awaiting news from sponsors, or receiving treatment in the infirmary.⁸³ Borne aloft in the hands of six future Americans—pending successful processing at the station—is our national symbol of conditional acceptance, the American flag.

Moving to another photograph made by Sherman on the same occasion featuring children being pulled in the “Uncle Sam” cart (Figure 6; c. 1904), historian Anna Pegler-Gordon pointedly observes that where Sherman portrayed his adult sitters as being from the “Old Country,” his photographs of children suggest the possibility of their assimilation, while stressing the “necessity of Americanization.”⁸⁴ Informing Pegler-Gordon's interpretation is a contemporary comment made by Commissioner of Immigration at Ellis Island Frederic C. Howe, who wrote at the time when the garden photos were made, “Ellis Island is not only the ‘gateway of the nation’ but it is the nation's great kindergarten of Americanization.”⁸⁵

Within the Mott School and Ellis Island photographs, the presence of the Stars and Stripes amongst America's youngest newcomers cannot be underestimated. By engaging with

⁸³ *A Nation of Strangers*, 48.

⁸⁴ Anna Pegler-Gordon, *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2009), 146-47.

⁸⁵ Commissioner Howe to Secretary of Labor Davis, October 5, 1921, Chief Clerk's File, 2/174B, Records of the Department of Labor (RG 174), National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., cited in Harlan Unrau, *The Historic Resource Study: Ellis Island-Statue of Liberty National Monument*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1984), 557, quoted in Pegler-Gordon, *In Sight*, 146-47. The propagandistic nature of this image cannot be overemphasized, since versions of this photograph were included in the 1904 annual report, as well as reproduced in additional publications and in Commissioner William Williams' scrapbook outlining improvements made at Ellis Island. *Annual Report of the Commissioner General of Immigration* (1904), opp. 99, and Scrapbook 1, William Williams Photograph Collection, Local History and Genealogy Division, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

this potent national symbol in the form of presentation, pledge, and salutation ceremonies, immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century were encouraged to “come and gather [beneath] its blessed folds. . . . [to be] tangled in the stars and covered with the stripes.”⁸⁶ This seeming statement of universal inclusion rendered through one’s stated allegiance to the flag was concurrent with the height of European immigration to the U.S. and Riis’s and Sherman’s flag photographs. In practice, then, assimilative models of pledging oneself to one’s adoptive nation at the expense of previously held language, customs, and beliefs were created with predominantly white European individuals in mind. As a result, assimilative models, in reality, have little relevance to immigrants of color for whom blending in with white mainstream America was (and is) not an option.

In her recent autobiographical essay, “Whose America Is It?,” writer and professor of English literature Amy Ling recounts her experience of growing up as a Chinese immigrant in the U.S. Summarizing U.S. education policy as “totally homogenizing and assimilationist,” Ling observes that,

The prevailing national self-concept was Israel Zangwill’s metaphor of the large melting pot, where all the peoples of the world would be mixed together and come out WASP, celebrating Columbus Day and Thanksgiving from the Pilgrims’ point of view; Memorial and Veteran’s Day and the Fourth of July, waving the red, white, and blue.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ “Origin of the Flag Presentation to Educational Institutions”; quoted in Ellis, *To the Flag*, 4.

⁸⁷ Amy Ling, “Whose America Is It?” *Weber Studies* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 28. Between 1891 and 1920 over eighteen million southern and eastern European-born individuals entered the U.S. In 1890, the population was just under sixty-three million; by 1910, more than one in seven Americans were foreign-born. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975). During this period of exponential growth Israel Zangwill penned his 1914 play, *The Melting-Pot*. In a scene that echoes the sentiments expressed in Ling’s future childhood reminisces, two characters remark how, “Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian—black and yellow—Jew and Gentile—Yes, East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross are melted and fused by the purging flame of the Great Melting-Pot.” Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot* (New York: MacMillan, 1920; originally published 1914), 1-2.

On its surface her remembrances echo the assimilationist sentiments being promoted by Riis's and Sherman's turn-of-the-century photographs. Applying a critical eye to the national holidays that defined her childhood, Ling highlights her participation in these celebrations in order to move on to her next point: the sheer futility of the patriotic flag waving exercises. If intended to banish her unwelcome thoughts of being unmixable—thoughts that threatened her very identity as an American, such public displays only underlined for the scholar her unassimilable appearance. This sentiment is evinced by Ling's further reflections.

Recalling the three decades spent growing up and living within the U.S., Ling points to the insurmountable task she endured of holding onto her American identity while being faced by the fact that:

[T]he United States [had] fought three wars in Asia against people that looked like me: in the Forties against the Japanese, in the Fifties against the Koreans and the Communist Chinese, and in the Sixties against the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotian. It's extremely difficult and totally confusing to feel American and to look like the enemy.⁸⁸

Her painful reminiscences highlight the contradictory messages being extended by the U.S. to its Asian newcomers—the pull forward of invitation countered by the push backward of rejection. Despite feeling seemingly embraced by her adoptive country on the occasion of national holidays, Ling articulates her inability to banish feelings of being emotionally, psychologically, and physically repelled when confronted by the physical reality of her raced body, as framed by America's geopolitical ambitions in Asia.

I would argue that the push-pull borne out by Ling's memories is one of the hallmarks of the contemporary immigrant experience in the U.S. As demonstrated by Riis's and Sherman's photographs and by Ling's essay, for the immigrant being represented within the context of our

⁸⁸ Ling, "Whose," 28.

nation's symbol, engaging with the Stars and Stripes through waving, or addressing it by reciting the Pledge are important acts that can provide proof of one's loyalty and devotion to one's adoptive country. In working within an American idiom and context, Tseng, Lee, and Matthew assert their own right to being American on their terms.

An Asian Betsy Ross? Gaze trained above that of his imagined viewers, a young man of Asian descent poses stiffly at attention (Figure 1). Betraying nothing of his thoughts, the man's expressionless face reads as a blank cipher. Behind him and across the street stands a modest brick building. The man is the artist Tseng Kwong Chi; the building is the Betsy Ross house in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Figure 1 is but one of many hundreds of black-and-white self-portraits made by Tseng for his decade-long East Meets West project, in which the artist repeatedly photographed himself at recognizable tourist sites. At each location, attired in Mao suit, mirrored sunglasses, and ID badge hanging from his left breast pocket, Tseng would doggedly assume the role of the "unofficial" or "ambiguous" ambassador.⁸⁹

Although *Betsy Ross House, Pennsylvania* (1981), for the most part, fulfills Tseng's project's parameters—a formally uniformed stony-faced artist posed in relation to an identifiable landmark—he does in this case deviate from his customary appearance. For this, his portrait with the birthplace of our beloved national symbol, the artist has removed his characteristic reflective eyewear, making his features more accessible than is usual. Perhaps, even more significant to the present investigation is what the artist holds in his upraised left hand—two flags: the Betsy Ross flag—known by its alternating red-and-white striped field, interrupted by a blue canton (upper corner nearest the flagpole) with thirteen five-pointed stars arranged in a circle—coupled with the flag of the People's Republic of China—a predominantly red field

⁸⁹ Lucy R. Lippard, *On The Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place* (New York: New Press, 1999), 35-36.

interrupted by one large gold star set off by four smaller stars at its canton. Tseng's highly symbolic act of unifying and clasping in one hand the potent signifiers of two polarized nations—one democratic, one communist—during the midst of the Cold War strikes one as being particularly important to his artistic undertaking.

Contemporary with *Betsy Ross House* is another work by Tseng that provides additional insight as to the significance of Old Glory within his art making. For Tseng's ironic *Moral Majority* (Figure 7; 1981)—comprised of twenty black-and-white photographic portraits arranged into a four-by-five grid—the artist travelled to Washington, D.C. carrying a wooden board to which he had roughly stapled a crumpled American flag.⁹⁰ Makeshift prop in hand, Tseng next approached our nation's elected public servants and invited them to pose alongside his doctored flag. Not coincidentally, the twenty politicians who agreed to be photographed by the artist also happened to be the most high profile conservatives working in Washington at this time—Republicans such as, Alfonse D'Amato, Bob Dornan, Reed Larson, and Daniel P. Drake, with the most prominent figure being that of William F. Buckley, Jr.

The importance of Buckley's contribution to American conservative politics cannot be overstated, as evidenced by a memorial penned on the occasion of his death in 2008 by William Kristol, then editor of the neoconservative *Weekly Standard*. As Kristol pithily puts it, "Before Buckley, there was no American conservative movement."⁹¹ Significant to our understanding of Tseng's *Moral Majority*, is an editorial, penned by a young Buckley while editor-in-chief of the *Yale Daily News*, conveying early evidence of his notorious intolerance. In response to a

⁹⁰ David S. Rubin, *Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994), 37.

⁹¹ William Kristol, "The Indispensable Man," *New York Times*, March 3, 2008. Kristol adds, "There were interesting (if mostly little-known) conservative thinkers. Plenty of Americans had conservative inclinations and sentiments. But Buckley created conservatism as a political and intellectual movement."

reader's challenging of a previous editorial, which asserted Yale's right, as a private institution, to exclude any and all minorities, and in anticipation of reactionary arguments against civil rights legislation in the 1960s, Buckley snapped, "Discrimination of sorts [is] indispensable to the free society.... Human beings are equal only in the eyes of God."⁹²

Buckley's views on homosexuality reveal similar prejudice. The political commentator is also remembered for his untoward conduct when debating Gore Vidal at the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention.⁹³ The customarily unflappable Buckley, while losing his temper on national television, had angrily retorted back to his political rival with, "Now listen, you queer, stop calling me a crypto-Nazi or I'll sock you in the goddamn face and you'll stay plastered."⁹⁴ In addition to this public media incident there was also Buckley's callous response to the 1980s AIDS epidemic, when he wrote an op-ed piece for *The New York Times* that advocated for the branding of HIV-positive individuals with the tattooed equivalent of the Scarlet Letter "A," so that the American public may "be protected."⁹⁵

As a gay Chinese man living and working in New York during the late 1970s and 80s, Tseng would have been aware of the cultural crusades being spearheaded by the Moral Majority, a prominent American political organization founded by the Baptist minister Jerry Falwell and his associates that married together interests of the Christian right with those of the Republican Party. Turning to the artist's *Moral Majority*, then, one would not be mistaken in interpreting

⁹² "The Problems at Hand," *Yale Daily News*, September 24, 1949; "Needed: A Little Tolerance," *Yale Daily News*, October 12, 1949; editor's note, *Yale Daily News*, December 12, 1949. Fifty-years later, reacting negatively to the public outcry for the enforced separation of church and state within America's public schools, Buckley had this to say, "Although there are secondary schools that attempt to keep Christianity prominently in sight, this much is plain: there is today another God, and it is multiculturalism." Quoted in William F. Buckley, Jr., *Nearer, My God: An Autobiography of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 37.

⁹³ John B. Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 292. For an extended description of the extent of the feud between Buckley and Vidal refer to pages 288-95.

⁹⁴ William F. Buckley, Jr., quoted in *ibid.*, 292.

⁹⁵ William F. Buckley, Jr., "Crucial Steps in Combating the AIDS Epidemic; Identify All the Carriers," *New York Times*, March 18, 1986.

Tseng's title as tongue-in-cheek. Within the culture and society in which the artist established his home, Tseng's sitters' *majority* position as Anglo-hetero-males provides a stark contrast to the artist's own *double minority* status. Tseng's use of the word *moral* refers to those individuals, who subscribe to conservative politics and who then, as now, are quick to affirm their thoughts, behaviors, and actions as being founded on morality (in theory, if not in practice). Therefore, one could say that Tseng targeted the members of the Moral Majority based upon their aversion to *his* presence within American society, as a person of color who engages in intimate relationships with members of the same sex. Furthermore, Tseng, by positioning these self-elected—after all, they had had the opportunity to decline participation in his project—representatives of the *Moral Majority* against the backdrop of an imperfect symbol of American patriotism in the form of a ruffled flag, is essentially mocking, thereby reducing the stature of these federal legislators, as well as, artistically deriding their exclusionary politics.⁹⁶ This brings us to the question: how does Tseng's use of the Stars and Stripes in *Moral Majority* influence our reading of the artist's self-portrait before Betsy Ross's home (Figure 1)?

I would argue that by pursuing a self-portrait made in association with one of America's most patriotic residences, Tseng, as in the case of *Moral Majority*, alludes to feeling distanced from his adoptive home. As an example, let us go through an exercise where we consider the artist's portrait compared to an imagined contemporaneous tourist snapshot made at the same location. During the 1980s, one would have encountered the latter more familiar photograph either prominently displayed over the mantle or safely tucked away enclosed within the pages of an overstuffed family album. Within the fictional image one would most likely view tourists

⁹⁶ Rubin, *Old Glory*, 37. Rubin adds how, "Oblivious to the fact that the flag was ruffled, the politicians not only posed, but later signed the photos with amicable salutations!"

plural, as opposed to the sole figure occupying Tseng's photo. The convivial group portrait conveys a more informal, relaxed, and playful mood. The artist's self-portrait, by way of contrast, is decidedly opposite in tone; Tseng's impassive features, rigid pose, and uniform-clad body communicate a formality and seriousness absent from the fictional photograph. That he presents himself in static black-and-white, as opposed to living color, underlines that his is a self-portrait devoid of warmth. Finally, by standing across the street at a noticeable distance from the historic residence, the artist creates an Alice-in-Wonderland effect so that the dwarfed scale of the door compared to the pictorial gigantism of Tseng, effectively denies him entry. The miniaturized portal brings to my mind periods in our nation's history when immigrants of Asian origin were effectively barred from even gaining entry into the U.S.

Tseng's relation to his adoptive country, as expressed in *Betsy Ross House*, communicates an ambivalence that is neither entirely positive, nor altogether negative. For example, despite feeling unwelcome, by holding the Betsy Ross and People's Republic flags in one hand, Tseng symbolically combines the two nations. In doing so, the artist conveys his refusal to adopt one flag and therefore one country over the other. What is not clear, however, is whether his gesture was intended as an act of defiance, or as a reaction to how he as a gay Chinese man is perceived within the U.S. I tend to favor the latter, as will be revealed further in the following chapter that focuses on Tseng. For now, let us consider the presence of China's flag, as the artist's acknowledgement of America's inability to look past his raced body and, by extension, historic relations between the U.S. and Communist China.

I would also argue that the ambiguity, or push-pull of Tseng's relationship to his adoptive home shares parallels with an earlier photograph (Figure 8; c. 1943) made by an unknown photographer in the Manzanar Internment Camp soon after the U.S.'s entry into World War II.

Facing the viewer, a smartly dressed young woman of Asian descent sits in front of a Singer sewing machine. Gaze cast downward, she focuses on the task at hand: stitching what may be the finishing touches on Old Glory. The patriotism implied by her act cannot be underestimated, since it was by virtue of being Japanese alone that she found herself summarily interned at Manzanar by mandate of the U.S. government.

Armed with the knowledge that the seamstress is being coerced to apply her skill upon the national symbol of her captors (and for the countrymen who abandoned her), I interpret the generous folds of the flag as a fabric barrier that parallels the function of the dwarfed door of Tseng's *Betsy Ross House*: they demarcate a line. In both photographs, the contact between insiders and outsiders seems prohibited; however, in the case of the anonymous Japanese woman the implied segregation mirrored her daily reality. The patriotic cloth's divisive placement echoes the presence of the barbed wire fencing, which marked the perimeter of the camp where the sewer and her unseen companions were interned.

Although interpreted above as being unwelcome, as in Tseng's self-portrait beside Betsy Ross's house, the depiction of a "Japanese American Betsy Ross" commissioned by the U.S. government also contains a "mixed-message."⁹⁷ Where Tseng's portrayal communicates the push-pull of attraction and repulsion towards his adoptive country, the internment photograph illustrates the nation's confused attitude towards its citizens of Asian descent. The woman portrayed in "Japanese American Betsy Ross" conveys the elusive promise that immigrants of Asian descent can assimilate into American life and culture, while at the same time reminding them that full admittance is an impossibility.

⁹⁷ *A Nation of Strangers*, 78.

To reinforce my point that Asian individuals' attempts to assimilate into American life by "pledging to one flag, one nation" provide no guarantee of acceptance, let us next turn to another image that dates to the same period as that of the Manzanar photograph.

American Enough. A handsome child at the center of a motley group of boys of roughly the same age and size stands two steps ahead and apart from his peers (Figure 9; 1942). He holds in both hands a slender pole from which flies an American flag. Behind the standard bearer his companions show proper deference to the Stars and Stripes in varying degrees. The students of Raphael Weill School dutifully try to maintain an erect stance, left arms at their sides, right palms to their breasts; they are reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. In contrast to Jacob Riis's earlier nineteenth-century photograph, these children stand united behind the flag, rather than standing at attention before it. This image is but one of nearly eight hundred photographs made by photographer Dorothea Lange, only to be confiscated and suppressed by the federal government's War Relocation Authority (WRA).

Interestingly, it was the WRA who had originally commissioned these photographs that it went on to later find controversial. Prior to the Raphael Weill assignment, the talented photographer had established a name for herself through her Farm Security Administration work made during the Great Depression. Lange had made the flag recitation group portrait as part of a larger effort to document the internment so that the U.S. government could demonstrate to its detractors that the Japanese detainees were not being mistreated nor was international law being violated.⁹⁸ According to the photographer's records, Lange began making photographs at the

⁹⁸ Dinitia Smith, "Photographs of an Episode that Lives in Infamy," *New York Times*, November 6, 2006. The article was written on the occasion of the release of Linda Gordon and Gary K. Okihiro's *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006). The historians' thoughtful publication provides its audiences with some of the images and background surrounding the

Raphael Weill School in the heart of Little Tokyo in San Francisco, California, on Thursday, April 19, 1942—only two weeks after the first 644 Japanese had been evacuated from the city.⁹⁹ Of interest to my research, her photographs of the schoolchildren, as well as those made within the internment camp, were never published during her lifetime.¹⁰⁰ Historian Linda Gordon maintains that in the eyes of the U.S. government, Lange’s imagery possessed unacceptable content that “unequivocally denounce[d] an unjustified, unnecessary, and racist [governmental] policy.”¹⁰¹

What was so subversive about Lange’s photograph of young boys aligned behind the flag? Recalling the charged racial climate of the 1940s, one is immediately struck by the group’s diversity. Here are individuals representing brown, white, black, and yellow populations assembled together in the act of reciting the Pledge as one body, one voice. In one month’s time, the Japanese children who eagerly posed for the photographer would no longer be attending Raphael Weill School, having been evacuated with their families and neighbors to be housed and detained for the duration of the war in government-sponsored WRA centers.¹⁰² By focusing on male schoolchildren specifically, Lange evokes for viewers the troops, representing every nation, who were at this time presently engaged in armed combat around the globe. By situating the young Japanese boys’ high esteem for the U.S. within the context of their classmates’ diversity at a time when the country had only months ago declared war against the country of their ancestry, Lange pictorially demonstrates the importance of group affiliation in defining one’s identity.

nearly 800 photographs made by Lange of Japanese internees recently found in the National Archives, “where they had lain neglected for a half-century after being impounded by the government.” Smith, “Photographs.”

⁹⁹ Gladys Hansen, “Dorothea Lange at Raphael Weill School—1942,” The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco, accessed November 23, 2013, <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist10/lange2.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Linda Gordon, “Dorothea Lange Photographs the Japanese American Internment,” in Gordon and Okiihiro, *Impounded*, 5.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰² Text excerpted from Dorothea Lange’s original caption for this photograph. Gordon and Okiihiro, *Impounded*, 86.

Simply put, it is not so much who we are, as who we are with, that can define us in our eyes. At the same time taking into account the historical context that informs Lange's photograph, her image suggests that outward displays of membership are not enough: that despite one's best efforts one's *yellow* race can act as a barrier.

A contemporary artist who recognizes the complex interplay of individual and group identity, and race, is Nikki S. Lee. In her *Projects* series, Lee capitalizes on the concept of identity as defined through group membership, in order to reveal its unstable nature.

In *Projects*, Lee infiltrates different American groups as defined by socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, ethnicity, hobbies, music preference, age, and so on; and then has herself photographed either engaged in a stereotypical in-group activity or posed alongside willing group members. Her companions have ranged in type from affluent yuppies enjoying their lunch break to young punks clowning at a club. In Figure 2, standing between the sturdy wooden pillars of an airy shaded porch, the artist—the lone female at the center—and her obliging escorts stop and pose for the camera. In making her photographs, Lee will hand off her inexpensive point-and-shoot camera to someone—typically a stranger or a group member enlisted ad hoc—to take a snap of her installed within the milieu of her adopted cohort.

For this particular group photograph, Lee tames her black tresses with a fetching crimson snood, an ornamental hairnet worn at the back of a woman's head; and pairs it with a coordinating cap-sleeved dress. The artist's obliging male companions sport a range of casual tops suitable for the warm weather—from Hawaiian, to bowling, to undershirt; all of the men save one sport a rakish Panama hat. The title of this image, *The Swingers Project (53)* (1998-99), and the group's period attire align them with America's Swing Era, also known as the Big Band Era, which peaked during the Second World War. This epoch in our nation's history is

contemporary with Dorothea Lange's Japanese internment photographs, the U.S.'s dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the turning of America's attention to Lee's native Korea following Japan's surrender to the Allies.

Lee's inclusion of the American flag in a photograph that evokes an era within her adoptive nation's past when it was aggressively broadening its sphere of influence so that it might establish democracy within the Eastern hemisphere, is decidedly provocative. In reality, if this had been an actual photograph dating to the 1940s-50s and the men accompanying the artist on the porch had been G.I.'s on leave from fighting for their country in the Pacific Theatre, how welcome would Lee's highly visible Asian presence, her raced body, be then?

This question calls to mind sentiments raised by Amy Ling, who recalled the confusion and difficulty she experienced when attempting to "feel American" while looking "like the enemy."¹⁰³ Immigrant authors of color are able to position their writing against the social and historical backgrounds of their countries of origin in addition to that of mainstream U.S. culture, effectively providing a multifaceted perspective on world history that incorporates personal responses to significant global events. Narratives that comment upon international events yield insight as to the effects of American policies at home and abroad, while at the same time allowing for multiple perspectives from which to appraise the formation of an "American identity."¹⁰⁴ The same might be said of immigrant artists of color when they position their visual work against the social and historical backgrounds of their homelands, as well as that of their adoptive country.

¹⁰³ Ling, "Whose," 28.

¹⁰⁴ Dodge, "Visualizing," 173-74.

The presence (or absence) of the American flag in their works raises issues related to belonging: who does and does not belong. For example, how did Manzanar's inhabitants view the presence of the American flag within their camp (Figure 10; 1942)? Was it interpreted as a symbol of invitation and hope, or oppression and abandonment? Very likely, the answer is more complex and involves some combination of these summary responses. Regardless, as had been the case of the immigrant children waving Old Glory upon Ellis Island's rooftop playground and the schoolchildren reciting the Pledge in one of New York City's overcrowded classrooms, the American flag has historically been employed as a tool of indoctrination to be applied towards members of any racial, ethnic, and/or cultural group perceived as Other. Of relevance to the present research and the work of the dissertation's final artist of interest, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, is how America's beliefs, attitudes, and behavior concerning the assimilation of its native inhabitants bear a striking resemblance to its eventual treatment of immigrants of Asian descent.

Before & After. Before-and-after photographs provide, as if true, a seeming visual account of a frictionless path to assimilation. Intentions such as these are visible in a catalogue cover designed for the Carlisle Institute's Indian Industrial Training School (Figure 11; 1895). Intended to be read by an English-speaking audience from left to right, the Native American Indian's relinquishing of the primitive teepee on a desolate plain on the left, for the modern balloon-frame dwelling on a well-appointed lawn on the right, promotes assimilation as the one true path. Accompanying the domestic coupling is an equally effective portrait pairing featuring before-and-after representations of the same individual. As a result, through the stark simplicity of the before-and-after narrative format, Chauncey Yellow Robe seamlessly appears to trade in his traditional longhair, feather, and savage buckskins on the left, for the more respectable

modern haircut, tie, and somber dark suit on the right. Rather succinctly, the viewer moves from uncivilized to civilized within the breadth of a single page.

Richard Henry Pratt, the individual responsible for founding the Carlisle Institute in 1879, frequently summarized for attentive white audiences (and potential benefactors) his program for “cultural transformation,” stating that, “The Indian must die as an Indian to live as a man.”¹⁰⁵ Chauncey Yellow Robe, as one of the few students who remained at Carlisle long enough to graduate, went on to become the school’s official spokesperson: gracing its publications, as in the example discussed here, even to the extent of publically playing the part. For the Institute’s exhibit at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition held in Chicago to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ arrival in the New World, Yellow Robe served as a living “sample” of the kinds of changes the Institute wrought in addition to supplying visitors with first-hand information.¹⁰⁶

Returning to the catalogue cover, by now it should come as no surprise that the final visual marker of Yellow Robe’s successful assimilation, from burgeoning Indian warrior to an individual whom Pratt described as “a fine specimen of gentlemanly young manhood,” is conveyed symbolically through Yellow Robe’s exchange of his diminutive bow and quiver full of arrows for the much larger, bolder American Flag. From the before-and-after iconography, which illustrates for promotional purposes Chauncey Yellow Robe’s assimilationist transformation, we next move to a pairing created by the artist Annu Palakunnathu Matthew for her *An Indian from India* series.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Henry Pratt quoted in Lorna M. Malsheimer, “‘Imitation White Man’: Images of Transformation at the Carlisle Indian School,” *Studies in Visual Communication* 11, no. 4 (Fall 1985): 55.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Henry Pratt quoted in *Battlefield and Classroom: Four Decades with the American Indian*, ed. Robert M. Utley (Carlisle, PA: Cumberland County Historical Society, 1964, originally published in 1908), 307; from Malsheimer, “Imitation,” 67.

Amongst the three performative photographic projects that are the focus of this dissertation, Matthew's *An Indian from India* more directly addresses how immigrants as artists may address the acculturative pressure of negotiating between the twin desires of adopting the new dominant host culture's worldview, while retaining vestiges of one's culture of origin within a sustained body of work.¹⁰⁷ In *An Indian from India*, Matthew couples turn-of-the-century photographs of Native Americans with digitally manipulated images of herself attired in traditional South Asian Indian dress or contemporary Western dress, depending on the dictates of her model image.¹⁰⁸ By using archival photographs as the source for both images—a literal copy in one case, a re-creation in the other—the artist looks to a time in the U.S.'s past when photography was being used to support Anglo-American imperialist ambitions. Further, by drawing attention to this earlier construction of Native Americans as a vanishing race, Matthew draws parallels between the historical injustices inflicted by Anglo-colonial ambitions upon two sets of Indians: Native American and South Asian.

By situating her self-portraits within the context of her adoptive country's past, Matthew communicates her desire to be part of its present and its future. Tseng and Lee share similar interests, albeit by embedding themselves amongst America's places and people, respectively. As Matthew demonstrates in her coupling (Figure 3) of *American Indian Woman Wearing Flag* (1913) on the left, and *Indian American Wearing Flag as Sari* (2003) on the right, she intends to dictate the terms of her citizenship, rather than have them dictated for her. Within each portrait,

¹⁰⁷ Joseph E. Trimble, "Introduction: Social Change and Acculturation," in *Acculturation: Advances in Theory, Measurement, and Applied Research*, ed. Kevin M. Chun, Pamela Balls Organista, and Gerardo Marin (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2003), 6-7. Acculturation is not only limited to immigrants; any individual who identifies with a group that occupies a marginal position in relation to a larger dominant society may experience acculturative pressure.

¹⁰⁸ Gary Hesse, "Introduction," in *Annu Palakunnathu Matthew: Bollywood Cowboys and Indians from India, Contact Sheet* vol. 115 (Syracuse, NY: Light Work, 2002), 2.

a young, dark-haired woman returns the camera's gaze from the middle of the same sparsely furnished room. Beginning with American Indian on the left, the stout figure is simply dressed in an ironed blouse and long dark skirt. She stands proudly, for two artistically draped American flags fall from her left shoulder. Although not a before-and-after image per se, the message being communicated by the early-twentieth century photographer, Joseph Kossuth Dixon, in the earlier image serves the same purpose as Chauncey Yellow Robe's portraits: the noble savage has been domesticated and ultimately assimilated into American culture. Dixon's portrait, with its conspicuous incorporation of the U.S. flag, showcases the American Indian's assimilation so successfully that a before portrait of the sitter attired in beads, feathers, and buckskins would have been superfluous.

In contrast to her Native American companion, Matthew does not merely swathe herself in the American flag, but instead wears it as a sari. She effectively adapts the Stars and Stripes to the wants, needs, and desires that she requires of her adoptive country: to accept her and her South Asian Indian heritage as is. Not dissimilar to Chang-rae Lee's fictional immigrant characters, the artist states, "I am American," as opposed to "I am becoming American." Matthew cleverly asserts her *Indian-first-American-secondness* by wending a cloth patterned with our nation's symbol around her raced body as a sari—an outer garment, commonly made of cotton or silk, that is elaborately draped around the body and traditionally worn by women of South Asia. Through the restructuring, recoding, and combining of American—the flag—and South Asian Indian—the *sari*—signifiers in her self-portrait, Matthew embodies what she refers to as Homi K. Bhabha's notion of "cultural hybridity," or the coming together of two cultures which "give[s] rise to something different. Something new and unrecognizable, a new area of

meaning and representation.”¹⁰⁹ Her pairing shares affinities with Tseng’s coupling of the American and Chinese flags in *Betsy Ross House, Pennsylvania*, and Lee’s coupling of the American Swing Era with her raced South Korean self. In marked contrast to her *American Indian* predecessor, however, the *Indian American* Matthew continues to cling tightly to her culture of origin, represented here in the shape of a form-fitting *sari*, as she simultaneously cloaks herself in America’s red, white, and blue.

Artists Tseng, Lee, and Matthew, despite being better educated than members of previous generations of immigrants of Asian descent, continue to share concerns common to all immigrants as to how to navigate the process of assimilation, how to resolve a new and/or differing perception of themselves vis-à-vis the “mainstream community,” and how to respond to their adoptive countrymen and -women’s perceptions of their country of origin.¹¹⁰ Recalling the period in her life during her time in the U.S. when she realized that she was no longer part of the “dominant culture,” Vishakha N. Desai, the President and CEO of the Asia Society in New York, had this to say of her thoughts and behaviors at this time: “With a greater awareness of my public rather than private self . . . I tended to interpret all of my new experiences in terms of others’ expectations of me as an Indian.”¹¹¹ Art historian and Asian studies scholar Margo Machida makes a similar observation: “From the moment a person enters the sphere of a new nation, s/he inherits for better or worse, the cumulative historical experiences, politically determined status,

¹⁰⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. John Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 211; quoted in Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, “Perception and Projection: Dual Identity as an Indian Artist in the U.S.,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (MONSOON 2002): 68.

¹¹⁰ Vishakha N. Desai, “Whither Home? The Predicament of a Bicultural Existence,” in *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, ed. David Sternbach and Joseph N. Newland (New York: Asia Society Galleries/New Press, 1994), 26.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

and assemblage of beliefs and representations that surround what is perceived to be his/her group.”¹¹²

As stated previously, the issue of race is unavoidable for Asian artists or any person of color interested in exploring the immigrant experience. Thinking about oneself in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and so on, leads us to issues concerning identity. As author Gish Jen writes, “This whole search for identity, this navel-gazing, is very American. . . . Once you start thinking about what it means to be Irish-American or African-American or Chinese-American, then you’re American.”¹¹³ The three artists’ performative self-portraits round out our understanding of our nation’s immigrant past and present, while at the same time working to influence its future. In closing, as Gish Jen astutely observes above, this search for identity is a distinctly American pursuit, therefore, in the chapters that follow I will explore how each artist’s visual narrative—Tseng’s *East Meets West*, Lee’s *Projects*, and Matthew’s *An Indian from India*—is ultimately an American story.

¹¹² Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2008), 198.

¹¹³ Gish Jen quoted in Sachs, “American.” In another example of this, during a dialogue between Korean American and Korean artists (from Korea) for *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art* (1993) held at the Queens Museum of Art in New York, the conversation quickly went sour when Korean artists repeatedly criticized their U.S. counterparts for creating works, which they viewed as being overly concerned with race, as it was not an issue in a fairly homogenous society such as theirs. In Allan DeSouza, “The Flight of/from the Authentic Primitive,” in *Memories of Overdevelopment: Philippine Diaspora in Contemporary Art*, ed. Wayne Baerwaldt, (Irvine: University of California/Irvine Art Gallery, 1997), 123.

Chapter 2: Filling-in-the-Blanks of Tseng Kwong Chi's East Meets West

A young man of Asian descent anchors the bottom left corner of a square black-and-white large-format photograph (Figure 12; 1979). Two skyscrapers rise above him, their precise geometric forms creating stark lines against the inky black backdrop of a cloudless sky. Due to the low vantage point man and towers appear monumental, imposing. This effect is furthered by the subject's appearance. With his crisp uniform, stiff military bearing, and hand locked tight around the trigger of his camera's shutter release cord, the creator and subject of this photograph, Tseng Kwong Chi (1950-90), seems to have more in common with the cool precision of the city's architecture than the warmth of its human inhabitants.

With this image our investigation begins at the base of the Windows on the World Restaurant, where Tseng embarked upon the first of many outings marked by his wearing of the Zhongshan suit evocative of the recently deceased Communist leader Mao Zedong.¹ It had been in 1978, soon after Tseng Kwong Chi had joined his younger sister Muna Tseng living in New York, that their parents came for a visit. As Muna explains:

My brother didn't have a suit and Windows [on the World] had a dress code, so he wore his Mao suit instead. When he arrived at Windows the maître d' took one look at him and treated him like a V.I.P., a gentleman from the East, an emissary from Cathay.²

Unfortunately, despite the fun to be had at the wait staff's expense, the elder Tsengs, incensed by their son's attire, chided him saying, "We escaped China because of this. How could you do this

¹ Tseng Kwong Chi did not know whether he owned "a real Mao suit." In a 1996 interview with *New York Times*, Muna Tseng shared that the elderly man who sold Tseng the suit could not say conclusively whether the suit had been meant for Kuomintang or Chinese Communist officials. Margaret Loke, "Inside Photography," *New York Times*, October 18, 1996. It was years after the *New York Times* interview that Muna learned that the suit was really a Nationalist uniform from the 1930s. In C. Carr, "Just Visiting This Planet," *Village Voice*, March 9, 1999.

² Carr, "Just."

to us?”³ As a former member of the Nationalist army, Kwong Chi and Muna’s father had opposed Communism and Mao Zedong. After the Communist party rose to power in 1949, their parents had quickly escaped from Shanghai to Hong Kong, where Tseng Kwong Chi was born a year later. Then, in 1966, with the onset of the Cultural Revolution fanning worries that forces loyal to the mainland would next move to seize control of Hong Kong, the Tseng family relocated again, this time to Canada. As a result, one can understand how his parents would view Tseng’s wearing of the Mao suit as a personal affront.

It may come as a surprise, then, that Tseng is best known today for his Zhongshan suit self-portraits. When he began in 1979, he called his photographic project *East Meets West* (1979-89). Around 1987, however, Tseng began referring to his work as *The Expeditionary Series*; the significance of this shift will be further explored later in the chapter.⁴ For now, let us focus on uncovering why Tseng repeatedly donned, performed, and photographed himself adopting a uniform so at odds with his family’s history. Making his clothing choice even more puzzling, perhaps, is the fact that during his lifetime, Tseng had wanted to be identified first and foremost as an “artist” and had “hated” the idea of being identified as an “Asian American artist.”⁵ Why, then, if he had wished to avoid essentialist readings of his identity and his work, did Tseng pursue an artistic endeavor reliant upon such a strongly coded Chinese signifier—the Mao suit—for its meaning?

The present investigation looks to Tseng’s experience as an immigrant of Asian descent for answers. One of the many challenges faced by newcomers to the U.S. is how to come to

³ Muna Tseng, quoted in *SlutForArt*, by Muna Tseng, directed by Muna Tseng, Goodwin Theater, Austin Arts Center, Hartford, CT, April 20, 2006.

⁴ For the sake of clarity, this dissertation will refer to Tseng Kwong Chi’s photographic project as *East Meets West*.

⁵ Muna Tseng, quoted in *SlutForArt*.

terms with the majority culture's existing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors concerning their minority status, as it relates to perceived nationality and/or culture of origin. This may involve learning about historic and/or current perceptions, as well as developing a familiarity with the identity politics of the day. For artists of color, such as Tseng, self-portraiture provides an opportunity to pinpoint the physical human body as *the site* of artistic investigation, bringing us to issues concerning identity—more specifically a collective racial, ethnic, and/or national group identity. Also, in keeping with psychoanalysis, feminism, and postcolonial and postmodern theory, through his enacting of the mysterious Asian *Other* within his photographs Tseng is supporting an *anti-essentialist* position of racial, ethnic, and/or national identity that challenges conceptualizations of identity as “an internally unified order” with a clear meaning that can be “captured and represented.”⁶

Recalling Rudyard Kipling's well-known dictum that, “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” the West has historically been both intrigued and baffled by Asian or “Eastern” cultures and the “Oriental mind.”⁷ Edward Said describes this *othering* as the West's “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over” the East.⁸ For example, historian John W. Dower observes that as early as the mid-sixteenth century frustrated Jesuit missionaries described the Japanese mind as “inscrutable” and “topsy-turvy” in order to demonstrate how even up until World War II such thinking prevailed, “virtually unchanged by succeeding

⁶ James Martin, “Identity,” in *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*, ed. David Atkinson et al. (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 99. See also, Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York; London: Routledge, 1993) and *Gender Trouble*, 2nd ed. (New York; London: Routledge, 1999); and Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs Identity?” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996).

⁷ John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 95.

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 3.

centuries of Western observers.”⁹ In another example, looking to Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1976), Rey Chow notes how the celebrated philosopher’s attempt to “read across cultures” resulted in the casting of “Chinese writing as the metaphor for difference from Western phonocentrism.”¹⁰ She adds that this, of course, had implications for the broader fields of Chinese and Asian studies such that, “Translated into the context of high theory and philosophy, ‘inscrutable Chinese’ is no longer simply the enigmatic exterior of the oriental but also an *entire language and culture reduced to (sur)face, image and ideogram* [emphasis in the original].”¹¹

This focus on imaging leads us to Hollywood and its role in perpetuating the “yellow peril” stereotype.¹² Film scholar Gina Marchetti traces the “yellow peril” to the West’s “medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions of Europe,” adding that it “combines racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the irresistible dark, occult forces of the

⁹ Dower, *War*, 94. Father Francisco Cabral, head of the Jesuit mission from 1570 to 1581, wrote, “Among the Japanese it is considered a matter of honor and wisdom not to disclose the inner self, to prevent anyone’s reading therein. They are trained to this from childhood; they are educated to be inscrutable and false.” Cabral’s successor, Alessandro Valignano observes, “They have rites and ceremonies so different from those of other nations that it seems they deliberately try to be unlike other people. The things which they do in this respect are so beyond imagining and it may be truly said that Japan is a world in reverse of Europe, everything is so different and opposite that they are like us in practically nothing.” Dower nicely folds into his discussion comments made by experts of Japan prior to and during World War II, that echo sentiments expressed by the Jesuit friars. For example, Barbara Tuchman, who would later go on to become of the U.S.’s most celebrated historians, had this to say: “So completely divorced is the Japanese mental process from the Occidental, so devoid of what Westerners call logic, that the Japanese are able to make statements, knowing they present a false picture, yet sincerely believing them. How this is accomplished it is impossible for a foreigner to understand, much less to explain.” Selections quoted in *ibid.*, 95-96 from George Elison, *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 16; Michael J. Cooper, S.J., ed., *They Came to Japan: An Anthology of European Reports on Japan, 1543-1640* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 229; and Tuchman’s essay published as Barbara Wertheim, “Japan: A Clinical Note,” *Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 3 (April 1936): 521-26, and reprinted in her *Practicing History: Selected Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 93-97.

¹⁰ Rey Chow, “How (the) Inscrutable Chinese Led to Globalized Theory,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America* 116, no. 1, Special Topic: Globalizing Literary Studies (Jan 2001): 70. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

¹¹ Chow, “How (the) Inscrutable,” 72.

¹² Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2.

East.”¹³ As the archetypal villain, Fu Manchu may be viewed as the fictional “yellow peril” incarnate.¹⁴ With his sinister eyebrows, long mustache, and even longer fingernails, movies “capitalized only on his colorful blood-lust and genius for torture.”¹⁵ Even the “good guy” film-detective, Charlie Chan, who spoke in fortune cookie one-liners, was a riddle, as indicated by this loaded-compliment to Chan made by another character, “You’re all right. Just like chop suey. A mystery, but a swell dish.”¹⁶ Also relevant, the mystery of Chinatown was suggested by a whole series of visual clichés—“the ominous shadow of an Oriental figure thrown against a wall, secret panels which slid back to reveal an inscrutable Oriental face, the huge shadows of a hand with tapering fingers and long painted fingernails poised menacingly, the raised dagger appearing suddenly and unexpectedly from closed curtains.”¹⁷

Ultimately, what is at stake for individuals of Asian descent by being labeled as the “mysterious other,” is that they are being denied their humanity. As noted within the previous chapter, within the U.S. this *othering* determined the jobs that Asians were able to acquire, the sizes of their families, and even their self-esteem. In *East Meets West*, Tseng invokes the trope of the inscrutable Asian other, which has historically been viewed as a fixed identity, maybe

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Journalist Sax Rohmer invented the fictional character of Fu Manchu after visiting Limehouse, London’s East End Chinatown in the early twentieth century. Fu debuted in a short story “The Zayat Kiss” (1912), the first of a series of that was published in the novel, *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1913; retitled in the U.S. as *The Insidious Fu Manchu*), before being featured in radio, film, and television. The general plot was that Fu Manchu, “highly educated in Europe, a master of disguise, a scientist and commander of secret societies in Asia would plan world domination,” as revenge against foreigners for the death of his wife. Roger Garcia, *Out of the Shadows: Asians in American Cinema* (Milan, Italy: Olivares, 2001), 242.

¹⁵ William K. Everson, *A Pictorial History of the Movie Villain* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1974), 38.

¹⁶ In *Charlie Chan at the Opera* (1936), quoted in Nita Tewari and Alvin Alvarez, *Asian American Psychology: Current Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 426.

¹⁷ Dorothy Jones, *The Portrayal of China and India on the American Screen, 1896-1955* (Cambridge, MA: Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1955), 24.

even an essentialist one, and transforms it into something anti-essentialist. As his friend, the dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones, observes:

[Kwong Chi's] imagery was always [that of] the curious, blank Chinese tourist. I always said to Kwong that you don't fool me. I know, I can sense protest when I see it. ... That this blankness was the way in which the culture at large expected him, as an Asian man, to exist, so he became a kind of cipher. He became a smooth surface that because it was so impenetrable, it reflected everything.¹⁸

My research picks up where Jones left off by following up on his assertion that Tseng adopts the persona of the “curious, blank Chinese” as an act of “protest.” Therefore, within his self-portraits the artist cleverly employs Western stereotypes of the “inscrutable Chinese,” as portrayed by his expressionless face in Figure 12 and fills-in-this-blank with multiple personae—permanent visitor, ambassador, SlutForArt, and tourist—in order to promote a worldview in which he is regarded as an artist first, Asian second.¹⁹

“Permanent Visitor”

Tseng blurs the boundary between life and art within *East Meets West*. The project's longevity as an artistic endeavor, from the year following the artist's arrival in New York City up until his untimely death from AIDS-related complications, underscores its importance. That Tseng actively planned and spoke of “the photographs that he was going to take in Alaska,” as the vision in his left eye began to deteriorate near the end of his life also reflects its personal significance.²⁰ In fact, for much of his life his thoughts rarely strayed from his series, since it was not uncommon for the artist to travel with Mao suit, camera, and tripod close at hand, thus

¹⁸ *SlutForArt*.

¹⁹ The Western stereotype of the “inscrutable Chinese” may also rest upon an observation made by those who are outside Chinese culture that the enigmatic exterior of the Oriental is an essential reflection of character. For an informative discussion about the habitual readings of exteriors—faces and bodies—in the treatment of Asian Americans by mainstream American society, please see David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 81-146.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

enabling him to make self-portraits at a moment's notice.²¹ I would argue that attempts to separate Tseng's life from his art become even more complicated when one becomes aware of how much his artistic process was intertwined with his personal life, such as his homosexuality and his active participation within the Manhattan club and East Village art scenes.

As a result, it should come as no surprise that Tseng's first self-portraits were made while vacationing with friends in Provincetown, Massachusetts, a narrow strip of sand located at the outermost curve of Cape Cod, also referred to as "Land's End," "Cape Tip," and by some, "Queersville, U.S.A."²² In *Hometowns: Gay Men Write About Where They Belong*, Reed Woodhouse describes the seaside resort as "one of the two or three places on the continent where gay people can be seen in something like their native habitat."²³ Since the postwar era, white gay men and lesbians found in Provincetown "a place where they could create ... a thriving gay world that celebrated rather than demonized gender and sexual alternatives."²⁴ Significant to my research, Woodhouse notes that in Provincetown he had experienced "the chance to get 'Family' right, and if not go home again, to go there happily for the first time."²⁵ As the eldest son born into a traditional Chinese family, Tseng had been expected to carry on the family name by first marrying and then fathering male children. At seventeen, the artist rejected his familial obligation outright by informing his father that he was gay.²⁶

²¹ Tseng "always had the suit with him"—"in the trunk of the car and the equipment. Everything." Kenny Scharf, quoted in *SlutForArt*. Many of the photographs from *East Meets West* were made during Tseng's travels, which would oftentimes combine work with pleasure. For example, the *East Meets West* photographs made in Rio de Janeiro were made when the artist visited and photographed his friend, painter and installation artist Kenny Scharf, at his studio in Brazil.

²² Michael Cunningham, "Social Studies: Out Town," *Out*, June 1995, 83; quoted in Karen Christel Krahulik, *Provincetown: From Pilgrim Landing to Gay Resort* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2005), 4.

²³ Reed Woodhouse, "Provincetown," in *Hometowns: Gay Men Write About Where They Belong*, ed. John Preston (New York: Dutton, 1991), 127.

²⁴ Krahulik, *Provincetown*, 152.

²⁵ Woodhouse, "Provincetown," 226.

²⁶ Loke, "Inside."

Therefore, in addition to race, Tseng's sexual orientation further barred him from gaining acceptance from mainstream America. His awareness of the position of homosexuals within the U.S. was explored in the previous chapter's discussion of his *Moral Majority* (1981) portraits in which senators and congressmen—all of whom as strong proponents of American family values were vehemently anti-gay—had been photographed against the backdrop of a conspicuously rumpled American flag. Painter and installation artist Kenny Scharf, who accompanied his friend, the Mao-suit attired Tseng on this particular assignment for the *SoHo Weekly News*, amusedly recalls that when the notable Washington politicians thought to question the flag's bedraggled appearance, Tseng shrewdly responded that our nation's symbol would appear to be “blowing in the wind” when photographed.²⁷ It was, of course, only after the photographs were developed that America's so-called “Moral Majority” were revealed as having been portrayed alongside, in Scharf's words, the “saddest looking crumpled flag.” On his friend's methodology, Scharf notes, “Kwong was someone who could exist in many worlds and somehow maintain his subversive edge without the knowledge of his subjects, whom he was actually skewering.”²⁸ In *Moral Majority*, Tseng alerts audiences of his opinion regarding how gays were being perceived as public pariahs as high up as our nation's capital, since around this same time in 1984, *The New York Times* had published an article featuring a July report from the Centers for Disease Control about a mysterious “gay cancer” and the damning pattern amongst those afflicted of amyl nitrate and LSD use “to heighten sexual pleasure.”²⁹ Such press coverage served to further

²⁷ Kenny Scharf, quoted in *Tseng Kwong Chi: Self-Portraits 1979-1989* (New York: Paul Kasmin Gallery, 2008), n.p.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Quoted in Fiona Buckland, *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), xvi.

alienate the public, as well as deny gays sympathy when the AIDS epidemic later gained momentum.³⁰

Reflecting upon the significance of his gay identity within Moral Majority and the site of his first self-portraits for *East Meets West*—Provincetown, Massachusetts, one cannot dismiss the importance of place to Tseng’s photographic series. By representing himself within the context of “Queersville, U.S.A.,” the artist cleverly invokes multiple identities, problematizing and frustrating essentialist views of identity. In *Provincetown, Massachusetts* (Figure 13; 1979), we encounter the artist standing before a charming seaside cottage, complete with clapboard siding, flower boxes, and shutters sporting jaunty anchors. Beyond its tidy frame, a mere strip on the horizon suggests the nearby sea. Detracting from what might have been a picturesque scene is that rather than sand or grass, the ground is conspicuously paved with hard, unyielding asphalt. Additional details of inhospitableness exist such as the drawn curtains and the stunted foliage occupying the planters. With his back to bungalow Number Three’s door, Tseng affects indifference, not dissimilar to the response of someone who feigns disinterest upon having just been snubbed. Although he turns his body slightly towards the viewer, the artist angles his head away so as to avoid our gaze. Meanwhile, by reflecting only the stark coldness of the *white* New England sky, his mirrored sunglasses block any hint of warmth or humanity, thus rendering a portrait of Tseng in which he appears simultaneously alienated and alien—I place emphasis on white as a means of underlining that his yellow race may have barred him from full participation within Provincetown’s “thriving gay world.”

³⁰ On April 23, 1984, the U.S. government made an announcement to the international community that the probable cause of AIDS is the virus known as HIV. Ibid.

This dissertation contends that one of the driving forces behind Tseng's *East Meet West* is that it provides a response to his experience of feeling unwelcome within the U.S., while simultaneously stating his intention of making a home for himself regardless. In addition to photographs, his commitment is also evident within his performances made for film and television. For instance, in 1984, Tseng collaborated with producer Christine Lombard to create a six-minute film, also, titled *East Meets West*. In the closing scenes, we see the artist on a ferry bound for Liberty Island. Over the course of the journey, Tseng narrates:

Life in Europe is extremely attractive. And, yet, I settled down in New York. I found, there, a suitable environment for my artistic journey. This city allows me to live and express myself spontaneously. I couldn't sense this individual freedom anywhere else.

The film concludes with a still-image from his photographic series of Tseng standing alongside the Statue of Liberty (Figure 14; 1979). Focusing first on the artist's facial expression, where writer and critic Dan Bacalzo observes "a slightly menacing air," I see instead determination. In the film, Tseng states that he chose to "settle down in New York" over pursuing a "life in Europe." His statement should not be taken lightly. The artist spoke fluent French, having received most of his formal training in Paris at L'École Supérieure d'Arts Graphiques of L'Académie Julien. Additionally, Tseng notes that life in New York "allows" him to live and express himself spontaneously. His enthusiasm, however, does not preclude him, as an immigrant of Asian descent, from being viewed as a "permanent visitor."

In fact, the artist acknowledges his "permanent visitor" status during a guest appearance on theatre professor Kestutis Nakas's *Your Program of Programs*, a cable access television show that aired in New York City during the early 1980s.³¹ Alerting his audience to the performative

³¹ "Tseng Kwong Chi on 'Your Program of Programs,'" accessed January 23, 2016, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsxDSyBa3iA>.

and serial nature of Tseng's photographic project, the host states, "He's been doing this kind of thing all over town." After noticing Tseng's ID badge bearing the word, "Visitor," Nakas adds that he is "a visitor here." It is at this point that the artist intervenes. Rather than allow his host to define him in front of a live and television audience, the artist intercepts and corrects Nakas before he can continue stating that he, Tseng, is "a *permanent* [emphasis in the original] visitor here." His choice of wording carries two possible readings relevant to the experience of immigrants (more specifically) and individuals of Asian descent (more generally) living in the U.S. First, is that as a person of Asian descent he, Tseng, will always be viewed as a visitor to this country. Second, the artist is publicly stating his intention to *permanently* settle down and make a home for himself in the U.S. despite not feeling entirely welcome.

Both readings of "permanent visitor" come into play within Tseng's portrayal alongside the Statue of Liberty. Through this self-portrait the artist aligns himself and his work with a potent symbol of America and its most cherished values. Positioned in relation to Ellis Island, Lady Liberty is recognized as the "nation's gatekeeper" and female embodiment of the nation: a visual foil to the more "authoritative and demanding figure of Uncle Sam."³² Standing also for the American ideals of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," the sculpture signifies "America's promise" to people all over the globe.³³ Tseng, standing at the foot of this hallowed figure, appears appropriately solemn.

Interestingly, within Asian American history there exists a certain irony to the monument's past. The celebrated sculpture was dedicated in 1886, four years after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which for the first time in our nation's history prohibited a group's entry

³² Sau-ling C. Wong, "Middle-Class American Women in a Global Frame: Refiguring the Statue of Liberty in Divakaruni and Minatoya," *MELUS* 29, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2004): 184.

³³ *Ibid.*

on the basis of race and ushered in a series of restrictive laws against the Chinese and other “undesirable groups (i.e., other Asians) deemed unsuitable for assimilation into the nation.”³⁴

The Act was not repealed until 1943.

Prior to the Act’s passage, a cartoon (Figure 15; 1881) in *The Wasp*, a weekly satirical magazine published out of San Francisco, both recognized nationwide efforts to raise money for a pedestal worthy of the Statue of Liberty, while promulgating anti-Chinese sentiment. The circumstances and the timing of “A Statue for *Our* Harbor,” as the cartoon is titled, demonstrate the historic ties between immigration and this particular American monument. The publication’s emphasis on the word “Our” underlines the idea that New York Harbor will no longer belong to Americans once Chinese individuals have gained access to its shores. Rather ironically, the man responsible for drawing the “anti-America he imagined would emerge were the Chinese to keep coming,” George Frederic Keller, was himself a recent immigrant from Germany.³⁵

In Keller’s dystopian view of an America overrun by Chinese hordes, the haunting figure of a slight man with slant eyes, a yellow hue, and serpentine queue has replaced the Statue of Liberty as the triumphant centerpiece of New York Harbor. Wearing tattered rags, this blighted signpost to a weakened nation holds in one hand an opium pipe; its foot rests prominently atop a grinning skull. Rays bearing the words “FILTH,” “IMMORALITY,” “DISEASES,” and “RUIN TO WHITE LABOR”—the societal ills attributed to Chinese individuals at this time—ring its brow. High overhead, a lurid moon with Asian features watches over the smoking ruins of Manhattan below. Although Tseng, in all likelihood, had not been aware of this nineteenth-

³⁴ Angelo N. Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998): 19-34, 82-104.

³⁵ John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats, *Yellow Peril!: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear* (London; New York: Verso, 2014), 231.

century cartoon of the pigtailed Chinaman masquerading as Lady Liberty, the artist appears to understand the significance of portraying himself in a heroic light when standing in the company of *the* symbol of American immigration past and present.

After all, the monument and what it represents—the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—held great personal significance to Tseng; otherwise, why request that following his death his ashes be scattered into New York Harbor from the ferry bound for the Statue of Liberty?³⁶ Again, instead of seeing what Bacalzo refers to as “a menacing air,” what I see reflected in Tseng’s stance is an individual prepared to stand his ground. Although the artist is positioned well beneath the sculpture’s base, Lady Liberty does not dwarf him, nor does he stand in her shadow. Instead, his body seems to be spot lit from above. Furthermore, his gaze mirrors hers. Like her, he is on the lookout for immigrants, who like him are eager to find a sense of “individual freedom” on America’s shores.

As well as addressing historic perceptions of Asians as “permanent visitors” to the U.S., as an immigrant Tseng also had to contend with contemporary views of the People’s Republic of China. In the section that follows, I will look at China’s global, political, and economic position in the late 1970s and 80s since it affected the artist’s experiences while residing within his adoptive country and traveling abroad. After all, *East Meets West* provided Tseng the perfect platform from which to explore his relation with not one, but two countries: the U.S.—the country in which he could live his life freely as a gay Chinese man—and the People’s Republic of China—the country from which his parents fled to escape an oppressive Communist regime.

³⁶ *SlutForArt*.

“Unofficial” or “Ambiguous” Ambassador

As carefully crafted as his ambassador persona, the name that the artist adopted after arriving in the U.S.—Tseng Kwong Chi—adhered to the Chinese tradition that one’s family name precedes one’s given name.³⁷ Interestingly, he assumed the more ethnic sounding appellation following his first public appearance wearing a Mao suit so that he might enjoy a meal out with his family at the Windows on the World restaurant. That Tseng’s name change was coincident with the emergence of his strongly-coded Asian persona reveals the high level of self-awareness that characterized his performance, whereby the artist observed himself enacting his audience’s expectations of how a Chinese man should act, look, and behave. At the same time, by basing what he referred to as his “unofficial” and/or “ambiguous ambassador” persona on the figure of Chairman Mao Zedong, Tseng drew from the awe that the Communist leader and his associates inspired, as was personally experienced by the artist when dining at Windows.

The artist states that *East Meets West* was inspired by U.S. President Richard Nixon’s historic visit to the People’s Republic of China in 1972. In Tseng’s words:

This project began in 1979. When President Nixon went to China a real exchange was supposed to take place between the East and the West. However, the relations remained official and superficial. My distant attitude expresses the mystery still surrounding China.³⁸

His statement suggests that we should examine the events leading up to the artist’s adoption of the Mao suit for his ambassador persona. When the People’s Republic was established in 1949 the U.S. refused to recognize the Communist government: this resulted in the ceasing of diplomatic relations, summits and joint meetings; in addition to ending the exchange of tourists,

³⁷ The artist began using his Chinese name, “Kwong Chi,” in place of the more Western sounding, “Joseph Tseng,” while a university student in Paris, France. Grady T. Turner, “The Accidental Ambassador,” *Art in America* 85, no. 3 (Mar 1997): 82.

³⁸ Christine Lombard, Producer, *Tseng Kwong Chi: East Meets West*, 1984.

business leaders, and academics. Consequently, when given the opportunity to accompany the President and First Lady Pat Nixon, the ninety-plus journalists who joined them worked exhausting eighteen-hour days in order to record every detail of the visit, since the trip provided the first opportunity in more than two decades for a “hard-won look into a long-hidden China.”³⁹ In terms of the information that contemporary American audiences encountered, *Time* magazine was “both the biggest selling American newsmagazine and arguably the best determinant of what [was] in the news.”⁴⁰ As a result, I look to *Time* in what follows as being representative of U.S. news coverage and as a gauge of the American public’s perception of China.

In the article “Excursions in Mao’s China,” written by Washington Bureau Chief Hugh Sidey and White House Correspondent Jerrold Schecter in 1972, we develop an idea of how media coverage of the People’s Republic created difficulties for immigrants and individuals of Chinese descent living within the U.S. by presenting them as other.⁴¹ Within the *Time*’s piece the two journalists sought to demonstrate the pervasiveness of Mao, and therefore Communism’s influence on daily life. From their politically-motivated observations of “Mao’s China,” I would argue that had there been any softening of public opinion toward Chinese individuals residing in the U.S. prior to the president’s travels, the journalists’ portrayal of Communism’s group-think effect on the masses would effectively re-establish the divide. Working from the idea that one

³⁹ Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2007), 151; quotation from “Untitled,” *Time*, March 6, 1972, 4.

⁴⁰ David D. Perlmutter, *Picturing China in the American Press: The Visual Portrayal of Sino-American Relations in Time Magazine, 1949-73* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), xviii. In *Picturing China*, Perlmutter posits that *Time* magazine owner Henry R. Luce had been intensely concerned about China and had harbored strong concerns on what kind of China he wanted his readers to know about.

⁴¹ Hugh Sidey and Jerrold Schecter, “Excursions in Mao’s China,” *Time*, March 6, 1972, 17. For example, looking in on a Chinese secondary school, Hugh Sidey witnesses seeing “Mao up on the wall. His sayings all over.” Sidey’s colleague, Jerrold Schecter, who spends his time at a Peking department store and visiting with a division of the People’s Liberation Army, also seems to conclude that, “Mao is everywhere.” As if offering proof that Mao’s government’s efforts to indoctrinate the country’s children is having its intended effect, Sidey reporting from the school makes a point to assure *Time*’s readers that teachers and students alike make frequent reference to “Our beloved leader Mao.”

can draw conclusions about a country's future by looking to its children, we turn to Sidey's observations of a chemistry class:

They recite like soldiers, turning to their books and back again on command, as if executing close-order drill. Nobody slouches, no eyes stray from the teacher to the guests; there is no unnecessary noise. It is like a machine.

In light of the Washington Bureau Chief's description, Tseng's enacting of a "mechanistic" and "robot-like" ambassador persona for *East Meets West* is understandable; through his performance the artist appears to be responding to his audiences' expectations as shaped in this instance by the American media.⁴² Also, Tseng, after characterizing relations between the People's Republic and the U.S. following Nixon's visit as remaining "official and superficial," moves next to the topic of his adoption of a "distant attitude," as reflecting the aura of mystery that continues to surround China. I believe that Tseng's observations here bring us to events and experiences closer in time to the artist's arrival during the late seventies.

In January 1979, five years after Nixon's resignation from office on the heels of the Watergate scandal and three years after Chairman Mao's death, Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping made the first official visit to the U.S. since the Communist takeover. Not coincidentally, I would argue, it was during this same year that the artist began making self-portraits for *East Meets West*. In a piece written for *Time* magazine about the Vice Premier's travels, we encounter first hand what the artist describes as "the mystery still surrounding China." The article, colorfully titled, "Beyond Confucius and Kung Fu," provides insight into how Tseng's experience as a newcomer to the U.S. was shaped by racial, social, cultural, and political

⁴² Charles Hagen, "Tseng Kwong Chi," *Art Forum* 22, no. 8 (April 1984): 79; and Barry Blinderman, "He was a Visitor," 1-3, in Tseng Kwong Chi, *Tseng Kwong Chi: The Expeditionary Works* (Houston, TX: Houston Center for Photography, 1992), 2.

forces—post-Nixon and Mao—in which imagery associated with Old *and* New China had become intertwined.⁴³ To better understand the visual cues underpinning Tseng’s ambassador persona, one need look no further than the opening lines from “Beyond Confucius” that tap into fears of the “yellow peril” and the “mysterious Orient”:

Americans have a vision of China that is a fanciful montage of antithetical images: Confucius and Kung Fu; Wellesley-educated Madame Chiang Kai-shek and Mao’s “sinister” widow Chang Ch’ing; highborn ladies tiptoeing painfully on bound feet and unisex masses marching in bulky Mao jackets; delicately misty watercolors and propaganda posters as crude as comic strips; hundred-year-old eggs and gunpowder; opium dens and Buddhist pagodas; the imperturbable mandarin sage and the fanatical criminal Dr. Fu Manchu.⁴⁴

Through this stereotype-laden account of Americans’ popular “vision of China,” *Time*’s readership readily apprehends that the divide separating the U.S. from the People’s Republic extends well beyond geography.

Despite, or perhaps, because of this perceived distance between the two countries, the Vice Premier’s visit to the U.S. was much anticipated such that in our nation’s capital, as one publication put it, “Where Prime Ministers and Presidents are routinely received with equanimity bordering on boredom, [Deng’s] arrival provoked the keenest excitement.”⁴⁵ One contemporary journalist made the observation that White House staffers could scarcely attend to preparations for the summit meetings between then-President Carter and the Vice Premier due to the many calls pressing for an invitation to the banquet.⁴⁶ As an immigrant to the U.S. of Chinese descent who had encountered treatment that made him feel other, like a “permanent visitor,” and therefore thoroughly unwelcome, it makes sense that as an artist Tseng would feel compelled to

⁴³ “Beyond Confucius and Kung Fu,” *Time*, February 5, 1979, 26.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ “Teng’s Great Leap Outward,” *Time*, February 5, 1979, 24.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

explore through his artistic practice a moment in his adoptive country's history when the nation of his racial origins was viewed with some semblance of respect and curiosity, as opposed to outright suspicion.

I contend that by referring to the persona that he performs for *East Meets West* as an “ambassador,” Tseng was drawing directly from Deng Xiaoping’s highly publicized tour of the U.S. The dictionary definition of the word “ambassador” is “An official envoy; especially: a diplomatic agent of the highest rank accredited to a foreign government or sovereign as the resident representative of his or her own government or sovereign or appointed for a special and often temporary diplomatic assignment.”⁴⁷ To specify for his audience the kind of “diplomatic agent of the highest rank” that he would be performing, the artist added the descriptive terms of “unofficial” and “ambiguous” to his ambassador persona. “Unofficial” calls to mind the experience of finding oneself unexpectedly thrust into the position of acting spokesperson for one’s perceived group, as defined by family, race, or nation. Tseng’s use of the word “ambiguous” points to the problems that attend making assumptions based upon appearance alone. Therefore, I posit that by labeling the role that he plays as the “unofficial” or “ambiguous” ambassador, the artist provokes his viewers to question the validity of *East Meets West*, meaning that Tseng wants them to approach his portrayal as being rooted in performance.

Exploring more closely Merriam-Webster’s definition of an ambassador as someone who often acts as a representative “appointed for a special and often temporary diplomatic assignment,” Tseng’s undercutting of the validity of his persona for audiences may be connected to his interest in achieving the “real exchange” between the U.S. and China that he believed was

⁴⁷ “Ambassador,” Merriam-Webster, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ambassador>.

lacking from, first Nixon's, and now the Vice Premier's visit. For example, let us compare a photograph of the artist at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. (Figure 16; 1982) with one made of Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping (Figure 17; 1979). In Figure 17, we encounter Deng saluting Daniel Chester French's majestic sculpture of Abraham Lincoln after having ceremoniously placed a wreath at its feet before a bevy of onlookers.⁴⁸ This image is one of many documenting the Chinese leader's groundbreaking weeklong visit in 1979.

Tseng conveys his interest in pursuing a "real exchange" between East and West within his self-portrait made with the Lincoln Memorial. In the guise of the ambassador, the artist stands with his back to the viewer, as his attention is focused solely on the marble representation of the sixteenth president of the United States before him. Standing before the seated figure, Tseng displays an attitude of quiet contemplation, even reverence. With his arms pulled tight behind his back, the white cuffs of the shirt beneath his Mao jacket touching, the artist's pose brings to mind imagery of black slaves bound by shackles. After all, it had been due to the efforts of Lincoln and the Union North that African-born and African-American individuals, who labored in the cotton fields of the Confederate South, were freed during the Civil War. Tseng's simple gesture pays tribute to the president remembered today as the "Great Emancipator." Furthermore, it is not uncommon for immigrants of color, who find themselves occupying a minority position within the U.S., to empathize with other minorities' plight. In this photograph and another work from *East Meets West*, Tseng's *Cotton Field, Tennessee* (Figure 18; 1979), we see how the artist responds to such impulses.

⁴⁸ Den Xiaoping Salutes at Lincoln Memorial," Corbis, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.corbisimages.com/stock-photo/rights-managed/BE045978/den-xiaoping-salutes-at-lincoln-memorial?popup=1>.

In Figure 18, we encounter the artist stooping as he gently handles an open cotton boll still attached to its stem. The caution communicated by the artist may be due, in part, to the sharp claw-like points on the burr, which make picking the crop by hand quite painful. The task of harvesting appears daunting due to the rows upon rows of cotton plants continuing high up into the horizon, filling up three-quarters of the pictorial space. When discussing this particular work, the artist's sister, Muna Tseng, shared that in this photograph Tseng Kwong Chi had been responding to the crop's historic associations with slavery and the American South by locating the field in Tennessee. As in his Lincoln Memorial image, he seems to convey through the form of a simple gesture his acknowledgment of the mistreatment of people of color and the trials they have encountered within his adoptive country's past.

Returning to our comparison of Tseng and Deng Xiaoping, the artist's self-portrait rings with a sincerity that seems to be lacking in the press photograph. As befitting the text inscribed above the sculpture: "In this temple as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the Union the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever," within Tseng's self-portrait the only illumination that falls rests upon the hallowed form of the "Great Emancipator."⁴⁹ In the Lincoln Memorial and Tennessee cotton field photographs, we encounter Tseng connecting with the troubled racial past of the country where he intends to make a home. By way of contrast, the photograph of Deng, I would argue, holds no such personal meaning for the Vice Premier. Whereas Tseng's camera provides the only witness to his actions, within the press photograph of Deng in addition to the Vice Premier there are numerous other subjects: military personnel who

⁴⁹ Abraham Lincoln's place within the American psyche cannot be underestimated, as some 15,000 books have been written about the sixteenth president to date. Recently, about half of the books on Lincoln have been assembled into a book tower, which graces the lobby of the new Ford's Theater for Education and Leadership in Washington, D.C. and stands thirty-four feet tall and eight feet around. "Forget Lincoln Logs: A Tower of Books to Honor Abe," accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/20/148062501/forget-lincoln-logs-a-tower-of-books-to-honor-abe>.

salute alongside Deng, soldiers who face him bearing flags, a lone drummer and official-looking onlookers wearing suits or bearing itinerary who act as witnesses to the political spectacle as it unfolds before them.

Although Deng conveys a certain respect for the former American leader with his hand raised in salute, he, unlike Tseng, is the true visitor to the U.S., since his trip is only a temporary one. Furthermore, this photograph featuring the individual who emerged as the *de facto* leader of China following Mao's death in September 1976 and the subsequent purging of the Gang of Four a month later is but one of many images disseminated via news outlets throughout the world to mark the renewal of relations between the People's Republic and the U.S. In fact, the imagery of the Vice Premier's U.S. tour served to document for allies and opponents of the two countries the formalization of the rapprochement that President Nixon had initiated in 1972.

Remarking upon the scripted nature of Deng's actions in Figure 17, political scientists Ross Marlay and Clark Neher noted that his laying of a wreath at the Lincoln Memorial provides one of many examples in which the Vice Premier "seemed instinctively to know what to do to make a hit with Americans, including kissing children and posing for humorous photos with players of the Harlem Globetrotters who were nearly twice as tall as he."⁵⁰ It should be noted also that while the savvy leader was denouncing Soviet foreign policy at every opportunity and performing for the entourage of reporters recording his American travels, 150,000 Chinese troops were massing on the Vietnam border—actions which then led to the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979.⁵¹ It was no coincidence, then, that the planning of the Vice Premier's friendly visit to the U.S. had been coordinated with China's decision to invade Vietnam, since the People's

⁵⁰ Ross Marlay and Clark D. Neher, *Patriots and Tyrants: Ten Asian Leaders* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 66.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

Republic would soon be in need of protection from Soviet retaliation. Fortunately for Deng, President Jimmy Carter's administration and the American people were in a pro-Chinese mood due to their shared opposition towards the Soviet Union.

As well as employing the blankness of his ambassador persona to reflect upon Chinese and American relations past and present, I contend that Tseng took co-opted the image of the "inscrutable Chinese" to further his artistic ambitions. In the next section, we will explore how Tseng's involvement with the East Village art scene provided him a platform from which to interrogate and pursue his longed-for "real exchange" between East and West.

"SlutForArt"

One needs to first break down existing barriers in order to pursue a "real exchange." Inspired, perhaps, by the fawning treatment of the Windows on the World maître'd, Tseng next employed his newly created persona to gain entry into venues from which he would have ordinarily been excluded. In one instance, he wore his Mao suit to photograph the first Concorde landing at Kennedy International Airport.⁵² Conceivably Tseng's most daring escapade, however, was when he wore his Zhongshan to attend 1980s fashion maven and curator Diana Vreeland's "Party of the Year," which marked the opening night of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition *The Manchu Dragon: Costumes of the Ch'ing Dynasty, 1655-1912*.⁵³ Vreeland's celebration of the most opulent epoch of China promised in her words, "the exquisite refinement of luxury...all endlessly pretty and charming."⁵⁴ As Muna Tseng recounts:

⁵² As Muna Tseng recalls, her brother "rented a van and he got security clearance. He drove the van right to the tarmac and photographed the Concorde." Quoted in Loke, "Inside."

⁵³ For the gala opening, held on December 8, 1980, the artist contacted the *SoHo Weekly News* to offer his services and obtain a press pass for the evening. As to his unlikely presence at the gala, curator Richard Martin observed: Tseng "was no stranger to parties, but a more likely denizen of the Mudd Club than an uptown event." In Richard Martin, "Uniforms at the MET," *Creative Camera* no. 344 (Feb/Mar 1997): 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

[Kwong Chi] got himself up on the landing of the Grand Staircase. ... No one knew he had crashed the party. This get-up got him in, got him to greet the guests as they came up the steps. Henry Kissinger posed with him. Yves St. Laurent posed with him. St. Laurent and he were speaking in French and St. Laurent said: “Oh, your French is so good. Were you in the embassy in France?”⁵⁵

Although the artist wore dangling from his breast pocket an official-looking picture-ID badge bearing the notation, “Visitor: SlutForArt,” as when photographed with fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent (Figure 19; 1980), hardly anyone noticed—instead, “all treated him as a Chinese emissary rather than a postmodern photographer.”⁵⁶ Perhaps it was due in part to timing, since the *Manchu Dragon* exhibition had succeeded Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping’s historic visit to the U.S., that the celebrities did not question the presence of the “ambiguous” or “unofficial ambassador” within their midst.

At the gala, Tseng’s alterity was accepted along the same lines as the imperial robes on display, in that he proffered guests a living connection to the “land of jade.”⁵⁷ At the same time, two previously unpublished photographs convey something of the artist’s understanding of the Orientalism that underlay the exhibition. In the first image (Figure 20; 1980), as curator Amy Brandt notes, Tseng “orchestrates a pose of self-objectification” by mimicking the pose of the mute dress form behind him.⁵⁸ I would add that rather than confront the viewer directly, the artist positioned the camera so that the dummy with its clearly delineated Asian features, its eyes, although sightless, seem to stare accusingly, as if posing a question on behalf of Tseng and the robe’s former occupant: Is this how you view us, as exotic objects to be gazed at for your enjoyment? For his second portrait (Figure 21; 1980), Tseng assumes an impassive expression

⁵⁵ Loke, “Inside.”

⁵⁶ Turner, “Accidental,” 82.

⁵⁷ Martin, “Uniforms,” 15.

⁵⁸ Amy Brandt, *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera* (Norfolk, VA: Chrysler Museum of Art; New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University and Lyon Books, 2015), 53.

backed by a chorus line of female mannequins. Here, the artist seems to convey his weariness at having to perform his Chineseness to fulfill Western expectations by holding limply within his right hand a small flag representing the People's Republic of China. Dressed in his Mao suit and waving the Communist flag amongst the costumes of imperial China, Tseng marries imagery evoking the country's past and present.

Even as he enacted stereotyped representations of Chinese individuals with his ambassador persona, the artist adopted the image of the "curious, blank Chinese" as an act of protest. Tseng began pursuing *East Meets West* during a time in America's history when artists of color were making themselves visually present through their art. In *Mixed Blessings: New Art in Multicultural America* (1990), art critic, author, and theorist Lucy R. Lippard brings attention to artists representing themselves in terms of race and ethnicity for the first time, stating that "an individual 'identity' forged without relation to anyone or anything else hardly deserves the name."⁵⁹ In addition to including Tseng's photographic series, Lippard also included work from other artists that pursued identity-related themes. In contrast to his American-born contemporaries featured in *Mixed Blessings*, however, Tseng had not come of age during the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps, as a result, his exploration of American attitudes towards Asian race/ethnicity differs from that of his peers. Whereas their artistic investigations led them to create broader works that can be subsumed under the umbrella heading of Asian American identity, Tseng's *East Meets West*, I would argue, focuses more specifically on his own gay Chinese masculine identity.

Due in part to his being an immigrant to the U.S., Tseng's photographic series may also be viewed as a reaction to the pan-ethnic groups of the previous generation. The creation of pan-

⁵⁹ Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 21.

ethnic groups—for example, Native American, Hispanic American, and Asian American—in the arts mirrored trends present within larger American society. The Greek “pan” in pan-ethnic translates to “all” in English. Therefore, pan-ethnic groups from their inception were intended to incorporate peoples who differ linguistically, culturally, and geographically, but who are, nevertheless, viewed as “homogenous” by mainstream society.⁶⁰ Prior to the Asian American movement, early immigrant communities, mindful that whites tended “to lump” all Asians together, sought to distinguish themselves from one another, which means that they were not above denigrating other Asian groups, or at least approving of their denigration.⁶¹ In contrast, at the height of the Asian American movement during the late 1960s college students of Asian ancestry concerned with building political unity and a pan-Asian consciousness heralded their common fate by stressing the similarity of experiences and treatment that Asian groups had historically endured within the U.S.⁶²

As sociologist Yen Le Espiritu astutely observes, “The pan-Asian concept originally imposed by non-Asians became a symbol of pride and a rallying point for mass mobilization by later generations.”⁶³ Members of the movement rejected the label “Oriental,” a term which carried “a long and violent history of cultural imperialism and discrimination,” in favor of the term “Asian American,” and increased their visibility on campus through the development of pan-Asian organizations, publications, and Asian American study programs.⁶⁴ By the time of

⁶⁰ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 2-3.

⁶¹ Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 133.

⁶² Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 105.

⁶³ Espiritu, *Asian*, 20.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Tseng's arrival to the U.S. in the late 1970s, artists who identified themselves as "Asian Americans" tended to downplay distinctions among group members in the interest of "building a large, cohesive coalition."⁶⁵

In contrast, Tseng's photographic project concerns itself with subverting essentialist conceptualizations of identity prior to the late 1980s, which is when theorists and artists began questioning pan-ethnic conceptualizations of identity. The term *essentialism* began to be applied to statements and images that convey overly generalized or stereotyped perceptions of identity or imply that group identity is predicated on biology or nature. When critiquing essentialist thought with regard to African Americans, influential cultural theorist bell hooks stresses the importance of affirming "multiple black identities," in addition to acknowledging "the specific history and experiences of African Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience."⁶⁶

In many of the photographs created by Tseng for his *East Meets West* series, we encounter images that bell hooks would recognize as engaging with "the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience." Along with Nixon's visit to China, Tseng also cites as inspiration for *East Meets West* his encounters with Asian tourists visiting New York City.⁶⁷ The artist explains how once in the U.S. he found himself inexplicably drawn to Asian tourists. At the same time, Tseng quickly found himself disturbed to discover that not only did he meet with very few Chinese sightseers, but that the majority appeared to be "so completely Westernized

⁶⁵ Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art After 1980*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 45.

⁶⁶ bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," in *The Truth about the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing in the Postmodern World*, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher-Putnam, 1995), 122.

⁶⁷ Margo Machida, "Out of Asia: Negotiating Asian Identities in America" in *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, ed. David Sternbach and Joseph N. Newland (New York: Asia Society Galleries/New Press, 1994), 96.

that you cannot really tell if they are Chinese, or Korean, or Japanese.”⁶⁸ I am led to wonder whether the artist’s observation concerning the uniformity of Asian tourists is somehow related to his change in attitude towards aligning himself—at least artistically—with a distinct Chinese heritage. Kristoffer Haynes, Tseng’s companion at the time of his death had this to add: “I don’t think that he really enjoyed being Asian so much. Anytime that I mentioned doing anything related to Asian or Chinese culture he would just put it down, he didn’t want anything to do with it.”⁶⁹

To begin to explore Tseng’s possible interest in exploring “the specific history and experience” of Chinese Americans and “the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience,” one may look to his self-portrait made against the backdrop of the Golden Gate Bridge (Figure 22; 1979). With the discovery of gold in California in 1849, waves of Chinese prospectors came to the state to find their fortunes. In fact, the characters used in Chinese to denote “San Francisco,” site of the first Chinatown, may be translated into English as “Gold Mountain.”⁷⁰ By the end of the gold rush, up to 70,000 Chinese individuals chose to remain in California, making them the first major population of Asians in the U.S. Amongst this number, however, Chinese women were few due to the low number of female Chinese immigrants allowed entry into the country. As a result, of the 100,000 Chinese living within the U.S. more than ninety percent were male, creating a “bachelor society.”⁷¹ Benjamin Sloat observes,

With many of these [Chinese] men finding work as cooks, in laundry services, or as personal servants, [they] became seen as sexless bodies doing women’s work. Their slim builds, long queue hairstyles, and lack of opportunity to have families (and demonstrate virility) only reconfirmed their supposed lack of masculinity.⁷²

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ *SlutForArt*.

⁷⁰ Benjamin Sloat, “Shades of Brown & Yellow: Asian Visual Representation in the American Construct,” *Exposure* 39, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 33

⁷¹ Ibid. 34.

⁷² Ibid.

Taking this information into consideration, as well as San Francisco's historic significance to Chinese living within the U.S., within his *San Francisco, California (Golden Gate Bridge)* (Figure 22), Tseng may also be acting in opposition to societal views of the emasculated Chinese male.

In a contemporary account attempting to trace the psychological history of Chinese America, Ben Tong attributes the image of the “meek, inscrutable, and non-aggressive ‘Chinaman’” to the experience in his words of “total oppression by a white racist society.”⁷³ Of the societal limitations being faced by Asian males within the U.S. during the seventies, one of Tong's students shares:

[He] cannot catch his own group's chicks, be a big corporation executive or deal with pig harassment. He can't stop wearing glasses, grow to be six feet tall or leap over buildings with a single bound. The dude will always be chinking Clark Kent. If he ever took off his shirt, that one hair on his unmanly chest will blow away.⁷⁴

The student's impassioned observation demonstrates that for the Asian male in America there is no escape, since within their reality, and their imaginings—in the form of comic book superheroes—they are excluded from achieving much of anything.

Therefore, in Figure 22, Tseng's commanding depiction of himself against the impressive backdrop of the Golden Gate Bridge runs counter to past and present characterizations of the impotent Chinese male. Posed next to one of America's modern engineering marvels, the artist holds himself as erect and unflinching as the Golden Gate's upright towers. This aligns with this dissertation's main argument that as an immigrant to the U.S. Tseng's interest in creating a “real

⁷³ Ben R. Tong, “The Ghetto of the Mind: Notes on the Historical Psychology of Chinese America,” *Amerasia Journal* 1, no. 3 (Nov 1971): 9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

exchange” between East and West led him to create a body of work that promotes an anti-essentialist view of identity. Therefore, through this heroic self-portrait, the artist moves beyond an investigation of Asianness, beyond Chineseness, to the increasingly pluralistic and thus more multifaceted representation of the *gay male Chinese* individual. Here, we see Tseng assuming a dominant stance in relation to as he puts it, “the monuments and icons that Westerners consider to be the symbols of their power and glory.”⁷⁵ As in the previous Statue of Liberty photograph, the artist seems to diminish a recognizable American monument to a more manageable scale; the cars traversing the bridge appear toy-like. This comparison is not made lightly. In fact, the Golden Gate Bridge may be interpreted as the Statue of Liberty’s west coast counterpart, since Angel Island—the site where most Asian immigrants were processed—lies at the center of San Francisco Bay. Despite being positioned off-center, Tseng is clearly the subject of this photograph. The Golden Gate’s cables even converge on the buttoned-up figure of the artist.

As an immigrant of Asian descent who was also an artist, Tseng in the role of the militaristic ambassador found his voice. At the same time, in an art world that viewed him as Asian first, artist second, what better way to make his artistic presence known than to wrest the image of Mao from the most celebrated artist of the day: Andy Warhol. After all, Warhol and his art held sway over Tseng and his friends, the young denizens of the downtown art scene. With Warhol as their unofficial role model, Tseng, Keith Haring, and Jean-Michel Basquiat strove to become pop stars by creating “identifiable characters and symbols,” as critic Paul Laster succinctly puts it. “Haring had his radiant baby; Basquiat, the crown; and Tseng Kwong Chi donned his Mao suit.”⁷⁶ Given the influence that Warhol exerted on Tseng and his

⁷⁵ Tseng Kwong Chi in Michael Kaplan, “East Meets West,” *American Photographer* 5, no. 4 (Oct 1985): 14.

⁷⁶ Paul Laster, “Suitable Attire Required,” *Art Asia Pacific* no. 42 (Fall 2004): 57.

companions, it makes sense that he would look to the late Communist leader as inspiration for *East Meets West*. Time-wise this may also be due in part to the glowing reception that Warhol's *Mao* series received upon being exhibited in the Whitney Museum of American Art's "Andy Warhol: Portraits of the 1970s" in 1979.⁷⁷ In fact, the first self-portraits made for *East Meets West* date to this same year. Also of interest Warhol, like Tseng, cites Nixon's visit to China as inspiration for the most ambitious work of his career. More specifically, after a four-year hiatus from painting spent focusing on other ventures—film production, *Interview* magazine, and maintaining the studio—Warhol observed that he had chosen to paint as his subject "the most famous person in the world today" as identified by *Life* magazine in 1972.⁷⁸ Within his monograph of Warhol, David Bourdon notes that in keeping with the artist's professed interest in celebrity his interest in Mao is more likely due to the popular media's coverage of Nixon's visit to China than the man himself.⁷⁹

With regard to *East Meets West*, then, what does being a "SlutForArt" mean exactly? For an artist like Tseng who was interested in becoming part of the New York art world, it meant to debase himself for his art. By adopting the figure of Mao as his symbol, Tseng does so in three ways. First, he panders to Western expectations by adopting the most heavily coded signifier of China of his day. Second, he insults his heritage, since his father as a former Nationalist had sworn opposition to Communism and Mao and as a result had been forced to flee with the

⁷⁷ The exhibition, "Andy Warhol: Portraits of the 1970s," organized by David Whitney for the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1979, ushered in a new period in American appreciation of Warhol's work. See George Frei and Neil Printz, *The Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. 3 Paintings and Sculptures, 1970-1974* (London; New York: Phaidon, 2002), 166. In a contemporary account of the exhibition, critic Hilton Kramer highlights the great attention lavished on the Mao series, with the giant paintings of the "late Chinese party chairman...housed in a special, chapel-like pavilion in the exhibition's main space" and within the inner galleries a selection of the "multipanel, multicolor, smaller-scale series." Hilton Kramer, "Art: Whitney Shows Warhol Works," *New York Times*, November 23, 1979.

⁷⁸ Bob Colacello, *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 110-11.

⁷⁹ David Bourdon, *Warhol* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 317, 323.

family, first from the mainland to Hong Kong and then, when that became too close, to Canada. Lastly, Tseng runs the very real risk of being pigeonholed indefinitely as an *Asian* artist.

1980s Art/ Club Scene. Paradoxically, by adopting Mao as his symbol, although Tseng referred to himself tongue-in-cheek as a “SlutForArt,” *East Meets West* demonstrates how the artist was clearly conversant with the artistic currents of his day in that his ambassador performance was strongly informed by postmodern theory. Beginning in France in the 1960s and 1970s, intellectuals and academicians such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault were laying down the groundwork for postmodern theory. With regards to identity, postmodern thought advanced the idea that identities were “constructed” or learned within cultural and political settings, rather than being defined at birth.⁸⁰ Around the time that Tseng was working on his photographic series, Craig Owens, writing about the links between postmodernism and feminism, made the observation that postmodernism entails a critique of mastery, an ongoing effect “to upset the reassuring stability” of norms and positions that present themselves as universal and self-evident, but which in fact are culturally specific and serve the interests of a limited few.⁸¹

Postmodernism calls into question what were thought to be “fundamental concepts, institutions, and categories—among them, the institutions of art and art history, and more broadly the concept of lived identity.”⁸² Placing emphasis on the constructed nature of identity, cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall notes that:

⁸⁰ Robertson and McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, 51.

⁸¹ Craig Owens, “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 57-58.

⁸² Laura Tripp and Gary Sangster, “From Trivial Pursuit to the Art of the Deal: Art Making in the Eighties,” in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art; New Museum of Contemporary Art; Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990), 63.

It may be true that the self is always, in a sense, a fiction, just as the kinds of “closures” which are required to create communities of identification—nation, ethnic group, families, sexualities, etc.—are arbitrary closures; ...It is an immensely important gain when one recognizes that all identity is constructed across difference.⁸³

Not only in theory, but also in and through the practice of art, the notion of “identity” as a stable construct was being upended by artists whose work since the late 1970s was understood as effecting a critique of representation by investigating and putting on display identity’s arbitrary and provisional nature.

Perhaps it is only logical that performance art and photography—often incorporated within the same work—came to be recognized as important tools for critiquing representation. After all, each subverted modernism’s assumption that an artwork’s meaning can be determined through formal structure alone.⁸⁴ Art historian Douglas Crimp observes that with regard to photography, in particular, and its association with “quotation, excerptation, framing, and stating...we are not in search of sources of origins, but of structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture.”⁸⁵ Essentially Crimp is saying that one derives photographic meaning from visual antecedents that exist outside the photographs’ immediate borders, and this relation is in no way medium specific. His assertion accounts for my earlier discussions with regard to Tseng’s *East Meets West* of Nixon’s 1972 visit to China, Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping’s weeklong trip to the U.S., and Andy Warhol’s *Mao* series. A contemporary of Tseng’s, who also looked to popular culture to inform her self-portraits, is the artist Cindy Sherman (b. 1954).

⁸³ Stuart Hall, “Minimal Selves,” in *Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) Documents 6*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London: ICA, 1987), 45.

⁸⁴ Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 21; see also, Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75-88.

⁸⁵ Crimp, “Pictures,” 87.

Tseng's *East Meets West* series often elicits comparisons to Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, which were made around the same time (Figures 23 and 24; 1977 and 1978).⁸⁶ Sherman, like Tseng, turns to performance to demonstrate the constructed nature of identity. In fact, both artists' photographic series are informed by post-structuralist Judith Butler's idea of a *performed identity*. More specifically, focusing on gender, Butler states that:

Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced ... and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality*.⁸⁷ (emphasis in the original).

Often classified as a second-generation feminist, Sherman deconstructs stereotyped portrayals of women by staging performances involving variations in costume, hair, make-up, and location for her *Untitled Film Stills* series. Her inspiration derives from imagined scenes excerpted from generic B-movies or *film noir* dating to her mother's generation, the late 1950s and early 1960s. Both Sherman and Tseng challenge the idea of a fixed and constant identity by working within the framework of a photographic series that allows them to share with art audiences what Butler would refer to as a "stylized repetition of acts" shaped by social norms linked to a specific place and time, thus demonstrating identity's constructedness. For both artists the importance of performance cannot be overstated.

⁸⁶ For a sampling of examples, see Jalani Johar Schueller, "Claiming Postcolonial America: The Hybrid Asian-American Performances of Tseng Kwong Chi," in *Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen*, ed. Eleanor Ty and Donald Goellnicht (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 170-85; Hagen, "Tseng," 79-80; and "Tseng Kwong Chi, "Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc., New York, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.tsengkwongchi.com/bio.html>.

⁸⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; reprint, New York; London: Routledge, 1999), 179.

Like Sherman, Tseng avidly participated within the artistic and social milieu of the 1980s. During this period, performance was predominant, taking the form of either performative photographic work as in the case of both artists' projects, or ambitious large-scale semi-narrative staged artistic productions performed before a live audience.⁸⁸ In Tseng's case, for example, as a habitu  of Club 57 in the East Village, he not only documented but also participated in its performance art nights, themed parties, film screenings, and exhibits.⁸⁹ The eighties' club scene, with its openness to the expansion and testing of boundaries through performance, was ideal for Tseng to assume his ambassador persona in public in pursuit of a "real exchange" between East and West. Armed with a Polaroid camera, the artist made dozens of self-portraits accompanied by a co-participant in the form of a friend or fellow club-goer during thematic parties or just because, as in the case of *Polaroid Panel* at Club 57 (Figure 25; 1980), *East Meets West* at Danceteria, *Royal Wedding* at the Underground (1981), and *Reagan Inauguration* at the Mudd Club (1981)—that were then assembled into unique grid-format collages and signed and/or embellished by Tseng and his collaborators. Within each photograph, the artist appears to have shed the passivity and reserve observed within his World Trade Center and Statue of Liberty self-portraits in favor of a lively, convivial engaging persona.

I would argue that *all* of the occasions that Tseng photographed himself wearing his Mao suit are critical to understanding his *East Meets West* project as deconstructing the idea of racial or ethnic identity more broadly and that of Chinese masculinity more specifically. I propose that where Sherman challenges the concept of a stable and enduring identity through a change in costume and gesture within the context of film, Tseng does so by purposefully including as part

⁸⁸ Jones, *Body*, 21.

⁸⁹ Steve Hager, *Art After Midnight: The East Village Scene* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 66-85.

of his project seemingly flawed performances of his ambassador persona: instances when the calm façade of his mask has fallen from view. His portrayal of the ambassador persona made in the company of friends while club-hopping or amongst strangers during his explorations in and around the environs of New York, such as this group portrait made at a lifeguard ball in New Jersey (Figure 26; 1981), markedly differ from the more familiar works made alongside tourist destinations in that they look less studied and more spontaneous. In addition to his Polaroid collages, Tseng also made group portraits when with friends (Figure 27; 1980). On this particular occasion, art historian Amy Schlegel points out that, here, Tseng “abandons the stiff, formal tight-lipped ambiguous ambassador of the *East Meets West* series.” Significantly, she makes the distinction that, “No longer in ‘uniform,’ Tseng Kwong Chi is now in ‘costume.’”⁹⁰ Uniforms involve one’s employment, job, and/ or profession; they denote whether one occupies a position within the military, a hospital, or fast food restaurant, for instance. As a distinctive style of clothing, uniforms may also indicate one’s membership within a particular group or organization. By way of contrast, costumes are associated with a false and fleeting nature in that they are clothing adopted by an actor for a play or by a child on Halloween.

That this informal group portrait reflects Tseng “in costume,” rather than the performance artist/photographer “in uniform” is captured within a comment made by his friend, painter and installation artist, Kenny Scharf. Recalling Tseng’s strained relationship with his father, Scharf observes that all of the group had been “misfits in a way” and outcasts from their communities and families; this led them to adopt each other “as family.”⁹¹ The group, then, offered this band of “misfits” and “outcasts” the acceptance they craved. The acceptance that Tseng found

⁹⁰ Amy Ingrid Schlegel, “Introduction,” in *A Retrospective, Improbable Pilgrim: The Photographs of Tseng Kwong Chi* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Art Alliance, 2002), n.p.

⁹¹ Kenny Scharf, in *SlutForArt*.

amongst his group of friends allowed him to, as he shared in the film, “live and express himself spontaneously”; he “could not sense this individual freedom anywhere else.” Returning to the group portrait, it is the artist’s smile, his off-balance pose and playful manner that render the Mao suit into a costume. Of his portraits made amongst friends, performance artist Ann Magnuson had this to share: “In each photograph of Tseng, I see not only the faces of friends long vanished [due to AIDS], but hear the gleeful laughter of the man behind the camera, a man delighted with life and gathering the evidence.”⁹²

To Ann Magnuson’s observation that within Tseng’s group photographs made amongst friends she views “a man delighted with life and gathering the evidence,” I ask what, exactly, is the artist gathering evidence for within these less scripted moments? I posit that the artist is gathering evidence of instances of his much sought-after “real exchange” between East and West, photographs made in the spirit of companionship and camaraderie. One encounters Tseng’s engaging manner, instances of the artist in costume, as opposed to a uniform as alluded to earlier also within the company of complete strangers. In three photographs made of the artist while assisting his friend Keith Haring in distributing posters made by Haring for an antinuclear rally held in New York’s Central Park, one can imagine what it would have been like to run into the artist wearing his Mao suit on the streets of Manhattan (Figures, 28, 29, and 30; 1982). I would like to push the idea of Tseng’s interest in creating a “real exchange” between East and West even further. Again, the aim of this dissertation is to advance our understanding of photography’s role in portraying the immigrant experience, with particular emphasis being placed on artists as immigrants communicating their experience themselves. In the section that follows, I will demonstrate how the artist uses his photographic series to break down the barriers

⁹² Ann Magnuson quoted in Schlegel, “Introduction,” n.p.

existing between East and West. Drawing from anthropology and sociology, I contend that Tseng works to break down barriers by using his audience's existing associations with the tourist snapshot to provoke them into questioning the validity of their existing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors towards Chinese Americans more specifically, and Asian Americans more broadly.

Tourist

The tourist snapshot provides Tseng with the ideal tool for communicating the Asian immigrant experience. In her discussion of the relation between tourism and photography, American essayist Susan Sontag notes that the photographic medium allows tourists to “take possession of a space in which they are insecure.”⁹³ Both immigrants and tourists share a similar interest in gaining mastery over the unfamiliar environment. While Tseng was growing up in first Hong Kong, and then Vancouver, his father had made endless photographs of his family, posing them in Muna Tseng's words, “stand up straight, eyes to the world.”⁹⁴ Since making photographs is one of the defining activities of tourism, Tseng cleverly draws upon his, as well as his art-viewing audiences' shared associations of what Dean MacCannell calls “modern tourism” for *East Meets West*.⁹⁵

Prior to addressing the links between Tseng's project and the tourist snapshot, it may be helpful to first outline some of the social and anthropological scholarship that was emerging around tourism during the period in which, perhaps not coincidentally, the artist was making his

⁹³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1977; reprint, New York: Picador, 2001), 9.

⁹⁴ Muna Tseng, “Acknowledgments,” in *Tseng Kwong Chi, Ambiguous Ambassador, Monograph of 95 Photographs from the Expeditionary Self-Portraits Series* (Tucson, AZ: Nazraeli Press, 2005), n.p. Tseng's father had given him the Rolleiflex camera that he used from the mid-1970s until 1987 when he purchased his Hasselblad camera. Ronald Tseng had purchased this camera in Manchuria at the end of the Japanese occupation (1945) while serving in the Nationalist army. Tseng Kwong Chi, *Tseng Kwong Chi: The Expeditionary Works* (Houston: Houston Center for Photography, 1992), 28.

⁹⁵ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 5-6.

first self-portraits. Anthropologist Valene L. Smith defines the “tourist” as “a temporarily leisured person who voluntarily visits a place from home for the purpose of experiencing a change.”⁹⁶ She adds that the foundation of tourism rests on three key elements: “leisure time,” “discretionary income,” and “positive local sanctions,” which means that tourism is supported by the local authorities and inhabitants, as well as the national government.⁹⁷ Basically, tourism is a free-time pursuit not accessible to everyone that may be viewed as being counter to regulated and organized work. As a result, the places, experiences, objects, and people that one encounters as a tourist are often perceived as being outside the realm of routine daily life.⁹⁸ This organization of work and leisure into “separate and regulated spheres of social practice” is regarded by scholars as one of the hallmarks of a “modern society.”⁹⁹

In light of our modern society’s engagement with tourism, then, Tseng cleverly uses this leisure-time pursuit to reinforce important concepts within *East Meets West* in two ways. First, the artist builds upon concepts such as the “tourist gaze” and “liminal space” to strengthen his assertion that identity is socially defined.¹⁰⁰ Second, returning to Susan Sontag’s observation that the photographic medium allows tourists “to take possession,” I will later explore how *East Meets West*’s evocation of the tourist snapshot allows Tseng as an immigrant of Asian descent to not only take possession of space in which he is insecure, but to also render for audiences his unfamiliar alien presence familiar.

⁹⁶ Valene L. Smith, “Introduction,” in *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, ed. Valene L. Smith (1977: reprint, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 1.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 2-3; and MacCannell, *Tourist*, 1-3.

⁹⁹ MacCannell, *Tourist*, 5-6.

¹⁰⁰ Urry, *Tourist*, 2-3; and MacCannell, *Tourist*, 109-11; and Dean MacCannell, “Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings.” *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 3 (Nov 1973): 589-603.

The “tourist gaze” suggests that the tourist experience involves a particular way of seeing. In this case, the social organization of the “tourist gaze” has close ties with the tourism industry, such that looking becomes equated with consumption. Within modern society, those who can afford to engage in tourism, where tourist sites are chosen due to their association with anticipated pleasure, as informed by popular imagery. As sociologist John Urry observes, “Such anticipation is constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, TV, literature, magazines...which construct and reinforce [the ‘tourist gaze’].”¹⁰¹ Urry further likens the “tourist gaze” to that of Michel Foucault’s “medical gaze” in that the two are supported and justified by an institution.¹⁰² Also, Urry further adds that souvenirs and personal mementos, such as photographs, postcards, and models, “enable the gaze to be endlessly reproduced and captured.”¹⁰³ By taking into consideration the reasoning that underlies Tseng’s selection of tourist sites, viewers of his work may come to understand culture and therefore society’s role in informing the tourist gaze. Significant to his artistic endeavors, the act of questioning the artist’s self-portrait will lead them to questioning *all* representations of individuals of Asian descent. By performing the ambassador persona against a rotating backdrop of tourist locales, Tseng actively challenges viewers to consider how imagery of Chinese individuals, as products of a societal and cultural gaze, are similarly shaped and constructed.

By using tourism and its connection to liminality—in that the tourist experience can relate to a transitional or initial stage of a process—Tseng provokes his viewers to question the authenticity of his ambassador persona. In attempting to describe how tourism provides its participants a liminal space, I turn to cultural anthropologist Victor Turner’s conception of

¹⁰¹ Urry, *Tourist*, 3.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 1; and Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (London: Tavistock, 1976), 89.

¹⁰³ Urry, *Tourist*, 3.

liminality as “a realm of possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.”¹⁰⁴ Expanding upon this idea that by going on holiday one embarks upon “a realm of possibility,” art historian Lucy R. Lippard observes how as tourists,

We are not who we think we are when we are elsewhere. We can even become another person entirely. Who will ever know? Travelling can be a kind of performance piece. We can tell our airplane seatmate or one-night stand almost anything. We can reinvent ourselves instead of our surroundings.¹⁰⁵

Through their own experience as past, present, and expectations of being future tourists themselves, the art-going audience who encounter Tseng’s self-portraits will likely understand first-hand the transformative possibilities and suspension of everyday rules that accompany the tourist experience. This has become reflected in our daily conversation in that the saying, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas” has become part of our popular lexicon.¹⁰⁶

Moving next to a discussion of the importance of the tourist snapshot to Tseng’s *East Meets West*, I turn to Dean MacCannell’s seminal text *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. Important for our purposes, the sociologist and cultural theorist approaches tourist attractions as signs, citing semiotics and Charles S. Peirce’s idea that “a sign represents something to someone.”¹⁰⁷ Within this view of tourism, the conventional tourist “marker” is no longer information attached or posted to the site: rather MacCannell extends the use of “marker” to cover any information about a tourist site, whether it be found in travel books, museum

¹⁰⁴ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 97. For a more extensive treatment of the parallels to be drawn between tourism and sacred rites of passage, see Nelson H. H. Graburn, “Tourism: The Sacred Journey,” in *Hosts and Guests*, ed. Valene L. Smith, 21-36.

¹⁰⁵ Lucy Lippard, *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place* (New York: New Press; London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 5.

¹⁰⁶ “Urban Dictionary: what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,” accessed January 23, 2016, Urban Dictionary, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=what%20happens%20in%20Vegas%20stays%20in%20Vegas>.

¹⁰⁷ MacCannell, *Tourist*, 109.

guides, stories told by persons who have visited, and art history texts and lectures.¹⁰⁸ Connected to his discussion of the relation between signs and tourist attractions, then, is MacCannell's observation that modern individuals, regardless of national boundaries, share an awareness of "what the important attractions are."¹⁰⁹ For example, if one is in Paris, France, the attraction is the Eiffel Tower. He attributes this shared understanding to what he describes as "an elaborate set of institutional mechanisms, a two-fold process of sight sacralization that is met with a corresponding ritual attitude" on the part of the tourist.¹¹⁰ Essentially, what MacCannell means by "ritual attitude" is that when visiting tourist or "sacred" sites the tourist is expected to engage in certain scripted behaviors and activities.

Making photographs is one of the activities expected of tourists. By photographing himself next to a monument or from the promontory of a scenic overlook, Tseng takes part in one of the ritual requisites of tourism that one must return home from vacation with something to show for it, whether it be "match covers, folk art, or rolls of exposed film."¹¹¹ I contend that he provides his audience a point of entry into *East Meets West* by making tourism a part of his performance. By creating self-portraits that draw upon the tourist snapshot, Tseng invites viewers to stand in his shoes, to walk where he has walked. In fact, much of the literature on tourism is written from the traveler's point of view in the form of first-person accounts. This, then, hopefully increases the likelihood that *East Meets West*'s audience will place him-/herself in the artist's position as an immigrant of Chinese descent.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 110

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 42.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Graburn, "Tourism," 33.

Tseng's selection of recognizable tourist sites, such as Mount Rushmore and Niagara Falls, and the approach that he takes when sighting his self-portraits within these locations communicates his strong interest in connecting not only with the American populace in the form of his group portraits but also with its history. As the artist observes, "Tourists often go for what they've seen in films or in photographs. Monuments appeal to them because they represent past or present glories and power."¹¹² Within anthropologist Valene L. Smith's five types of tourist activities, Tseng's photographic project would be classified "historical tourism" with its focus on "the glories of the Past."¹¹³ I also view Tseng's landscape photographs as part of historical tourism, as opposed to Smith's recreational tourism due to the imagery's link to nineteenth-century American painting, survey photography, and the sublime.

The artist's single-minded pursuit of a backdrop that consists of a known tourist site photographed from a recognizable vantage point aids his photographic project. When making his photographs he often determined the best location for his cameras by scouting out the most popular tourist views.¹¹⁴ As Richard Martin notes, even with his landscape photographs, Tseng conducts "research" that involves a thorough exploration of the postcard racks in souvenir gifts shops. Martin continues:

In looking for the prime vantage, he selects by consensus and convention, not by personal expectation. If postcard racks do not make a site evident in terms of mood, [Tseng] relies on waitresses in local diners and coffee shops for their locations and lore of the region. In this he identifies with the visual and oral tradition of the locality. ... He seeks the common view, as if a contestant on *Family Feud*.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Lombard, *East Meets West*.

¹¹³ Smith, "Introduction," 5-6. Smith goes on to list "ethnic tourism," "cultural tourism," "environmental tourism," and "recreational tourism" as the remaining four remaining types of leisured mobility that can be undertaken by the tourist.

¹¹⁴ Turner, "Accidental," 82.

¹¹⁵ Richard Martin, "The Expeditionary Photographs of Tseng Kwong Chi," *Arts Magazine* 61, no. 1 (Sept 1986): 95.

By creating self-portraits informed by the “visual and oral tradition of the locality,” Tseng again demonstrates his interest in pursuing a “real exchange” between East and West. At the same time, it allows him to use his audience’s familiarity with his photographic surroundings to his advantage. Within his imagery, the artist employs familiar tourist iconography as a foil for his foreignness, his alien-presence.

Tseng’s photograph of himself made in the company of a man wearing an astronaut suit at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida (Figure 31; 1985) illustrates the barrier that exists between host and visitor, West and East, the U.S. and its Asian immigrant population. Although they are shaking hands, the two figures barely turn to acknowledge one another. Wryly highlighting the lack of sentiment between the suited figures is the sign hanging above them that states: “WELCOME KENNEDY SPACE CENTER—FLORIDA.” The strong black vertical line created by the sidewalk both visually and symbolically divides them further. Additionally, if these two representatives—of democracy’s triumph in winning the moon race and the other of Communism’s loss—were to face one another, the reflective surface of the astronaut’s visor and the ambassador’s sunglasses would prevent them from engaging in what the artist would refer to as a “real exchange,” since they would only be able to see themselves.

I will close my discussion of Tseng Kwong Chi’s appropriation of tourism for his *East Meets West* series by addressing how the tourist snapshot provides a means for the tourist—and for our purposes, the immigrant—to proclaim ownership of their surroundings. As scholars have noted, around 1987 the artist began to refer to *East Meets West* as *The Expeditionary Series*. During this period, his approach toward his photographic project also altered. It was, also, around this time that the artist purchased his Hasselblad camera, which lends itself to landscape photography. Prior to the mid-1980s, Tseng had stood directly apart from the man-made tourist

location, monument, or architectural backdrop. In contrast to the earlier imagery, Tseng in the later self-portraits minimizes his presence in favor of foregrounding the grandeur of the natural environment surrounding him. Rather than approach this change in attitude toward the series solely as a “turn[ing] inward ... a quest for spirituality through contact with nature,” or as nearing the end of his life his “reflections on mortality,” I argue that his expeditionary attitude and foray into the sublime may be interpreted as a continuation of themes present early on within his photographic project.¹¹⁶ I say this not to discount others’ readings of the artist’s work, but rather to open up the discussion.

The term “expeditionary” brings to mind historic images of the lone-explorer making forays into uncharted territory to fulfill imperialist ambitions. In Figure 12, we encounter Tseng at the foot of the Twin Towers. In this, as in his photograph seated upon the rim of the Grand Canyon (Figure 32; 1987), the lone artist claims a place for himself with America’s past, present, and future. In a 1986 review of *East Meets West*, art critic Robert Ryman reacted to Tseng’s portrayal made alongside the U.S. astronaut with the pointed question, “Why the Space Center anyway?”¹¹⁷ Recall, the artist’s interest in connecting his ambassador performance with Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping’s weeklong tour of the U.S. Perhaps, Tseng’s visit was intended to mirror the leader’s much-publicized visit to the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. The artist, also, photographed himself in front of the Notre Dame in Paris and Big Ben in London, with Mickey Mouse at Disneyland, before the gates of Elvis’s Graceland, in a Tennessee cotton field evocative of slavery and the south (Figure 18), and at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania, former site of the power plant in which a nuclear meltdown occurred in 1979.

¹¹⁶ Schlegel, “Introduction,” n.p.; and Turner, “Accidental,” 83.

¹¹⁷ Robert Ryman, “Leonid Sokov/Tseng Kwong Chi/Gregg Smith,” *Arts Magazine* 60, no. 7 (March 1986): 142.

The last two locations I believe demonstrate that as an artist Tseng is less interested in a strict portrayal of tourism and more interested in connecting himself with the places that have burned themselves into our consciousness, making his choice of location more in keeping, again, with Valene Smith's historical tourism type of activity.

Regardless of whether the site selected can be associated with tragedy or triumph, the importance of the location for Tseng is that it has historic roots. In fact, from its beginnings, *East Meets West* was inspired by the idea that history itself is "a complete fabrication."¹¹⁸ The photographs that tourists make to remember their trips are similarly constructed. Looking at a snapshot of a smiling family at the Grand Canyon, only those who had posed would know that only an hour prior to the photograph being taken no one was on speaking terms due to a disagreement concerning a wrong turn. For the uninitiated, who view this group portrait defined by happy faces on a day when everyone enjoyed perfect weather, this hypothetical image communicates a perfect family outing to one of our nation's beloved national parks. The artist cleverly operates from this premise that we, all of us, have experience in making fictional pictorial narratives, particularly when it comes to the tourist snapshot.

By the act of making self-portraits that refer to the tourist snapshot, Tseng, as an immigrant to the U.S. "takes possession of a space" in which he is insecure. Stating that, "Our first apprehension of modern civilization ... emerges in the mind of the tourist," Dean MacCannell argues that by studying tourists one gains insight into modern society.¹¹⁹ Recall, that the artist looked at the Asian tourists whom he encountered in New York only to discover that there were few Chinese sightseers at the time and that the majority appeared to be so

¹¹⁸ Blinderman, "He was a Visitor," 1.

¹¹⁹ MacCannell, *Tourist*, 147.

“completely Westernized” that he could not tell if they were Chinese, Korean, or Japanese. By playing the part of the tourist, behaving as a self-proclaimed “SlutForArt,” and performing as the “unofficial” or “ambiguous” ambassador in *East Meets West*, Tseng claims a place for himself and for immigrants of Chinese descent more specifically, Asians more broadly.

Conclusion

What would Tseng Kwong Chi have thought of all this? I’m standing in front of a display comprised of *the* actual Mao suit and Visitor ID badge worn by the artist and his Statue of Liberty self-portrait from *East Meets West* (Figure 33) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition, *China: Through the Looking Glass*, held in 2015. Here, I encounter Chinese tourists *en masse* in a way that the artist could never have imagined when crashing the Met’s gala for *Manchu Dragon*. Wave after wave of flag-led groups make their way through the show alongside me. Conceived as a collaboration between the Costume Institute and the Department of Asian Art to explore how China has fueled the fashionable imagination of the West for centuries, *Through the Looking Glass* marks the first time the Institute has built an exhibition with major financial backing from Chinese donors. As of 2015, Chinese visitors are the Met’s largest foreign audience accounting for about 12% of its international visitors.¹²⁰ As Maxwell K. Hearn, the Douglas Dillon Curator in Charge of the Met’s Department of Asian Art observes, the museum’s best-selling foreign-language guidebook is in Chinese, and it is continually adding Chinese wall labels.¹²¹ In addition, according to the U.S. Travel Association, a research-and-advocacy group for the industry, an estimated 2.2 million Chinese visited the U.S. in 2014, adding that this number will likely increase 17% a year for the next five years due to China’s

¹²⁰ Ellen Gamerman, “For China Show, The Met Goes where the Money Is,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2015.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

improved economy and the boom of its middle class from the early 2000s.¹²² Indeed, more and more Chinese have the means and the inclination to travel. This is a far cry from when Tseng only encountered the occasional Chinese sightseer on the streets of Manhattan.

East Meets West continues to capture our attention, as evidenced by the 2015 exhibition *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera* organized by Amy Brandt at New York University's Grey Art Gallery. One can look to the artist's participation within the East Village art scene of the 1980s as one explanation, and the influence that his work had on the later avant-garde Chinese artists of the 1990s, such as Song Dong and Zhang Huan, who encountered his photographs in Western art magazines smuggled into their country as another.¹²³ I posit that Tseng's means of connecting with his audience—the tourist snapshot—bears some relevance. By setting as the backdrop for his self-portrait the iconic monument, architecture, site, and so on, Tseng associates himself with something larger than himself. His *East Meets West* mines the basic human desire to transcend one's immediate history and succeeds. Returning to his portrait made at the foot of the Twin Towers at the beginning of this chapter (Figure 12), one comes to understand how individual and collective meaning come to inform one's viewing of an image. For the artist, looking at this image may have brought to mind the first public appearance of his ambassador persona in the company of his family at Windows on the World. Post-September 11, the towers, once admired for their height, have assumed powerful meanings for people all over the world. It is the power of iconography associated with these structures—its evolving meaning over time and how it connects to the changing position of the immigrant in America that make *East Meets West* so enduring.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Oluronke Ojo Rose, "Tseng Kwong Chi: Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, New York," *ArtUS* 23 (Summer 2008): 31.

Chapter 3: Nikki S. Lee: “The Korean Project”

Standing shoulder-to-shoulder, their gazes facing outward, a group of eight female students stand in a circle near the entrance to an anonymous institution (Figure 34; 2000). Each girl holds in her hand an open fuchsia-folding fan—its playful color providing a welcoming contrast to the somberly clad adolescents and the leaden sky overhead. In general, the photograph is unremarkable, bearing the hallmarks of being taken by an amateur with its conspicuous digital date stamping in the bottom right hand corner. Most disturbing, perhaps, is how the three girls standing closest to the viewer have had their legs abruptly cut off at the ankles. Images such as this are similar to those found in any high school yearbook, or more recently with the emergence of online social networking, Facebook. Its subjects, the students, are positioned in the middle of the image. They are shown engaged in an activity that demonstrates their cohesion. And, lastly, as is the case with individuals this age who have been thrust into the physically and psychologically awkward process of maturing into adulthood, their discomfort rises to the surface when asked to pose before the camera.

Standing amongst them, the shortest student posing at the group’s center is the thirty-year-old artist Nikki S. Lee. This particular image is from her *Schoolgirls Project*, a single work from her much larger *Projects* (1997-2001) series. From this point onward, for ease of reference I will refer to each project as a *subproject*. For each subproject the artist infiltrated, in all cases but one, American groups with whom she then had herself photographed either engaged in a stereotypical in-group activity, or posed alongside its members. In order to achieve the illusion of belonging needed to demonstrate how identity can be inferred by group affiliation, for each group represented the artist adopts culturally coded signifiers as defined by external attributes—hair, clothing, cosmetics, and behavioral mannerisms—characterizing its members. As a result,

much of the series portrays a cross-section of 1990s American society. Lee places emphasis on the fact that *The Schoolgirls Project* is her only subproject pursued outside the U.S.¹ Therefore, one of the questions driving the current investigation is why did Lee include this *Korean* subproject within a body of work that critics and scholars have interpreted as representing the artist's repeated attempts at assimilating into American culture? This question, as we will see in the pages that follow, is connected to my main argument that Lee's performance of differing socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, and age groups within *Projects* has as much to do with the artist's investigation of her native South Korea as it does her adoptive country.

Prior to this dissertation, existing scholarship on Lee's *Projects* has demonstrated little interest in her country of origin, being focused primarily on what the photographic series as a whole communicates about race in America and the ramifications of the artist's infiltration of its myriad racial and cultural groups. For example, art historian Miwon Kwon applies James Clifford's idea that ethnography should combine "participant observation" with "empathic engagement" (or "experience" with "interpretation"), only to conclude that *Projects* demonstrates a disturbing trend in recent artistic practice of someone who *does not* engage with culture as a "responsible and self-reflexive participant observer" in that Lee's work avoids critiquing the artist's role in cultural production.² In contrast, American studies scholar Cathy Covell Waegner, holding a less critical view of the series, views Lee's *Hip-Hop Project* as a

¹ "Nikki S. Lee—"The Creators Project" (2011)," accessed January 23, 2016, ASX.TV, <http://www.americansuburbx.com/2011/04/asx-tv-nikki-s-lee-the-creators-project-2011.html/asx-tv-nikki-s-lee-the-creators-project-2011-2>.

² James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 34-41; and Miwon Kwon, "Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee," in *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, ed. Alex Coles (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000), 74.

positive reflection of “playful postmodernist passing.”³ As if in response to Waegner, art historian Cherie Smith turns to Lee’s *Projects* to demonstrate the problems inherent in post-identity ideology. Drawing from legal scholarship, Smith argues that post-identity’s “supposed colorblindness” rather than liberating the oppressed, instead “leaves them disempowered” and “less able to challenge systemic oppression and trenchant hierarchies.”⁴ Lastly, in his exploration of the ways in which community has been represented in the U.S. during the twentieth century, art historian Louis Kaplan discusses Lee’s *Projects* within the framework of the artist’s performing community as a rite of passing, such that every image asks: “Who is one of us?”⁵

The present investigation of Lee’s *Projects* will build upon my previous chapter’s exploration of Tseng Kwong Chi’s *East Meets West* series by continuing to add to our understanding of the experience of immigrants of Asian descent within the U.S.⁶ Like Tseng before her, Lee employs self-portraiture within her photographic series to pursue issues concerning her individual racial/ethnic identity. Also, much like Tseng, Lee assumes an *anti-essentialist* position of racial/ethnic identity that challenges the idea that identity comprises “an internally unified order” with a clear meaning that can be “captured and represented.”⁷ Although her work also engages with recent scholarship on anti-essentialism, drawing from

³ Cathy Covell Waegner, “Performing Postmodernist Passing: Nikki S. Lee, Tuff, and Ghost Dog in Yellowface/Blackface,” in *Afroasian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*, ed. Heiki Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 223, 237.

⁴ Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 201.

⁵ Louis Kaplan, *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 194.

⁶ When I first began my research Nikki S. Lee was splitting her time between Seoul, South Korea and New York City: she currently lives and works in South Korea. Regardless, during the period in which she pursued her *Projects* series, the experiences that Lee portrays within her photographs are relevant to the experiences of immigrants who arrived in the U.S. at this time.

⁷ James Martin, “Identity,” in *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*, ed. David Atkinson et al. (London; New York: I/B. Tauris, 2005), 99.

psychoanalysis, feminism, and postcolonial and postmodern theory, her work is not analogous to Tseng's. Unlike Tseng, who presents himself as inscrutable, as a canvas on which fantasies of individuals of Chinese descent specifically and Asians more generally are projected within *East Meets West*, Lee seemingly performs her Korean female identity in only one of her subprojects.

Within my research I am also interested in exploring how the concerns confronting immigrants of Asian descent *differ* based upon the artist's country of origin and the time of their arrival in the U.S. For Lee's *Projects*, this involves looking to Homi K. Bhabha's concept of a site for "hybrid translation" or a "third space," where individuals occupying a minority position create their own systems of representation to disrupt hegemonic *essentializing* notions of identity.⁸ Also, in contrast to my investigation of Tseng's *East Meets West* series, where I explored events surrounding the opening of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the U.S., this chapter is less interested in exploring the past and present relationship between the U.S. and Lee's country of origin. Although one can approach her *Projects* in relation to mainstream America's sentiment toward its Korean-American inhabitants (e.g., Korean store owners defending their shops against African-American mobs during the 1992 Los Angeles Riots), this topic, although a valid subject of inquiry, has been addressed by previous scholarship and has little bearing on the present study.⁹ Instead, my exploration of *Projects* operates from the perspective that as an immigrant Lee becomes what I will refer to as a *double outsider*, an individual who feels at home neither within an adoptive country, nor within one's

⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. John Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 211.

⁹ Nicole Hodges, "Sampling Blackness: Performing African Americanness in Hip-Hop Theatre and Performance" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2009).

country of origin, since this dissertation argues that it is Lee's outsider perspective that informs her perception of the U.S. and South Korea, as portrayed within *Projects*.

While reviewing *Projects*, critic Mark Godfrey draws a number of parallels between Lee's series and Woody Allen's mockumentary *Zelig* (1983). During the course of the film, the main character, Leonard Zelig, much like the artist, morphs into a diverse array of characters, from "a feathered Native American" to "a bearded rabbi."¹⁰ Godfrey argues that both Lee and Allen "play with ideas about the immigrant's fear and the newcomer's desire to blend into their environment."¹¹ Important to my discussion of the artist's use of snapshot photography is what Godfrey says next: "The significance of [Lee's] work lies less in the interaction between the artist and the various crowds in whose midst she appears, than in the encounter the viewer has with her work in the gallery."¹² He continues:

Lee is engaging with her own Ethnic identity—her position as "the Korean" is the subject of all the images, implying that if the viewer can laugh at "The Hispanic Project," then they could also laugh at "The Korean Project."¹³

I believe that Godfrey's observation originates from the idea that if Allen through *Zelig* addresses the difficulties faced by American Jews during the 1920s, then Lee through *Projects* engages with contemporary prejudices held towards Korean individuals. Drawing from anthropology and sociology, I propose that Lee uses her audience's existing associations with snapshot photography, particularly those related to one's group affiliations, to provoke her newly adopted compatriots into questioning the validity of their existing beliefs, attitudes, and

¹⁰ Mark Godfrey, "Nikki S. Lee: Stephen Friedman Gallery, London," *Frieze* 52 (May 2000): 109.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

behaviors not only towards South Korean immigrants to the U.S. like herself, but those subgroups with whom she is photographed.

Early Life & Artistic Development

Nikki S. Lee is a fiction. It is the name adopted by South Korean-born artist Lee Seung-Hee upon arriving in New York City in 1994.¹⁴ Her “American name”—the initial “S” stands for Seung-Hee—was selected from a list, compiled by a friend, of models who had been featured in that month’s *Vogue*. In his introduction to the monograph for Lee’s *Projects*, Russell Ferguson observes that for an artist, who adopts multiple personae the way one dons a new outfit, to look for inspiration to the model Niki Taylor, an individual who became known for gracing American magazines promoting the latest fashions, is rather apt.¹⁵ Lee’s action assumes greater meaning when one recognizes that she is adhering to the standard assimilation plot in which the immigrant alters or abandons their given name in order to become more easily Americanized.¹⁶ Interestingly, Lee’s name change runs counter to that of artist Tseng Kwong Chi, who exchanged the more Anglo-sounding Joseph for the more ethnic-sounding “Kwong Chi” after coming to the U.S. The reason behind this difference may be explained by looking to each artist’s performative works. In *East Meets West*, Tseng’s self-portraits directly invoke the stereotype of the mysterious Asian in order to subvert it. Lee, within *Projects*, indirectly probes her South Korean identity in self-portraits that more directly address the external characteristics that define American subgroups.

¹⁴ Following Korean custom, I introduce the artist’s “Korean name” beginning with her family name (Lee) followed by her given name (Seung-Hee). See Russell Ferguson, “Let’s Be Nikki,” in *Projects*, ed. Lesley A. Martin (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz; New York: D.A.P., Distributed Art Publishers, 2001), 17.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kaplan, *American*, 193.

Lee was not a newcomer to American culture. Prior to her arrival, the artist engaged with the West in the form of its popular culture—food, activities, movies, television, magazines, and music. As the artist fondly recalls, “I ate at McDonald’s, I roller-skated and watched Hollywood movies, I watched *Wonder Woman* and *Starsky and Hutch*.”¹⁷ She grew up in Kye-Chang, “a really small town in Korea,” where her father ran a “one-stop wedding business,” renting out the hall, organizing the festivities and taking the photographs.¹⁸ In addition, as if in preparation for *Projects*, her father made numerous portraits of Lee as a child. She later attributes this early experience to the ease that she feels when posing before a camera.¹⁹

The artist never set out to become a photographer, nor does she consider herself one.²⁰ It had been Lee’s early love of American movies that influenced her decision to pursue acting in college. She relinquished her childhood dream when she realized that she was, in her words, “not pretty enough” to become a successful actress in Korea.²¹ Lee went on to pursue photography at one of the most influential departments in the country, Chung-Ang College of the Arts at the University of Korea, after being dissuaded by her parents from studying film.²² Upon

¹⁷ Nikki S. Lee and Gilbert Vicario, “Conversation with Nikki S. Lee,” in *Projects*, ed. Lesley A. Martin (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz; New York: D.A.P., Distributed Art Publishers, 2001), 106.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 97; Carly Berwick, “Extreme Makeover,” *ARTnews* 105, no. 3 (Mar 2006): 110.

¹⁹ Berwick, “Extreme,” 112. Author’s aside: I find it interesting that both Lee and Tseng Kwong Chi’s interest in photography seems to have been somewhat influenced by their fathers.

²⁰ As the artist goes on to explain: “I don’t feel comfortable when people call me a photographer... I really love the material of photography, the text of photography. I’m using photography as a medium, but I don’t really care about photography. I’m moving to different media now. I made a film last year. So maybe I’m going to do a painting or make an installation. I choose the medium that is perfect for my concept.” Quoted in Edgar Allen Beem, “The Modern Self,” *Photo District News* 26, no. 8 (Aug 2006), n.p. In the previous sentence, Lee shares with the writer that she had even given away her camera in order to better explore other means of expression.

²¹ Lee and Vicario, “Conversation,” 97.

²² Berwick, “Extreme,” 110. On the development of photographic studies departments at the university/college level in Korea, Anne Wilkes Tucker has this to say: “College and university photography departments were established relatively late in Korea, beginning only in the mid-1960s with the creation of a two-year photography program at Seorabeol Arts College, which in 1972 was transferred to the Chung-Ang Foundation, later known as Chung-Ang University, still home to one of the most influential photography departments.” See Anne Wilkes Tucker, “Past/Present: Coexisting Realities,” in *Chaotic Harmony: Contemporary Korean Photography* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 13.

earning her bachelor's degree, she moved to New York City to study commercial photography at the Fashion Institute of Technology. It had been while interning for fashion photographer David LaChapelle that Lee revisited her initial creative impulse to "make something [of] her own," so she next enrolled in New York University's master's program in photography.²³ *Projects* arose from one of her assignments.²⁴ Before delving into the series that captured the art world's attention, I will begin my exploration with more recent works, since they too explore the same subject: Lee's identity as seen through the eyes of others.

The earliest series, *Parts* (2002-05), like Lee's *Projects*, is also made up of self-portraits. Rather than a revolving cast of American subgroups, however, Lee poses with assorted *suggested* male partners. In contrast to *Projects*, the photographs in *Parts* (Figure 35; 2003) are forcibly cropped, such that viewers encounter an image of the artist in which the presence of her partner is suggested through the presence of a shoulder, a knee, and so on. Essentially, the viewer is left with the task of filling in the conspicuously absent or partial figure. These images invoke for the viewer memories of bad break-ups, of photographs of once happy couples now angrily torn in half. I agree with art critic Phil Lee's observation that, "By drawing the viewer's attention to how a woman feels in a given situation, [the artist] highlights how other people and different kinds of relationships affect a woman's personal identity."²⁵ This sounds remarkably like Lee's earlier *Projects*. At the same time, for the first time *Parts* shows the artist controlling *every* aspect of the image-making process: scripting the scene, hiring an actor to pose alongside her, and deciding the exact place in which to cut the photograph in half. The resulting image is

²³ Lee and Vicario, "Conversation," 99.

²⁴ Berwick, "Extreme," 112.

²⁵ Phil Lee, "Indefinite 'Nikkis' in a World of Hyperreality: An Interview with Nikki S. Lee," *Chicago Art Journal* 18 (2008), 78.

as carefully scripted as a movie, which leads us to Lee's next endeavor: the hour-long film *A.K.A. Nikki S. Lee* (2006).

As in her self-portraiture, within *A.K.A.* the artist weaves a fictional narrative around the main protagonist played (once again) as herself. Early on, Lee as "Nikki" informs her audience that this is "a documentary about the real Nikki, a rather plain, serious young woman who is in turn making her documentary about her alter ego, Nikki Two."²⁶ She proceeds by saying that the character of Nikki Lee is "based on what people think her character is."²⁷ Lee's next work, *Layers*, continues her artistic investigation of how she believes others perceive her.

Layers (2007-08) has been described by curator Susan Bright as providing its viewers with a visual "snapshot of how different nations view 'Asianness.'"²⁸ For this work (Figure 36; 2007), Lee visited various metropolitan centers around the world. In each city, she asked local street artists to sketch her likeness on a piece of translucent paper. Afterwards, she constructed composite images by stacking three drawings made within the same location and then photographing them; the resulting work may be likened to nineteenth-century British scientist Francis Galton's composite portraits of criminals categorized by crime committed, or more recently artist Nancy Burson's computer-generated composite photographs from the late 1970s and early 1980s, which explored issues concerning gender, race, and standards of beauty. For example, in *Mankind* (Figure 37; 1983-85) Burson selected portraits—an Asian, a Caucasian, and a Black male—from a nineteenth-century book on racial types. Using a computer program,

²⁶ Carol Kino, "Now in Moving Pictures: The Multitudes of Nikki S. Lee," *New York Times*, October 1, 2006.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Susan Bright, *AutoFocus: The Self-Portrait in Contemporary Photography* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2010), 210.

Burson was then able to apportion how much each race contributed to the final image based upon current world population statistics.

In *Layers*, Lee, like Burson is interested in exploring the intersections between race, identity, and society. Musing upon *Layers*, Lee states:

[Before] thinking about “who I am,” I first started thinking about “where I am.” I recognize the difference between the “I” that I perceive and the “I” that others perceive. ... So who am I? How do I understand this gap? To understand others sincerely might mean to understand this gap.²⁹

I propose that it is this gap that exists between her perception of herself and how others perceive her that drives *Projects*. At the same time, *Projects* also affords Lee the opportunity to better know her adoptive home by engaging with its subcultures. As I contend within this chapter, after becoming familiar with American culture and society through *Projects*, Lee by the series’ conclusion ends up having to pursue a similar investigation within her (then) former home through her *Schoolgirls Project*.

Recalling that Lee’s *Projects* grew out of a class assignment to produce a simulation project, *Oxford Dictionaries* defines to “simulate” as “to imitate the appearance or character of.”³⁰ Therefore, in the hundreds—only Lee knows the exact number—of color photographs that comprise her *Projects* series, the artist adopts roles that simulate her belonging to a particular group based on ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, worldview, recreational activity, age and/or sexual orientation.³¹ I argue that it is this diversity that lies at the heart of her photographic project. A chronological listing of Lee’s subprojects conveys the range and scope of communities that the artist infiltrates: *The Drag Queen Project* (1997), *The Punk Project*

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “Simulate,” Oxford Dictionaries, accessed January 23, 2016, http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/simulate.

³¹ Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects Gallery unnamed representative, email message to author, October 31, 2012.

(1997), *The Tourist Project* (1997), *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project* (1997), *The Lesbian Project* (1997), *The Hispanic Project* (1998), *The Yuppie Project* (1998), *The Swingers Project* (1998-99), *The Seniors Project* (1999), *The Ohio Project* (1999), *The Exotic Dancers Project* (2000), *The Skateboarders Project* (2000), *The Schoolgirls Project* (2000), and *The Hip Hop Project* (2001).³²

Although her self-transformation from community to community appears “seamless and chameleon-like,” Lee enacts the artist’s version of the anthropologist’s “going native” through meticulous study.³³ After selecting which group to target, the artist undergoes a physical metamorphosis through “a blend of clothes, makeup, diets, hair extensions, tanning salons, colored contact lenses, dance lessons, and sheer grit to infiltrate wildly different milieus.”³⁴ Following her rigorous preparation, Lee spends time with her temporary companions, ranging from a few weeks to a few months. And, not unlike the actors in the films that she admires, Lee *refines* her simulation of her target group’s semiotic codes of dress and appearance, assumes their mannerisms, learns their skill sets, and participates in stereotypical in-group activities.³⁵

³² Lee’s first project, *The Drag Queen Project* (1997), and her last project, the *Hip Hop Project* (2001) were not included in the artist’s *Projects* (2001) monograph. Kaplan, *American Exposures*, 193. *The Drag Queen Project* was not included in the monograph due to a lack of model releases. Although Lee determined the subject for each subproject, many of the subprojects had been commissioned or were funded. *The Hip Hop Project* was commissioned for the exhibition “One Planet under a Groove: Hip-hop and Contemporary Art” organized by the Bronx Museum of New York in 2002. *The Exotic Dancers Project* was supported by Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT and *The Skateboarders Project* was supported by the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco which arranged for a residency at the Headlands Center nearby. Information provided by Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects Gallery unnamed representative, email message to author, October 31, 2012.

³³ Lee’s transformations in *Projects* are often described as “seamless” and/or “chameleon-like.” For only a few of the many examples see, Ben Davis, “Cultural Karaoke,” *artnet Magazine*, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/davis/davis10-24-06.asp>; Roy Exley, “Nikki S. Lee (Tales of the City) (Exhibition): Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.” *Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine* no. 99 (July/September 2000): 59-60; and Ingrid Sischy, “Great Pretenders.” *New York Times Magazine*, suppl. Fashions of the Times (Spring 2002): 56-60. Kwon, “Experience,” 84.

³⁴ Kino, “Now.”

³⁵ The artist is an avid movie watcher. See *ibid.*; Lee, “Indefinite,” 64; and Lee and Vicario, “Conversation,” 97. In her interview with Phil Lee, the artist shares how she “watched a lot of movies to get to know [American] society better.” Lee, “Indefinite,” 64.

Finally, when she decides that the moment is picture perfect, the artist will hand her inexpensive point-and-shoot camera to someone—typically a stranger or ad hoc to a fellow group member—and request that they take a snapshot of her within her adopted cohort.³⁶

To begin to understand why Lee has herself photographed in the guise of different personae it may be helpful to return briefly to Tseng Kwong Chi's *East Meets West*. Like Tseng before her (Figure 14), Lee also had herself photographed alongside the Statue of Liberty (Figure 38; 1997). At first glance, her attitude is more playful, less scripted. Whereas Tseng, as the “unofficial” or “ambiguous” ambassador, assumes an unwelcoming stance and cool demeanor for his portrait, Lee, in *Tourist Project (13)*, mugs for the camera. Wearing an unflattering white t-shirt with the text “NEW YORK” and the city’s signifiers—its familiar skyline, the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, and (of course) Lady Liberty—in miniature emblazoned across her chest, Lee, in contrast to the stoic Tseng, appears open to whatever experiences America, beginning with The Big Apple, has to offer.

Although Lee positions herself well below the sculpture’s base, like Tseng, she pictorially asserts her presence before this symbol of “America’s promise.”³⁷ Most noticeably, Lee does not depict the copper-clad monument to freedom and the pursuit of happiness in its entirety. In fact, the artist abruptly cuts Lady Liberty off at her neck. This comes as no surprise when one learns that Lee once forthrightly informed one of her interviewers that her main subject of interest is *herself*.³⁸ Within her art, Lee is the measure of all things. In a conversation

³⁶ For the earlier subprojects, the artist’s friend Soo Hyuan Ahn who accompanied the artist took many of the photographs. Ferguson, “Let’s,” 7.

³⁷ For Sau-ling C. Wong’s description of the four ways that the Statue of Liberty serves as a potent symbol of America please see Sau-ling C. Wong, “Middle-Class American Women in a Global Frame: Refiguring the Statue of Liberty in Divakaruni and Minatoya,” *MELUS* 29, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2004): 184.

³⁸ A. M. Homes, “Hot Shots,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (Feb 2000): 250-255.

with curator Gilbert Vicario, the artist openly acknowledged: “In my work, I take pictures with a group and with other people of the group. So I describe like-people and their cultures, and then it goes back to my identity: I describe myself.”³⁹

In her portrait with the Statue of Liberty Lee elevates her status pictorially and keeps the viewer’s attention focused on her. As a person of color and newcomer to the U.S. who now occupies a minority position in relation to the adoptive culture, that Lee is assuming a dominant position within her portrayal carries great significance. By cropping the sculpture, rendering it headless, and then photographing herself next to this decapitated symbol of our nation’s freedom and gift of international friendship from the people of France, the artist seems to both poke fun and make use of tourist snapshots in which the traveler takes visual precedence over the historical monument or natural landscape. For example, in photographs made to document couples’ first visits to the Eiffel Tower, the pairs are often portrayed as upstaging the view of the famed City of Lights below.⁴⁰ Returning to Figure 38, this same effect is achieved within Lee’s self-portrait, where she occupies the foreground of the image. The artist draws further attention to herself, while playfully commenting upon the stereotype of the knack that tourists have for visibly sticking out from the local populace, by adding substance to her petite frame, attiring herself in a pair of voluminous bright red shorts, accessorized by black bulky camera case with matching fanny pack.

The current investigation approaches *Projects*, as Lee’s artistic exploration of her experience as a newcomer to the U.S. While her group portraits have often been interpreted as a

³⁹ Lee and Vicario, “Conversation,” 101-102.

⁴⁰ Author’s personal experience.

“commentary on racism and social minorities,”⁴¹ Lee asserts that this was never her intention, stating, “I’m not Korean-American... I don’t have issues about race.”⁴² The linking of *Projects* to “issues about race” may be due in part to her arrival in the U.S. being coincident with the New York art world’s recent interest in multiculturalism and émigré art.⁴³ During this time the artistic establishment sought to redress its historic lack of diversity by creating more inclusive museum exhibitions, such as the 1993 Whitney Biennial (often referred to as the “Identity” show); “Beyond the Borders: Art by Recent Immigrants” at the Bronx Museum and “Asia/America: Identities in Asian-American Art” at the Asia Society, both in 1994; and “The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s,” simultaneously at the New Museum, The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and The Studio Museum in Harlem in 1990. The actions of the Asian American art movement in the form of collectives based out of the West Coast and New York City also sought to correct this perceived historical imbalance.

Even if she denies that her work addresses issues concerning race, Lee does not avoid the subject altogether within *Projects*. That being said, I believe that it would be a mistake to approach Lee’s treatment of race and ethnicity as one would a U.S.-born-Asian-American artist. When comparing artists who arrived after America lifted immigration quotas in the 1960s with American-born second- and third-generation Asian artists, art historian Margo Machida found that the newly arrived immigrants often had little knowledge of Asian-American histories or of prior struggles for civil rights, and as a result they “found little incentive to engage in the causes of cultural politics.”⁴⁴ Machida attributes this difference to the American-born artists having

⁴¹ Kino, “Now.”

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China*, (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2006), 61.

⁴⁴ Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2008), 4-5.

shared common experiences related to growing up in the U.S. such as enduring analogous “struggles with institutionalized discrimination, racism, and ethnic stereotyping.”⁴⁵ For many Asian immigrants, such experiences were new. Further, as newcomers to the U.S. they encountered the unexpected challenges of adjusting to their newly acquired minority status and the majority culture’s perception of their race/ethnicity; being classified under the broad umbrella heading of “Asian”; living within a less homogenous society, in general; and negotiating between competing pressures to retain one’s culture of origin and to assimilate into mainstream American society.

To better appreciate how Lee may be exploring issues concerning her life in the U.S. as it relates to her native Korea within *Projects*, it may be useful to compare her work to that of a contemporary. Like Lee, Zhang Huan moved to New York City during the 1990s. However, in contrast to Lee, Zhang’s artistic career was already underway prior to his arrival. In fact, he had decided to relocate to the U.S. following his inclusion in the “Inside Out: New Chinese Art” exhibition organized by the Asia Society in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1998. Although he later ended up returning to Shanghai, in 2005, Zhang, like Lee, had been forced to navigate a culture and society different from his own. During his time spent in the U.S., Zhang created work that addressed the push-and-pull that he felt between his new and old homes in two ways. First, he pursued projects that demonstrated both his connection to China through the incorporation of “traditional references” in the form of the objects he used and his connection to the U.S. through the incorporation of “local influences.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Chiu, *Breakout*, 110.

Second, Zhang placed great emphasis on his body, asserting his physical presence within his adopted environment.

Like Lee in *Projects*, when enacting membership within a particular subgroup, and Tseng in *East Meets West*, when staging the ambassador persona in relation to varying locale, Zhang sets his portrayal within the context of performance. In *Pilgrimage—Wind and Water in New York* (Figure 39; 1998), created for the Asia Society’s “Inside Out” exhibition, audiences witnessed the artist lying upon a mattress of ice atop a Ming-style traditional wooden bed for nearly ten minutes. Tethered to the bed were dogs of different shapes, sizes, and colors.

Reflecting upon *Pilgrimage*, Zhang observes:

The use of dogs originates from my impression of New York. There are so many dogs in this city ... dogs are sensitive to the external environment and are afraid of possible dangers. What strikes me most about this city is the co-existence of different races and their cultures. ... Yet for me, there is a fear, or culture shock, if you like. I do like the city, but at the same time I have an unnamable fear. I want to feel it with my body, just as I feel the ice. I try to melt off a reality in the way I try to melt off the ice with the warmth of my body.⁴⁷

Within the passage, the artist notes that New York’s diversity serves as a source of both excitement and anxiety. Through the coldness of the ice in *Pilgrimage*, he attempts to physically and metaphorically keep his body separate from this new diverse environment. This enables Zhang, who came from a more homogenous society compared to that of the U.S., to hold onto and retain his cultural identity amongst the multitude that surrounds him. At the same time, the artist as immigrant expresses his desire to act upon his present reality (i.e., New York City) without becoming lost in the fray, as indicated by his wanting to melt the ice with the warmth of his body. Speaking of the assimilative pressures he has encountered, Zhang states: “Living in this melting pot, I firmly believe that I cannot lose what I have. ... I also need to face reality, the

⁴⁷ Zhijian Qian, “Performing Bodies: Performance Art in China,” *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 71.

reality of New York. I should make a great effort to become part of this society, but I cannot lose myself in it.”⁴⁸

Since critics have oftentimes characterized Lee’s *Projects* as reinforcing the notion that “America is the ultimate melting pot” or as a reminder of “how terrifically chunky the melting pot” can be, upon first glance it may appear that she does not share Zhang Huan’s concerns over the possibility of “losing” herself within New York’s, and by extension America’s melting pot.⁴⁹ I intend to complicate such readings. Whereas Zhang creates works that seek to preserve his identity while living within New York’s melting pot, Lee creates, as I will argue in the section that follows, a *hybrid* work in *Projects* that combines aspects of American and Korean cultures together while still retaining traces of their differing origins.⁵⁰

Performing Cultural Hybridity

One should not discount the theoretical underpinnings of Lee’s *Projects*. In fact, a year after Lee’s arrival in the U.S. in 1995, English postcolonial theorist, cultural critic, and historian Robert J. C. Young published *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*.⁵¹ While hybridity today is employed with slightly different meanings when applied to fields as diverse as linguistics, cultural studies, literary criticism, postcolonial analysis, and nature-society relations, it shares certain characteristics across disciplines. As geographer Katharyne Mitchell explains:

The primary feature of hybridity is clearly the idea of integration and diffusion, of a thing that is derived from heterogeneous sources, and composed of incongruous elements. The organic hybrid bears the physical traces of the heterogeneous originating elements, yet emerges as a distinct entity, as a thing in its own right.⁵²

⁴⁸ Zhang Huan, “A Piece of Nothing,” in *Zhang Huan: Altered States*, ed. Melissa Chiu (New York: Asia Society; Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2007), 73.

⁴⁹ Kino, “Now”; Jerry Saltz, “Decoy and Daydreamer: Girl Photographers Take on the World,” *Village Voice*, September 28, 1999.

⁵⁰ Katharyne Mitchell, “Hybridity,” in *Cultural Geography*, 188.

⁵¹ Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁵² Mitchell, “Hybridity,” 188.

Rohini Malik and Gavin Jantjes define hybridity as “a state of being, arrived at through the innovative mixing and borrowing of ideas, languages and modes of practice.”⁵³ Hybridity, then, focuses on the blending and synthesis of different cultures that come into contact with one another, whether through conflict, the sharing of proximate borders, or immigration. Thinking along these lines, Homi K. Bhabha observes that the process of “cultural hybridity,” in addition to giving rise to “something different,” also provides “a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.”⁵⁴ Also, due to the notable absence of a fixed identity (in that it is comprised of incongruent elements), many cultural theorists have championed hybridity as “the perfect interlocutor of resistance to various kinds of essentialist and essentialising narratives.”⁵⁵ Hybridity, I believe, is key to unlocking Lee’s *Projects*, since she readily invokes the theory in discussions of her work. In fact, I propose that Lee consciously employs a hybrid methodology within her work to create a point of intersection between Korea and the U.S. In an interview with American-based art historian, author, critic and curator RoseLee Goldberg, I contend that the artist pointedly outlines the differences between Western and Eastern cultures, so that she may better illustrate later how her group portraits seamlessly combine disparate influences.⁵⁶

In her conversation with Goldberg, Lee first identifies *empathy* as the Korean conceptual element that she mixes with American imagery—in the form of the cultural groups with whom she has herself photographed—to construct her hybrid works. As the artist observes:

⁵³ Rohini Malik and Gavin Jantjes, *A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with Artists on Internationalism* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1998) S.V. “Hybridity (in the glossary); quoted in Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art After 1980*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 48.

⁵⁴ Bhabha, “Third,” 211.

⁵⁵ Mitchell, “Hybridity,” 189.

⁵⁶ RoseLee Goldberg, “Only Part of the Story,” in *Nikki S. Lee: Parts* (Ostfildern Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz; New York: D.A.P., Distributed Art Publishers, 2005), 49.

Maybe this is a Korean characteristic. . . In Asian culture, we are taught to empathize with people. We don't respond to people in a rational or analytic manner. We don't explain emotions or behavior through situations—'Oh, this person may be experiencing a particular situation, that's why she acts this way.' To understand another person, I first have to synchronize my emotions to that person's emotions.⁵⁷

Whether or not she shares the same worldview as those whose environments she temporarily inhabits, Lee *empathizes with them*. Expanding upon the significance of empathy within her work, the artist states, "I was always curious about why I feel like I understand different cultures even though I don't have any experience [with multiculturalism], and I wanted to prove that with the pictures."⁵⁸ That empathy may be one of the driving forces behind Lee's *Projects* is, perhaps, best conveyed in an image from *The Ohio Project* (Figure 40; 1999) of the artist posed in front of a Confederate flag.⁵⁹

Within this provocative work, a peroxide-blond Lee sits on the arm of a La-Z-Boy recliner next to her bearded, rough-hewn, rifle-toting companion. Prominently displayed on the wall behind them hangs a Confederate flag, the proud emblem of Southern heritage, emblazoned in bold black caps with the combative statement: "I AIN'T COMING DOWN."⁶⁰ To all

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Berwick, "Extreme," 113.

⁵⁹ The inflammatory nature of this photograph reveals itself in two examples. First, as Louis Kaplan notes, this was the only Lee photograph selected for inclusion in "Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self," the comprehensive show at the International Center of Photography in New York devoted to the construction of race in American photographic history. See Kaplan, *American Exposures*, 184 [FN32]. In his footnote, the author adds that in the exhibition's catalog, the image has been placed as the frontispiece to Howard Winant, "The Theoretical Status of the Concept of Race," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: International Center of Photography and Abrams, 2003), 50. The second example relates to reviewer Chisun Lee's reaction to this work. Upon viewing this image, he felt immediate concern for the artist's safety wanting to say to her, "Get out, girl! Get out while you can!" Chisun Lee, "Portrait of the Assimilartist," *Color Lines Magazine* 5, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 38-40.

⁶⁰ Although post-dating Nikki S. Lee's *Projects*, in a 2015 study published in PLOS ONE, researchers used Google search data to identify the most concentrated cluster of racist searches. Of interest to my discussion of her *Ohio Project*, the "most racist places in America" were not identified as locations within the South, but rather "along the spine of the Appalachians running from Georgia all the way up to Near York and southern Vermont," with other "hotbeds of racist searches occurring in areas of the Gulf Coast, Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and a large portion of Ohio." David H. Chae et al., "Association between an Internet-Based Measure of Area Racism and Black

appearances, Lee, the man, and the couple's surroundings mirror the sentiment invoked by the charged text. The artist returns the camera's gaze with a pointed stare, whereas her partner's focus is aimed at the barrel of his shotgun. His attention brings our awareness to his weapon, which compounds the work's menacing air. A Bible on a side table interjects an element of moral righteousness to the pair's assumed united front. Altogether, in addition to the perceived defensiveness of the duo, this image reads as unapologetically American. After all, the U.S. is one of the few countries in the world where its citizenry can claim the constitutional right to bear arms. Also, available for the viewer's delectation is another American signifier: its junk food *à la* soda pop and chips.

Writing about the Confederate flag photo for *KoreAm Journal*, Paul Lee Cannon says of Lee's *Projects* that the series "has taken her to places most Korean Americans have not tread," with the implication being that these are places they would not care to visit or inhabit.⁶¹ Such judgments give *The Ohio Project* (7) impact, since within this photograph I see an artist who manages to simulate a true empathy for her companion. When asked what led her to look to the Midwest as a subject, Lee responded, "I was born and grew up in a rural area in Korea and that led me to be interested in American rural cultures when I moved here."⁶² In another interview, she attributes her "comfort" within the Hispanic and Ohio communities to her ability to insert

Mortality," *PLOS ONE* (April 24, 2015), accessed October 21, 2015, DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0122963. For an illuminating piece addressing the resurgence in popularity of the Confederate flag contemporary with Lee's photo project, see Chris Springer, "The Troubled Resurgence of the Confederate Flag," *History Today* 43 (June 1993): 7, accessed October 21, 2015, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/202807211?accountid=14556>. Even ten years after Lee's *Ohio Project*, controversy surrounding the public display of the Confederate flag continues at the national level, see Yoni Appelbaum, "Why Is the Flag Still There?," *Atlantic*, June, 21, 2015, accessed October, 21, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/why-is-the-flag-still-there/396431/>.

⁶¹ Paul Lee Cannon, "Identity Crises," *KoreAm Journal* 12, no. 9 (September 2001): 26-27.

⁶² Artist quoted in Lee, "Indefinite," 86.

herself “into all these different cultures here and fold them into [herself].”⁶³ Lee continues, “Maybe it’s a special ability. I think I can combine Eastern [Korean] and Western [American] things together.”⁶⁴ Additionally, if one takes into consideration that the artist grew up in a culture as (if not more) homogenous—racially, ethnically and culturally—than that of her white companions one begins to understand how she is able to develop empathy towards his segregationist attitude. At the same time, the artist rather cleverly heightens the irony of her pictorial assimilation into this ultra-white milieu by her very presence. If one recalls that hybridity qualifies the concept of group identity, suggesting that there is not now nor has there ever been an absolute difference between self and others, one develops a further appreciation of Lee’s use of empathy in creating her photographic series. When constructing her hybrid imagery, in addition to drawing from Korean culture’s empathy for others, Lee also finds there, as she told Goldberg, examples of traditional role-playing enacted by women.⁶⁵ In her film, *A.K.A. Nikki S. Lee*, the artist shares her “love” of Korean culture and its traditions.

For the immigrant, distance from one’s country of origin can make cultural celebrations, performances, and ceremonies once viewed with disdain become meaningful, to be recalled, even, with nostalgia. I believe that Lee’s stated interest in her Korean heritage might have been further spurred by her separation from her native Korea. Within traditional Korean culture, shamanic ceremonies, or *kuts*, and epic folk operas, called *pansori* are instances when women were allowed to play a pivotal role. Beginning with the religious example, in *A.K.A.* Lee shows a photograph of the shaman performing a *kut*, where a *kut* denotes a variety of rituals that range

⁶³ Lee and Vicario, “Conversation,” 105.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Goldberg, “Only,” 49.

from “the honoring of a benign god” to “the energetic summoning of an angry ghost.”⁶⁶ For these public performances, the shaman, referred to as a *mudang*, wears special clothing, carries the requisite sword or trident, and shakes a collection of small bells to the beat of a nearby drum in order to attract a particular spirit. Working herself into a semi-hysterical state, which conveys to her audience that her powers have been fully summoned, she dances energetically, jumping and twirling. The shaman may also try to evince that she has reached a transcendent state by executing inexplicable acts, such as walking barefoot on the upturned blade of her sword.

Within the film *A.K.A. Nikki S. Lee*, the artist reinforces her stated interest in *pansori* by sharing that she viewed them as a child and by including a clip labeled “Seoul 1998” of herself singing a *pansori* song for karaoke.” Despite this modern example, *pansori* originated as a form of entertainment around the seventeenth century and peaked during the nineteenth century. A single performer, called a *kwangdae*, wielding only a handkerchief and fan, employs these simple elements to suggest disguises, tools, weapons, or whatever the narrative calls for.⁶⁷ In addition, *pansori* singers possess a formidable vocal range, since they must act out all of the characters within a given story. Like the *mudang*, the *kwangdae*’s words and actions are also punctuated by the contrapuntal rhythms of an accompanying percussionist. However, differing from the shaman who entralls audiences for hours by demonstrating her skill at communicating with the dead, the *kwangdae* entralls audiences by performing operatic versions of popular folktales.

Regardless of whether or not one is an artist, perceived cultural differences become more pronounced with distance, and the Korean immigrants’ knee-jerk reaction to this separation may

⁶⁶ Donald N. Clark, *Culture and Customs of Korea* (Westport, CT; London: Greenwood Press, 2000), 45.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

be to cling more tightly to anything associated with their *Koreanness*. Also, contemporary with Lee's student days while attending Chung-Ang University in Seoul, both *pansori* and *kut* traditions experienced resurgences in popularity, becoming sources of national pride. As one author notes, "On university campuses day after day, students practiced the percussion typical of *kuts*, began their college festivals with rituals that were strongly shamanist, and often talked about forsaking foreign ideologies such as Christianity and Buddhism in favor of the genuine Korean religion shamanism."⁶⁸

As another example, a year before Lee's arrival to the U.S., in 1993, Korea's leading director Im Kwōnt'aek introduced *pansori* to younger generations through his award-winning film *Sōp'yōnje (The Western Style)*.⁶⁹ In the story, three wandering family members—a man, his stepdaughter, and younger stepson—travel the village roads suffering hardship as a *pansori* troop. At different points in the narrative, the characters use their art to endure periods of adversity. This movie struck a deep chord in the consciousness of Korean audiences even though few of them, especially younger viewers, could sing any *pansori*. As one critic put it, "the film is not so much about *pansori* as about the voice within us all."⁷⁰

In addition to providing Lee with a much-needed touchstone to her *Koreanness*, I believe *Projects* draws directly from elements found within *kut* rituals and *pansori* folk operas. Like her photographic series, both the religious and cultural traditions are long in duration—in Lee's case, each of her subprojects lasted from three weeks to three months. *Mudang* and *kwangdaie* perform in public before a live audience—for Lee, the witnesses to her performance are the

⁶⁸ Ibid., 46,

⁶⁹ Michael Breen, *The Koreans: Who They Are, What They Want, Where Their Future Lies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 8. The title refers to an emotion-laden type of *pansori* singing strongly associated with southwestern Korea. See Clark, *Culture*, 88.

⁷⁰ Clark, *Culture*, 89.

members of the subgroups with whom she photographs herself. Therefore, *mudang*, *kwangdaie*, and artist rely upon their audience to give power to their performance. Lastly, *kut*, *pansori*, and Lee's Projects series are propelled by the energetic actions of a single female protagonist—the *mudang*, the *kwangdaie*, and the artist, whereby each protagonist must be able to adopt a wide array of attitudes, costumes and gestures necessary for achieving a successful performance. To illustrate Lee's aptitude at employing role-play within her hybrid photographs, let us next turn to two works from her *Projects* series.

Lee adjusts her performance of friendship, for example, to conform to the subgroup's expectations. In *The Yuppie Project (4)* (Figure 41; 1998), we encounter the artist accompanied by a pedigreed dog and attired in a tasteful outfit posing with an equally well-dressed woman in front of a high-end luxury goods shop located on Madison Avenue. Lee further highlights the upscale nature of this retail excursion by placing emphasis on the Tiffany-blue shopping bag. The pricey purchase, held by the artist, occupies the center of the photograph. The bag is also framed within a triangle formed by the women's faces and the dog. The two females move towards one another as if trying to fit into within the camera's viewfinder. They appear to welcome the photographer's intrusion; the woman at the lower right smiles brightly, whereas Lee's look seems to be asking, "Is this what you were looking for?" Their helpful behavior is characteristic of what one would expect from these young upwardly mobile professionals.

In *The Hispanic Project (2)* (Figure 42; 1998), we find Lee with a different young woman being photographed on the occasion of the Puerto Rican Day parade.⁷¹ The pair clad in tight-fitting outfits and prominent gold jewelry return the camera's gaze with a hard stare. Unlike the yuppies in the previous image, these two figures come across as commanding, even though the

⁷¹ William L. Hamilton, "Shopping," *New York Times*, December 2, 2001.

flurry of activity and people that surround them make them appear in less control of their immediate surroundings.

Given Lee's professed identification with two marginalized groups—the *Ohio* and *Hispanic Projects*—expressed earlier, I find it interesting that she adopts for both subprojects an aggressive stance when creating artwork intended for a predominantly white, gallery-going audience, who are made up of individuals similar to *The Yuppie Project* participants. In an article written for an *Art Journal* series focusing on “whiteness,” art historian Maurice Berger interprets *The Yuppie Project*, in which Lee rubs elbows with Wall Street stockbrokers, traders, and investment bankers, as the artist's attempt to “expose and denaturalize this unmarked and invisible racial category of power and privilege.”⁷² To this astute comment, I would add that, situated within the context of the larger *Projects* series, *The Yuppie Project* is just one of many subprojects that demonstrates the artist's proficiency at identifying with different social groups through empathy and role-play.

When the artist adopts the appearance of her group of choice, she moves beyond copying its code of dress by adopting its lifestyle, so that she may enact a more authentic portrayal. With regards to *The Yuppie Project* Lee observes that, “Yuppies can't be real fashion people because they don't have the time. ... But they want to have nice 'style,' so they have to shop in department stores and they have to follow trends. It's safe too. You wear a Gucci bag with a basic outfit. ... It's a fashion equation.”⁷³ For *The Hispanic Project*, Lee had gold nail extensions applied professionally, gelled her hair, which she dyed brown, and treated her artificial ponytail with Smooth N'Shine Hair Therapy. She purchased her gold hoop earrings

⁷² Maurice Berger, “Picturing Whiteness: Nikki S. Lee's Yuppie Project,” *Art Journal* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2001).

⁷³ Hamilton, “Shopping.”

and other jewelry in the wholesale district at 27th Street in Manhattan, where, because she was a native Korean buying from Korean storeowners, she was able to obtain individual items at a discount.⁷⁴ More importantly, unlike *The Yuppie Project* which only required her attending to symbols of status in the form of brands and labels, *The Hispanic Project* required that Lee base her attire on what she saw people wearing out on the streets and what merchandise she found to be popular in the shops.⁷⁵

In part, the empathy conveyed towards her subjects within *Projects* may be attributed to Lee's ability literally to fit into other people's shoes. As she shared with Barry Schwabsky, "I identify myself easily. ... It's kind of weird, but I knew this naturally—how to act like a punk, how to have an attitude."⁷⁶ Writing about *The Hip Hop Project* (Figure 43; 2001), theatre scholar Nicole Hodges notes that the artist's performance of alternative images of African-American women, such as the "down sistah" and "b-girl" characters that exist in hip-hop culture run counter to the hyper-sexual images that circulate in popular culture, which speaks to Lee's "documentation of what she observed and *not necessarily what she thinks people want to see* (emphasis mine)."⁷⁷ When asked how she views herself in relation to the African-American community, the artist responded, "I just imagined myself as growing up in one of these black families like I was [a] real black girl."⁷⁸ After all, Lee acts as *the* point of reference because ultimately she is not as interested in investigating others' identities as much as she is interested in investigating her own. Again, I share Mark Godfrey's assertion that in *Projects* the artist engages with her own ethnic identity, so that her position as "the Korean" is the subtext for all

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Barry Schwabsky, "Nikki S. Lee," *Artforum International* 38, no. 1 (September 1999): 158-159.

⁷⁷ Hodges, "Sampling."

⁷⁸ Ibid., in Nikki S. Lee, personal correspondence between Nicole Hodges and artist, March 2008.

her self-portraits.⁷⁹ Therefore, in the section that follows I pursue this idea that Projects has as much to do with Lee's positioning Korean culture under a microscope, as it does her adoptive American one.

Communicating the Outsider's Perspective: From Konnichiwa to Anyang

At first glance, *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project* (1997) and *The Schoolgirls Project* (2000) seem at odds with the other subprojects featured in Projects. I contend that that through her outward assimilation into cultural groups, Lee is interested in testing the boundaries of identity. This dissertation argues that by first titling her subprojects *The Young Japanese (East Village)* and *The Schoolgirls Project*, Lee practices what post-structuralist Judith Butler describes as the "process of reiteration" whereby familiar acts of identity linked to how individuals perform as part of a group are repeated, or in this instance labeled, in order to re-affirm the group.⁸⁰ Additionally, Lee's titling of the *Young Japanese* and *Schoolgirls* projects serves a practical purpose, since otherwise American audiences may fail to identify the subgroups as the artist intended. I will pursue this topic in greater detail in the section that follows. For now, let us consider how Lee, in contemplating her definition of self, links individual identity to a group identity as defined by relationships.

Nan Goldin is another artist who became known for photographing group identity as defined by relationships in her seminal *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1979-86). On critics comparing her work to Goldin's, Lee observes that Goldin, known for exploring intense emotional and physical moments within her relationships through photography, is interested in exploring the personal bond shared between two people from the "outside," whereas she, Lee, is

⁷⁹ Godfrey, "Nikki."

⁸⁰ See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

motivated by something deep “inside” when portraying her simulated relationships.⁸¹ When discussing how social connectedness informs her work, the artist acknowledges:

Maybe we can think that my work is deep in the sense that I approach relationships from a broader scope. ... To get to know where I am and who I am requires for me to see myself through the eyes of others, those who live their lives around me, a society to which I belong. This explains the overarching concept of my work quite well. I believe that the broad scope of my work adds depth to the investigation of identity.⁸²

Therefore, the artist invites her viewer to approach her identity as it relates to those with whom she has herself photographed. Fortunately, *Projects* provides a visual record suitable to our purposes. Upon reviewing the many groups represented, one is oftentimes struck by their diversity. This becomes interesting when one notes that Lee’s native South Korea is racially, ethnically, culturally, and socially more homogenous in comparison to the U.S. Although the artist lived in New York for three years before embarking upon *Projects*, I contend that *Projects* conveys attitudes towards “the other”—racial, ethnic, cultural, and social—that Lee experienced while growing up and living in South Korea. This becomes more apparent when one stops to consider the varying subgroups comprising Lee’s *Projects*.

In his *Art and America* review of South Korea’s Kwangju Biennale in 2000, critic Frank Hoffmann observes that until the 1980s, the country had censored nude paintings, except for those idealized figures deemed acceptable by their conforming to classical artistic standards of female beauty.⁸³ Additional taboo subjects are as follows: “gender identity,” “homosexuality,” “transvestitism,” and “sexual commerce.”⁸⁴ Within Lee’s *Projects*, one encounters *all* of the above “rarely seen in Korean art” topics—nudity, gender identity, homosexuality, transvestitism,

⁸¹ Lee, “Indefinite,” 80-81.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸³ Frank Hoffmann, “Monoculture and Its Discontents,” *Art in America* 88, no. 11 (Nov 2000): 72.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

and sexual commerce—in *The Lesbian Project* (1997), *The Drag Queen Project* (1997), and *The Exotic Dancers Project* (2000) specifically. Therefore, as was the case for Tseng Kwong Chi before her, I contend that life in New York provided Lee the opportunity and artistic freedom to pursue work that would have been deemed too controversial within her native South Korea. Also, fitting under this category is Lee’s *Young Japanese (East Village) Project*, which would have been unthinkable in South Korea for reasons that will be outlined within the present section.

Within *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project (11)* (Figure 44), we see three club kids of Asian descent, presumably Japanese given the work’s title, sitting in a bedroom next to a wall covered in colorful candid snapshots and fliers promoting popular nineties dance club acts. At the center of this tightly knit trio is a grinning green-haired *South Korean* Lee. The artist’s gaze, albeit tired, is open and encouraging, while her two male companions seem more reserved. Seated closer to the viewer, the two larger men seem to shield the smaller Lee in a protective manner. They belong together. This sense of belonging is further communicated in another image of the artist from the same series (Figure 45). In a photograph that captures the convivial party spirit, a group of young women, already occupying cramped quarters, manage to gather even closer together when a young man photobombs their photo op, hopping into the picture right before it is taken.

Given Korea’s colonial past, remarkably only a few scholars and reviewers of Lee’s Projects have expressed surprise at Lee’s pursuit of *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project*. Reporting for *The New York Times*, art critic Holland Cotter simply notes that for Lee, “Japanese” was “a particularly loaded identity for a Korean.”⁸⁵ Jerry Saltz, writing for *The Village Voice*, observes the “weirdness” of Lee in *The Young Japanese* series stating, “Here (as

⁸⁵ Holland Cotter, “Art in Review: Nikki S. Lee,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1999.

depressing as this is) the American eye has difficulty telling the difference between these two ancient uneasy geopolitical neighbors.”⁸⁶ Like Saltz, Louis Kaplan begins his analysis by remarking that *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project* plays with the stereotype that all Asians look the same to Western eyes. However, pushing Saltz’s and Cotter’s assessments further, Kaplan observes:

One of the implied ironies is that [Lee’s] simulation of herself in the guise of a young Japanese woman plays into the historical desire of imperialist Japan to co-opt Korea into its spheres of influence. Another reading is that the Project’s projection (“turning Japanese”) may alternately be read as the unconscious desire in the Korean imagination to assimilate to the dominant culture. Therefore, her parody offers an ambivalent mixture of compensatory anger and resistance as well as admiration and desire for Japanese cultural and aesthetic power.⁸⁷

I completely agree with the reviewers’ shared assessment that in light of the difference between, as Saltz puts it, “these two ancient uneasy geopolitical neighbors,” Lee’s pursuit of *The Young Japanese (East Village)* is remarkable. To their observations, I would reiterate my own that life in New York gave her the freedom to pursue subjects either unavailable or not possible within her native South Korea.

Lee’s outward assimilation, then, as a Korean into the company of *The Young Japanese (East Village)* group as she has labeled her companions, becomes even more shocking when one considers that South Korea’s bitter resentment towards its Japanese neighbors has only very recently started to ease.⁸⁸ Even prior to Korea being absorbed within Japan’s territory as a result

⁸⁶ Saltz, “Decoy.”

⁸⁷ Kaplan, *American*, 176.

⁸⁸ Korean resentment of the Japanese even extends into the art world. At the 2000 Kwangju Biennale, reviewer Frank Hoffman observed that although Westerners have been well exposed to Monoha through prestigious shows such as “Japan des avant-gardes, 1910-1970” at the Centre Pompidou in 1988 and “Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky” at the Guggenheim SoHo in 1994, the Korean public is still rather uninformed about the movement. He added: “This is mostly due to the bitter resentment over Japan’s colonization of Korea. Until recently, there were [still] state-imposed bans on importing Japanese cultural products, including art works and films, into the country.” In “Monoculture,” 77.

of the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty in 1910, due to their geographic proximity the two nations' relationship has been characterized by centuries of cultural exchange, trade, war, and political contact. During World War II, the Japanese in addition to mobilizing the Korean people as laborers, taxpayers, and later soldiers, also selected its women to accompany Japan's army, serving the troops in the field as cooks, laundresses, and "prostitutes" or "sex slaves."⁸⁹ The Japanese referred to these women as "comfort women" or *wianbu*.⁹⁰

Significant to the present study's understanding of the controversial nature of *The Young Japanese (East Village)* subproject within Lee's *Projects* is that the effects of Japanese occupation are still very much in evidence within South Korean society. For example, it was not until the 1990s—the same decade that Lee began *Projects*—that South Korea acknowledged, for the first time in its history, the experience of the former *wianbu*. Up until this time, much of Korean society had been unwilling to face what many viewed as its shameful past.⁹¹ The arbiters of this change were three elderly women, former *wianbu*, who sought legal action against the Japanese government. Officially, the Japanese position has ranged from refusal to formally apologize to outright denial that such abuses occurred, thus further enforcing these women's silence and demonstrating how this trauma has yet to be resolved so many years after bringing it to the surface.⁹²

⁸⁹ Clark, *Culture*, 17.

⁹⁰ Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 5-6.

⁹¹ Chungmoo Choi, "Introduction: The Comfort Women: Colonialism, War, and Sex," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 6, no. 1 (1997): v, quoted in Cho, *Haunting*, 5-6.

⁹² In March 2007, Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe, officially denied that the Japanese Imperial Army participated in any wrongdoing toward the former comfort women, claiming there was no coercion on the part of the military and that the women were paid, voluntary prostitutes. Despite the assertion of Japanese historians and the testimonies of both victims and witnesses, Abe held onto his position of denial. Furthermore, as recently as 2012, animosity continues to simmer between Japan and South Korea over the issue of comfort women and it extends to American soil. In May, a delegation of Japanese officials visited Palisades Park, New Jersey, with a request to remove a small monument in a public park dedicated in 2010 to the memory of the tens of thousands of women and

That issues related to the war continue to color relations between South Korea and Japan up to today is why I find Lee's *Young Japanese (East Village)* photographs so affecting. At the same time, this subproject speaks to Lee's and her younger generations' efforts to break free of past animosities. In some ways, however, I would also contend that the *Young Japanese (East Village)* persona may have been one of the easiest for Lee to slip into, with the exception of *The Schoolgirls Project* and *The Yuppie Project* due to, in her words, "a lot of my friends was [sic] like that."⁹³ Significant to my research, I propose that more significant than having a similar language, culture, religion, and cuisine are the commonalities to be found in Lee's and the *Young Japanese* individuals' shared experience as émigrés of Asian descent to the U.S.⁹⁴ Lee and her *Young Japanese* companions are around the same age. They live in the East Village; they have moved from a more homogenous culture to a more diverse one; they find themselves experiencing prejudices against Asians that they had probably not been aware of prior to arriving in the U.S.; and they find that they must navigate their way through an unfamiliar culture using a language foreign to them. It is also very likely, as immigrants of color to the U.S. that they face issues concerning identity and alienation. If Lee shares these experiences in common with the *Young Japanese*, how does her experience compare to that of her peers who have also left South Korea for the West?

girls, many of them Korean, who were forced into sexual slavery by Japanese soldiers during World War II. The delegation's actions have only spurred added interest by Korean communities to build additional memorials across the U.S. See Kirk Semple, "New Jersey, Memorial for 'Comfort Women' Deepens Animosity," *New York Times*, May 18, 2012. The previous December tensions between Japan and South Korea over the legacy of comfort women were reignited when a bronze statue in honor of victims was installed across the street from the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, the South Korean capital; Japanese officials have asked the Korean authorities to remove the statue. See Sang-Hun Choe, "Statue Deepens Dispute Over Wartime Sexual Slavery," *New York Times*, December 15, 2011. For information on the recent deal between President Park Geun-hye of South Korea and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan aimed at resolving the dispute over Korean women who had been pressed into sexual servitude in Japanese military brothels before and during World War II please refer to Jonathan Soble and Choe Sang-Hun, "South Korean and Japanese Leaders Feel Backlash From 'Comfort Women' Deal," *New York Times*, December 29, 2015.

⁹³ Kino, "Now."

⁹⁴ Mary E. Connor, *The Koreas: A Global Studies Handbook* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2002), 78-79.

Notably, with only a few exceptions, many of the artists who created works tackling the subject of Korean identity and were included in the exhibition “Chaotic Harmony: Contemporary Korean Photography,” organized by the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in California, like Lee, had studied and received advanced degrees in other countries—notably the U.S. and Great Britain. Similar to Lee, as one artist, Jung Lee, wrote, “It was only after the beginning of my studies in photography in the U.K. that I, born and educated in Korea, started to give serious thought to the issue of ‘identity.’”⁹⁵ In contrast to Lee, however, another South Korean artist, Hyun-Doo Park, found his profound sense of alienation to be a powerful source of inspiration. While studying at the School of Visual Arts in New York, Park experienced feelings of loneliness and vulnerability that led him to create the series *Goodbye Stranger*.

In *Goodbye Stranger 1, no. 27* (Figure 46; 2002), the artist, working with a four-by-five-inch view camera, posed naked on the roof of his apartment building. Seated in a lotus position with a mirror in his lap, he literally backs himself into a corner, where he appears dwarfed, rendered insignificant by the towering structures nearby. Park describes the series as portraying his multiple failed attempts at assimilating into a foreign city, here New York, at once revealing the incongruity between him and the alien environment. He shares:

No matter where I am the cultural difference[s] between Korea and America are extreme. ... There are exact rules, codes of conduct in Korea that define proper behavior. There I know how to perceive or recognize myself. There are fewer rules in America. Thus, I feel extremely vulnerable here. This anxiety, paranoia, and delusionary thinking made me begin a series of self-portraits.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Joongho Yum and Jung Lee, *Jung Lee* (Seoul, Korea: One and J. Gallery, 2008), quoted in Karen Sinsheimer, “Identity, Family, Memory: Who Am We?,” in *Chaotic Harmony: Contemporary Korean Photography* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 60. Author’s note: Nikki S. Lee was not included in this exhibition; reviewers of the show have noted the curators’ omission.

⁹⁶ Hyun-Doo Park, unpublished artist’s statement, 2003, quoted in Tucker, “Past/Present,” 28.

As reflected by the bleakness of his words and portrayal, Park's response to the cultural differences between Korea and the U.S. is much more despairing and desolate than Lee's. Park seems alienated; Lee is much less so. In Figure 46, Park photographs himself as defenseless, lonely, and friendless. On the other hand, even in the images where Lee poses alone, as in *The Tourist Project (13)* (Figure 38), the artist always situates herself within the context of an identifiable group. As a result she positions herself as never truly being alone. Although Lee does not always portray the activities that she engages in as being particularly enjoyable—for example, *The Exotic Dancers Project (23)* (Figure 47; 2000), where a world-weary Lee, pauses presumably post-performance for a well-deserved smoke break—I contend that the artist avoids creating self-portraits that intimate that she feels alienated from her unfamiliar surroundings, as is the case, I would argue, in Park's *Goodbye Stranger*.

This does not mean, however, that Lee never explores feelings of isolation, or alienation within *Projects*. I maintain that Lee's last self-selected subproject, *The Schoolgirls Project* (Figure 34), begun when she was home for the holidays in 2000, may have been inspired by her feeling alienated from her native South Korea after living in the U.S. for three years. As Gilbert Vicario rightly observes, in contrast to *The Ohio Project*, *The Schoolgirls Project* is “no longer about sticking out like a sore thumb.”⁹⁷ I propose that it is the conformity that she experienced while back in South Korea that isolated Lee.

Within my research, I approach *The Schoolgirls Project* as being less about the artist as immigrant expressing the old adage, “There's no place like home” and more about the experience of returning to one's roots only to find that things are *the same, but different*.⁹⁸ Lee

⁹⁷ Lee and Vicario, “Conversation,” 104.

⁹⁸ Kaplan, “American Exposures,” 187.

shares that upon beginning *Schoolgirls* in Korea, it had not seemed any different from her previous projects, *at first*. In her words, “I didn’t go to a uniformed girls’ highschool [sic] in my youth—I went to a co-ed school. I never wore a uniform in my life.”⁹⁹ At the same time, despite some generational differences, the artist identifies similarities between her own past experience and the students with whom she is photographed. Humorously, she acknowledges that not much has changed between her generation and the next in that they enjoy the same activities: “studying, going out, eating, and shopping.”¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, Lee had anticipated that *Schoolgirls* was going to be easier than her previous undertakings in the U.S. in that for the first time she would be sharing the same language and culture as her subjects. This is why Lee was taken off guard by the unanticipated drawbacks, such as being forced to explain her actions more frequently than she had had to in the U.S.¹⁰¹ The artist attributes this difference to Koreans not “exposing themselves” to the camera as readily as Americans.¹⁰² She notes that in the U.S. she had been able to rally everyone together simply by saying, “Okay, everyone, snapshot!”; by contrast, in Korea, she encountered individuals who questioned her motives.¹⁰³ Lee adds, “Or they don’t understand what an ‘artist’ is. I explain what I’m doing [in the U.S.], people act interested. They don’t ask what a thirty-year-old is doing back in high school!”¹⁰⁴ Essentially, within her adoptive country, the U.S., Lee encountered a ready acceptance of her artistic endeavors that was absent in her homeland.

⁹⁹ Lee and Vicario, “Conversation, 104. “Until the 1970s, high school students were required to wear uniforms along with the badges of their schools. In the 1980s, wearing uniforms seemed a vestige of Japanese colonialism and uniforms disappeared only to return in the 1990s to minimize the differences in wealth.” Excerpted from Kim Young-na, *Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea* (Elizabeth, NJ; Seoul, Korea: Hollym, 2005), 77.

¹⁰⁰ Lee and Vicario, “Conversation,” 105.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Importantly, rather than focus on her feelings of alienation as Park did in *Goodbye Stranger*, in *The Schoolgirls Project* Lee continues to empathize with her subjects in South Korea much as she had done in the U.S. In so doing, rather than continue to probe the “self” within the unfamiliar multicultural milieu of the U.S., the artist deepens her investigation of identity by including the more familiar monocultural milieu of South Korea. I maintain that it is exactly because of the artist’s position as the “outsider artist who needs to pass into her ‘own’ culture and its milieu,” that Lee’s *Schoolgirls Project*, specifically, and her *Projects* series, more generally, addresses contemporary prejudices by countering essentialist modes of thinking. In the case of *Schoolgirls*, for example, Lee argues against the idea that belonging be based solely upon the place of one’s birth and/or upbringing, since—despite being born and growing up in South Korea—Lee found herself unable to automatically fit in. Within the context of the artist’s larger series, *Schoolgirls* illustrates how one’s identity may be determined by context. In this case, with her return trip home, the artist surprisingly encounters Korea’s racial, cultural, and societal homogeneity as a challenge. I contend that upon re-encountering the conformity of Korean society, Lee may be delving into her feelings of estrangement by selecting the most outwardly uniform group that she can conceive of: Korean female high school students. In Korea, most middle school and high school students have a school uniform and appearance restrictions policy, governing hair-length, make-up, and accessories; schools implement such restrictions for a variety of reasons, including “discipline, safety, and better academic performance.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Judy Park, “Do School Uniforms Lead to Uniform Minds?: School Uniforms and Appearance Restrictions in Korean Middle Schools and High Schools,” *Fashion Theory* 17 (April 2013): 167-168.

To fully understand Lee's difficulties with moving from South Korea's predominantly homogenous racial, cultural, and social landscape to the U.S. and then back again, it may be helpful to first develop a working understanding of contemporary racial politics in South Korea as conveyed in an article from *The New York Times* entitled, "South Koreans Struggle with Race."¹⁰⁶ Essentially, reporter Choe Sang-Han attributes South Koreans' difficulties with adjusting to their diverse immigrant population to the government's recent change in what had been its long-standing policy that citizens take pride in the country's ethnic homogeneity. Furthermore, Seol Dong-hoon, a sociologist at Chonbuk National University, looks to South Korea's extended history of "repeatedly being invaded and subjugated by its larger neighbors," as well as its racial outlook being "colored by pure-blood nationalism as well as traditional patriarchal mores" as the reasons behind South Koreans' present difficulties with accepting racial difference.¹⁰⁷

Keeping in mind that when interviewed, Nikki S. Lee repeatedly emphasizes the fact that she is "not a Korean-American" and therefore "does not have issues about race," however, I contend that it may be because she *did not grow up in the U.S.*, with its complicated web of diversity, that the artist was able to pursue Projects without taking into consideration how her actions undertaken in the pursuit of art may be judged.¹⁰⁸ For example, in the case of her *Hip Hop Project* (Figure 43) it is highly unlikely that Lee ever questioned whether her use of "blackface," which has been historically associated with minstrelry in American culture, oversteps the bounds of what constitutes being politically correct.¹⁰⁹ Unhampered by societal

¹⁰⁶ Sang-Han Choe, "South Koreans Struggle with Race," *New York Times*, November 2, 2009.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Kino, "Now."

¹⁰⁹ Take as an example the recent case of Rachel A. Dolezal, who stepped down as president of the Spokane, Washington, N.A.A.C.P. chapter, after being exposed and confronted for misrepresenting her identity as black. As

and cultural conventions, Lee is also free to forge connections with groups from whom American-born individuals may believe themselves to be culturally and socially separate. Indeed, unlike the artist, those who grew up in the U.S. may have been socialized to believe that certain cultural, ethnic, and racial boundaries are insurmountable. As noted earlier, some commentators have even characterized Lee's performances as "brave," because she ventures into environments where many red-blooded Americans would be afraid to tread. Art historian Phil Lee compares her "outsider" status within the U.S. to that of the Jewish Swiss photographer Robert Frank in the 1950s and notes that despite the distinctly different images that come out of their respective projects, Nikki S. Lee, like Frank, somehow "capture[s] something fundamental about American culture."¹¹⁰ I would further add to Phil Lee's comment the following observation that due to her time spent in the U.S. the artist has also gained something of an "outsider" status with regards to her country of origin. Therefore, what American audiences also encounter in Lee's *Schoolgirls Project* is her capturing "something fundamental" about *Korean* culture from the position of the "outsider" who had formerly lived within.

Do-Ho Suh serves as an example of another South Korean artist who moved to the U.S. to continue his artistic studies. The same year that Nikki S. Lee began pursuing her *Schoolgirls Project*, Suh posed the ungrammatical question, "Who am we?," as the title for a work that also

for public reaction, one *New York Times* article states that her story sent off "a national debate about the very meaning of racial identity, with some applauding her message and goals and others deploring her methods and actions." Its authors add, "It was one thing for Ms. Dolezal to identify with, appreciate and even partake in black culture, but it was another thing for her to try to become black, going so far as to change her physical appearance." The same article includes Dolezal's response to NBC "Today" show host Matt Lauer when asked about the motivation for her deception as follows: "I do take exception to that because it's a little more complex than me identifying as black, or answering a question of, 'Are you black or white?'" She offers no apology for her actions, maintaining that racial heredity does not equal identity. See Kirk Johnson, Richard Pérez-Peña, and John Eligon, "Rachel Dolezal, in Center of Storm, Is Defiant: 'I Identify as Black,'" *New York Times*, June 16, 2015.

¹¹⁰ Lee, "Indefinite," 81.

featured high school students (Figures 48 and 49). *Who Am We?* (2000) is basically patterned wallpaper printed with what, upon closer inspection, reveals itself as a field of discernible faces—37,000 of them collected from the artist’s own yearbooks—assembled together in a seemingly endless repetition. Of interest to our discussion, Karen Sinsheimer observes that for those outside Korea, Suh’s work is interpreted as “a symbolic statement of the individual subsumed by culture.”¹¹¹ She adds that in Korea, however, this kind of collective identity crisis is characteristic of the society as a whole. Therefore, it is Sinsheimer’s understanding that Suh’s question, “Who am we?,” suggests the absence of an individual identity that is consistent with the interchangeability of the “I” and “we” within Korea’s Confucian culture, where “an individual usually refers to one’s self as ‘we.’”¹¹²

Whereas the repetition and small size of the portraits on the walls of the gallery space render the individuals depicted as seemingly insignificant in *Who Am We?*, Do-Ho Suh’s earlier *High School Uni-Form* (Figure 50; 1996) conveys a more ambiguous attitude towards the self as we. This work consists of sixty-nine, or in larger versions 300, Korean schoolboy jackets sewn together as one. Both *Who Am We?* and *High School Uni-Form* depict the submission of the individual and one’s unique identity to a larger collective body in which “the formal unity of the whole is dependent upon the uniformity and conformity of its parts.”¹¹³ As Miwon Kwon states:

On the one hand, Suh’s images of the renunciation of individualism resonate with traditional Korean/Eastern values, which consider self-sacrifice in the name of a larger social or political entity, like the family or nation, to be a prime virtue. On the other hand, this virtuous submission of self to abstract notions of duty and honour is linked in Suh’s work to the colonization of subjects and bodies. It is unclear whether the order and discipline is imposed from the outside or regulated from within.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Sinsheimer, “Identity,” 58.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Miwon Kwon, “The Other Otherness: The Art of Do-Ho Suh,” in *Do-Ho Suh* (London: Serpentine Gallery; Seattle, WA: Seattle Art Museum, 2002), 12.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

The key sentence within Kwon's excerpt is that in both *Who Am We?* and *High School Uni-Form* it remains "unclear whether the order and discipline is imposed from the outside or regulated from within." I would only add to her reading of *High School Uni-Form* that the artist leaves it up to his audience to conclude whether or not the amassing of the school boys into one unit can be read as positive or negative. Perhaps, to the independent-minded American gallery-goer, the impression of collective-strength conveyed by this mass of schoolboys in the form of their sewn-together uniforms appears threatening. For the immigrant who feels overburdened by pressures to assimilate and bouts with alienation, the idea that one can attain strength when (re)united with one's group can serve as a profound source of comfort. Recall that the absence of "the exact rules and codes of conduct that define proper behavior" had been a source of anxiety for artist Hyun-Doo Park. At the same time, as illustrated by Lee's experience, after living abroad in a less regimented society the return home can just as easily leave immigrants feeling like they no longer belong.

Japanese artist Tomoko Sawada is another artist who employs the trope of the uniform-clad student as a signifier for the subsuming of one's individual identity under that of the collective group's.¹¹⁵ In her *School Days* series (Figure 51; 2004), Sawada creates as many self-portraits as is needed to represent an entire class of schoolgirls, plus their teacher. Remarkably, by altering her appearance through only slight variations in hairstyle, body position and makeup, discrete personalities seem to emerge for each fabricated girl. Unlike Lee, Sawada had attended

¹¹⁵ In an interview, Tomoko Sawada shares that not only is her work often compared with that of Nikki S. Lee's, but that she is also often mistaken for the artist. See Tomoko Sawada and Noriko Fuku, "self-portraiture is fundamentally about disguise," in *Heavy Light: Recent Photography and Video from Japan*, ed. Christopher Phillips and Noriko Fuku (New York: International Center of Photography; Göttingen, Germany: Steidl Publishers, 2008), 175.

a private all-girls school for junior high and high school and she draws upon her experience for this work. Recalling this period in her life, Sawada remembers:

There were unspoken rules about how to behave and what to wear. I didn't jump on the bandwagon and tried to find my own path, but nevertheless, having spent six years in that environment, it made a profound impression on me. *School Days* allowed me to recapture those days on film. I was picked on in school, so I did not want to belong to a group and hated things like group photos. I would rather have been photographed with close friends.¹¹⁶

From the above statement, relevant to my discussion of Lee's *Schoolgirls Project* is Sawada's observation that, despite outward appearances, as a student she had not viewed herself as being part of the group with whom she was photographed. In other words, like Lee through her *Projects* series, Sawada looks back at these group portraits as fictional events conveying a community affiliation not rooted in reality.

Lee's *Projects* has more in common with Sawada's *School Days* than with Do-Ho Suh's works. Both Lee and Sawada create self-portraits within the context of the uniform-clad student. More importantly, their respective series function in a similar manner. For both artists, the ultimate meaning behind each resulting photograph relies upon its being understood within a larger body of images, in the case of Sawada more constructed class photos. Returning to Figure 51, armed with the knowledge that each individual represented is a modified Sawada, one becomes preoccupied with the task of distinguishing how the girls differ from one another. Acquainting oneself with Lee's group snapshots involves an analogous process. Writing about his first encounter with *Projects*, photographer Danny Lyon notes that while attending a speaking engagement at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston he had been advised to "check out the show downstairs."¹¹⁷ Lyon continues:

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 177.

¹¹⁷ Danny Lyon, "Nikki S. Lee: Projects," *Aperture* no. 167 (Summer 2002): 6-8.

So dutifully I made my way to the basement where, snaking along the sides of a gallery wall, was a solid line of small color prints, placed so close together as to appear seamless... I kind of slid through the pictures, noticing that these drug-store prints had the dates printed in the corners—something I find annoying. Following the line of color prints was another gallery with six or seven 20-by-24 inch enlargements. ... As you cruise down the line of prints, you go from punks to yuppies to Midwest trailer folk to sleaze in a sex club. Nothing unusual in the world of photography. Then you notice something. The same young woman appears in many of the pictures.¹¹⁸

Others have shared similar anecdotes when recalling their first encounter with Lee's *Projects*.¹¹⁹

One critic even refers to the act of identifying the artist within each subproject as the “Where’s Waldo?” effect, after a children’s book where the reader is tasked with locating the fictional character and his misplaced belongings in countless chaotic scenes.¹²⁰ I propose that in *Projects*, Lee, like Sawada in *School Days* wants her viewer to distinguish the artist’s individuality from that of the group with whom she outwardly identifies within her portraits. Building upon Lyon’s experience of Lee’s work and continuing along this vein, as well as taking note of the artist’s interest in probing her identity through *Projects*, I will next explore how the artist tries to connect with her viewer through the adoption of the quotidian snapshot, so as to problematize stereotypes of individuals of Asian descent for a primarily American audience.

Appropriating the Group Snapshot

One of the topics that arises during Nikki S. Lee’s interview with Gilbert Vicario is how her *Projects* has been compared to a Hollywood movie, which is, in the artist’s words, “very American.”¹²¹ As the discussion unfolds, Lee agrees that her approach to *Projects* is analogous

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Hodges, “Sampling.”

¹²⁰ Jennifer Dalton, “Look at Me: Self-Portrait Photography After Cindy Sherman,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* (September 2000): 47.

¹²¹ Lee and Vicario, “Conversation,” 104.

to the contemporary trend of Asian directors' making of Kung Fu films with "Hollywood-style stories."¹²² She further observes:

The familiar formula makes people comfortable with new things. So [Ang Lee] made a movie with martial arts within the Hollywood system. That's what made it successful: he showed Chinese stuff the way American people wanted to see it. He did it in the *Matrix* way, even though *Matrix* originally took scenes from martial arts movies. He found points of intersection. I look for those kinds of similarities too.¹²³

In the previous section on hybridity, I pursued the idea that in *Projects* Lee combines American imagery with Korean elements, specifically empathy and forms of traditional role-play to create something that is neither purely American, nor Korean, but a fusion of the two cultures. In this section, I further argue that the artist, like director Ang Lee, incorporates "points of intersection" as part of her own methodology. Inspired by A. D. Coleman's assertion that, "It is a rare person indeed who has not appeared in dozens, even hundreds of photographs,"¹²⁴ I believe that Nikki S. Lee presents her "real Oriental concept" in a form very familiar to her prospective audience: the quotidian snapshot.

America's (and thus the world's) love affair with the snapshot can be traced to 1888 and George Eastman's emancipation of would-be photographers from the troublesome burden of developing negatives, by offering his company's photographic processing services.¹²⁵ As Mary Warner Marien observes, his Kodak Company's slogan "You push the button—We do the rest"

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ A. D. Coleman, "Autobiography in Photography," *Camera* 35 (1975): 34.

¹²⁵ In 1888, the Eastman Dry Plate Company in Rochester, New York introduced the No. 1 Kodak, which used what the company founder, George Eastman (1854-1932), called American film, a roll of paper coated with light-sensitive material. The camera came loaded with film containing 100 exposures. When all the pictures had been taken, the entire camera was sent back to the company in Rochester, where the prints were developed and the camera was reloaded. "In other words, Kodak invented a customer-friendly photo-finishing business, as well as an uncomplicated camera." See Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2010), 168-169.

induced the public to wield cameras and make spontaneous snapshots heretofore unknown.¹²⁶ In his study of the cultural dimensions of amateur photography, anthropologist Richard Chalfen concludes that photography possesses three primary functions: it provides documentation or evidence; it acts as an *aide de memoire* or memory aid of people, events, and places; and it demonstrates membership within one's culture of origin.¹²⁷ More specifically, within this section I unpack how Lee engages *Projects'* viewers by building upon their existing experiences with the photographic medium.

That photography may serve as proof of one's cultural membership involves an acknowledgement of its culturally scripted nature. On this subject, French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu says of photography that there exist "few activities which are so stereotyped and less abandoned to the anarchy of individual intentions."¹²⁸ Additionally, observing how the presence of children in a household increases the likelihood of ownership of a camera, Bourdieu discerns that photographic practice persists "by virtue of its family function."¹²⁹ By approaching the family unit as a *type of group*, I believe that one can readily apply Bourdieu's remarks on the family portrait to that of the more generic group. He states:

[The group] is both subject and object, because it expresses the celebratory sense which [the group] gives to itself, and which it reinforces by giving it expression, the need for photographs and the need to take photographs (the internalization of the social function of this practice) are felt all the more intensely the more

¹²⁶ Ibid., 169.

¹²⁷ Chalfen examined two hundred collections of personal imagery at various times over a ten-year period, as well as conducting studies, and popular publications. For a full accounting of his sources of information, see Richard Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1982), 1-2. For more information, see Chalfen, *Snapshot*, ["evidentiary quality"] 133-137, [*aide de memoire*] 137-139, ["cultural membership"] 139-142.

¹²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1990), 19. Bourdieu's *Photography* was first published in its original French 1965.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

integrated the group and the more the group is captured at the moment of its highest integration.¹³⁰

Alongside the compulsion to make photographs, which serves to solidify the function and shape of the group for its members, exist the conventions recognized by the group, which dictate one's behavior when constructing its imagery. Moving next to Bourdieu's observations specific to the "group portrait," he notes how individuals are "shown pressed against one another in the center of the picture," often with their arms around each other. He further asserts that, "the convergence of looks and the arrangement of the individuals objectively testify to the group's cohesion."¹³¹

Lee uses our associations with group portraiture to infuse the fictional relationships portrayed in *Projects* with an aura of authenticity. *The Swingers Project (53)* (Figure 2; 1998-99) serves as a prime example. Standing between the pillars of an airy porch, the stars and stripes draped immediately behind them, the artist and her coterie pose for the camera. The title of this subproject and the group's period attire connect them to America's Swing Era, also known as the "Big Band Era" (1935-1945). Lee wears a red snood and a matching capped-sleeves dress with tiny button embellishments. The men are appareled in a range of casual tops from tank top to Hawaiian to bowling shirt; all but one of the men sport Panama hats. In keeping with Bourdieu, within this photograph all of its "subjects are shown pressed against one another in the center of the picture." All of the individuals, save one, return the gaze of the camera in a collective display of group cohesion.

Part of the artistry of Lee's works is how she employs her medium: the members of the groups with whom she is photographed stamp her works with the look and feel of the authentic.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 81.

The artist's success at imparting upon her imagery a feeling of genuineness may also be attributed to some aspect of her personality: her knack for forging a perceptible bond with others. Regardless of whether her capacity for empathy is due to her Korean cultural heritage or her inherent character, it clearly enables her to transcend those aspects of herself that might otherwise seem to be insurmountable obstacles, such as her pronounced Korean accent.¹³² As Russell Ferguson astutely observes, only rarely do people seem self-conscious in the photographs, and never more than they might in ordinary family snapshots. Of the "personal" element often perceived within her *Projects* photographs Lee shares:

[T]here's definitely a moment behind each image. I had a party with the punks at my house, and I have very different snapshots [made on that occasion]. But I don't use them, because somehow they're too personal. People think deeper means better. But it can ruin my projects and it would be a totally different story.¹³³

Lee's care in not using snapshots deemed "too personal" is important to a photographic series comprised of multiple subprojects. To create a strong body of work the artist needs to make sure that each subproject carries equal weight. In order for *Projects* to succeed at convincing the viewer to suspend momentarily any feelings of disbelief and follow Lee on her artistic journey, the individuals with whom she is photographed need to serve as extras; the locations that they inhabit—trailers, cubicles, restaurants, homes, bars, strip clubs, street curbs—have to provide readymade backdrops for her assorted roles.

As well as exploiting the conventions of group photography to convince the viewer of the validity of the relationships that she photographs, Lee also incorporates the medium's historic associations with authenticity and the *real* into her imagery. In *The Power of Photography*:

¹³² Ferguson, "Let's," 11.

¹³³ Lee and Vicario, "Conversation," 103-104.

How Photographs Changed Our Lives, Vicki Goldberg makes the astute observation that “Even today, when a large audience supposedly ‘knows’ that photographs lie, the most sophisticated observers instinctively believe the camera’s report, at least for the brief pulse of time before the mind falls back on its education.”¹³⁴ Through his anthropological research, Richard Chalfen uncovered the “assumptions” that underlie “reality construction,” or the idea that truth be attributed to non-professional or amateur photographs.¹³⁵ Applying Chalfen’s assumptions to Lee’s *Projects*, audiences who view her images absent any background information may variously believe that: the events depicted occurred at a specific point in time; the people and places depicted were not manipulated; the activities depicted were *not* scheduled for the main purpose of making a photograph (i.e., the photograph was taken during an on-going activity); and the activities depicted were not scripted. An additional assumption is that, in the researcher’s words, “Viewers have the ability and willingness to ‘fill-in’ contextual information that is either visually missing or partially obscured,” and coupled with this idea is that viewers, “as appropriate audience members, are expected to have general familiarity with and some detailed information about the subject matter.”¹³⁶

Chalfen concludes that it is this combination of assumptions—the event photographed *happened*—it was *unscripted* and *engaged in for its own sake*—that informs how we interpret snapshots. He also adds that such imagery shared and experienced within a social context carries with it an implicit set of instructions for viewing and interpretation. A consideration of Lee’s *Projects*, then, is an exercise in what happens when the amateur photograph is

¹³⁴ Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), 19.

¹³⁵ Chalfen identifies thirteen assumptions total. For my purposes, I only address those relevant to Nikki S. Lee’s *Projects*. For his full list, see Chalfen, *Snapshot*, 126-127.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

transplanted from the album's pages to the gallery's walls. A close look at any of her photographs reveals that Lee clearly appropriates the snapshot within her works in order to invest her works with the slick sheen of legitimacy for her viewer. Lee shares that her interest in "artistic photographs" does not even approximate her avid interest in vernacular photography and "how people live with photographs and use them in their lives."¹³⁷ On the significance of personal snapshots Lee adds, "I'm more likely to be influenced by the little snapshots I see on a wall when I go to somebody's house. ... I'm inspired by real life, by the ordinariness of people taking pictures of people."¹³⁸ She evinces this interest within her *Projects* series.

For example, in two images excerpted from her *Young Japanese* series (Figures 44 and 45) a rather nice example of *mise en abyme* plays out. In Figure 45, one woman clutches a stack of snapshots close to her chest while pausing to have her photograph taken, whereas in the other image the trio pose for the camera against a backdrop of snapshots presumably taped to the wall behind them. Interestingly, Lee maintains that she is an artist and not a photographer. As proof, she asks how can she be a photographer if she does not even own a camera?¹³⁹ Despite her protestations, *Projects* is comprised of a series of photographic images. Lee states, "I try to make my pictures look less constructed. The images look real, are easy to believe, because they have a documentary style"—she even refers to her photographs as "fake documentary."¹⁴⁰

Regardless of whether she refers to herself as a photographer or not, the artist obviously possesses the technical know-how to make a photograph, having earned an advanced degree from NYU's photography department. To make her photographs seem "less constructed," Lee

¹³⁷ Goldberg, "Only," 52.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 53.

¹³⁹ Beem, "Modern."

¹⁴⁰ Kaplan, *American*, 174.

has developed strategies to circumvent her training and achieve her objective of making “fake documentaries.” This first involves locating groups to serve as both props and collaborators. One may even approach them as found objects. The authentic groups that are photographed exist in their *authentic* environments with or without Lee. It is her presence that prevents the final images from being read as straight documentary photographs. Lee’s purposeful inclusion of the date is a second strategy. After all, the artist takes great pains to include in her photographs the time-date-stamps that typically annoy the aspiring artist/photographer—for example, recall Danny Lyon’s reaction to the offending detail upon first encountering Lee’s *Projects* displayed on a wall.

Returning to Figure 2, the luminous digital numbers on the right hand corner align perfectly with the horizontal bar of the porch railing making their presence even more conspicuous. The intrusive markings serve as evidence that this event happened at a particular point in time. Also, lending legitimacy to this particular image is how superfluous visual elements such as the shrubbery on the photograph’s left edge and the prominent elbow on its right project into the main pictorial space. I would further argue that Lee, by selecting as the final photograph, a picture where not everyone is looking at the camera, invokes a candidness that serves to mask the fictional bonds holding the group together. Lee as noted earlier has also been compared to Nan Goldin, who became known for her gritty depictions of drug-addled youth in her *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* that included photographs made between 1979 and 1986 of drug use, violent, aggressive couples and autobiographical moments. In response, Lee has stated that, while, yes, she knows how to make pictures like Goldin, that is not her objective. Instead, she is interested in creating photographs that are in her words, “more

raw.”¹⁴¹ By “raw,” I do not believe that the artist is alluding to her subject matter. Rather, she means “raw” in the sense that by simulating artlessness she constructs images that will register as “real” for her viewer. This leads us to her third strategy, which is enlisting someone else to snap the final photographs after having infiltrated her target group.¹⁴²

Although the images from her *Projects* series are sold individually, Lee prefers that they be appreciated as a set and experienced as one would encounter snapshots collected into an album on the coffee table or enclosed within a frame on the mantelpiece. She offers:

You can't have one without the others—they're all connected. The *Punk Project* has to be with the *Yuppie Project*, the *Lesbian Project* and other projects—that's what makes the *Punk Project* look really Punk. The projects support and define one another. I don't necessarily see a sequence in my work, and my images don't have an order, but people can make up their own story when they see my work.¹⁴³

Clearly, when these photographs are viewed as Lee intended they single out the role of the performing artist, who is the repeated figure that unites the images and whom the viewer actively seeks out. *Projects* combines performance art with photography, but in contrast to straight performance art, the photograph does not provide documentation. Rather, it is the end result. Photography, for Lee, is the prime objective of her whole endeavor. Her images seem straightforward, but in reality they are highly conceptual. The artist plays upon our assumptions about photography's documentary and group affirming properties only to dismantle them, by openly revealing the fictional origins of her imagery. I believe that Lee does so in order to problematize her audiences' mistaken characterizations of individuals of Asian descent.

Let us return to Mark Godfrey's assertion that in *Projects* Lee engages with her own ethnic identity, such that her position as “the Korean” is the subject of all of the images. One

¹⁴¹ Ferguson, “Let's,” 10.

¹⁴² Kaplan, *American*, 174.

¹⁴³ Lee and Vicario, “Conversation,” 101.

misconception I would argue that this series attempts to deconstruct is that all Asians look the same when viewed through Western eyes. Using candid snapshots as a point of intersection, the artist rather cleverly inserts her unfamiliar (alien) physical presence through a familiar form. Additionally, I would argue that through the act of having to identify the artist in image after image, the viewer becomes accustomed to Lee's physical attributes, such as her crooked front teeth and her slight stature. By the time the viewer has reached photographs of the artist taken from her *Young Japanese (East Village)* and/or *Schoolgirls* subprojects, they should readily be able to locate Lee. If it takes them a bit longer, they may come face-to-face with the fact that they hold prejudices, previously unknown to them. For example, lumping together Asians as a group, when in reality as reflected in our discussion of Japan's colonization of Korea, the term *Asian* comprises a broad swath of individuals who come from diverse backgrounds and geographic locations, each with its own distinct language, culture, and history.

Another issue that the artist tackles is the idea of the U.S. as melting pot. The communities with whom Lee is photographed seemingly display little, if any, within-group variation. Is America as multicultural as it professes? Certainly, if one considers the *Projects* series as a whole, different ethnic, racial, socio-economic, recreational, age and/or sexual orientation groups are represented. At the same time, based on the images alone, one notes that each possesses its own uniform, code of conduct, and if one were to investigate further, probably shared political and worldview. Therefore, each of the groups may be viewed as a microcosm of monocultural Korea. In a way, Lee may be communicating to her American audience that they are not much different from her fellow Koreans in terms of being exclusionary towards those outside the group. After all, the artist could have very easily included her young upwardly mobile Korean friends within her *Yuppies* subproject.

Furthermore, recalling the artist Tomoko Sawada's comment that she had not felt like she belonged with the classmates with whom she was photographed as a teenager contrary to outward appearances, I believe that Lee's photographs touch upon the idea that one should avoid making assumptions based on appearance alone. Individuals are much more complex. As the artist notes, she felt that each of the groups with whom she was photographed reflected something of her own personality. All of us have multiple affiliations that are not reflected by any one image. As Vicki Goldberg notes, we fall for the objective truth reflected in photographs despite ourselves, in *Projects* Lee reminds us to exercise caution.

Conclusion

Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* series predates the proliferation of digital photography and the advances made in the making and disseminating of snapshots through the development of camera phones and social media platforms, such as Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram. Despite these innovations (and only partially due to the resurgence of 1990s fashion), I believe that Lee's images carry greater meaning for today's audiences. I conclude this chapter with one last photograph from her *Schoolgirls Project*. In Figure 52, a uniformed Lee sits with fellow students on a hallway bench during an unspecified down period on a regular school day. Recall the generational differences that Lee encountered when pursuing this subproject. In this photograph, a member of the more technologically savvy younger generation shows off knowledge not readily available to that of the elder. One can almost perceive Lee's head nodding as she attends to instructions from the girl seated beside her. When Lee encountered an aspect of Korean culture unknown to her, rather than shy away from it, she literally stepped into its proverbial shoes. This is the same approach that she took towards her adoptive country. She invites us to do the same through her images, to develop a greater understanding for others as she

has. After all, she is wise to recognize that if we can laugh at the Hispanic project, we can laugh at the Korean project.

Chapter 4: Annu Palakunnathu Matthew: An Indian from India in America

After living and working in the United States for five years, artist Annu Palakunnathu Matthew observed that, “Being born in Britain, raised in India and now living in America, my mixed or ‘masala’ background continually shapes my photographs.”¹ *An Indian from India* (2001-07) dates to a period in the artist’s life when Matthew was actively, as she puts it, “coming to terms with the fact that my future home was in the U.S. and my immigrant experience.”² In this chapter I unpack her statement by exploring what *An Indian from India* adds to our understanding of the “immigrant experience.” More specifically, I believe that Matthew’s photographic project demonstrates that for the newcomer to the U.S., in addition to feeling compelled to reflect back upon one’s country of origin(s), by the act of identifying oneself as an immigrant of *color* and therefore a minority within mainstream American society, one’s interest in learning about contemporary perceptions of one’s own ethnic and/or racial group evolves into the much broader desire to develop an understanding of the narratives that belong to other marginalized groups who live within one’s adoptive home.

An Indian from India was first inspired by Matthew’s and many immigrants’ experience of being further questioned, “Where are you *really* from?” after having identified a particular state or city as one’s place of origin. Elaborating upon this oft-repeated occurrence, the artist shares within the colophon that she wrote for the *An Indian from India* portfolios that,

When I say that I am Indian, I often have to clarify that I am an Indian from India. Not an American-Indian, but rather an Indian-American, South-Asian Indian (never heard of that till I got here), or even an Indian-Indian. It seems strange that

¹ Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, in interview with Andy Grundberg, “Commentary,” *Nueva Luz* 5, no. 2 (1998): n.p.

² Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, email message to author, June 17, 2013.

all this confusion started because Christopher Columbus thought he had found India and called the native people of America collectively as Indians.³

Within *An Indian from India*, then, Matthew appropriates the photographic representations of a people collectively mistaken for the inhabitants of the country that she had left behind and couples them with digitally manipulated images of herself dressed in traditional South Asian Indian or contemporary Western attire. By using ethnographic photographs as source material for her paired imagery—a literal copy of a found image in one sense, a digital recreation in the other—Matthew looks to a time in her adoptive country’s past when photography was being used to support Anglo-American imperialist ambitions. Furthermore, by drawing attention to this earlier constructed representation of American Indians, she also seeks to draw parallels between the historical injustices inflicted by Anglo-colonial ambitions upon two sets of Indians: Native American and South Asian.⁴

At the same time, by adopting clothing that evokes her ethnic heritage and linking her self-portrait to North America’s indigenous population, Matthew affirms her South Asian Indian identity within an American context. For example, *Feather Indian/Dot Indian* (Figure 53; 2001)

³ The text continues: “In this portfolio, I look at the other ‘Indian,’ I find similarities in how Nineteenth century photographers of Native American Indians looked at what they called the primitive natives, similar to the colonial gaze of the Nineteenth Century British photographers working in India. In every culture there is the ‘other’ outside the dominant culture. In this portfolio I play on my own ‘otherness.’ Using photographs of Native American Indians from the Nineteenth Century which perpetuated and reinforced stereotypes. The images highlight assimilation, use labels and make assumptions. I pair these with self-portraits in clothes, poses and environments that mimic these ‘older’ images. The clothes are also ‘made up,’ similar to Edward Curtis’ contrived posing and dressing up some of his subjects. The final paired images challenge the viewers’ assumptions of then and now, us and them, exotic and local. This work starts to question what is given credibility, what is patently contrived and how the two are not as far apart as we would like to believe.” Photographs for *An Indian from India* were printed as a set in the form of two portfolios—Portfolio I (2001) and Portfolio II (2004 & 2005), published singly by the artist (2003) and Cone Editions (2004), and printed in the form of Orotones (2008-09) in collaboration with Larry Danque at Cone. The colophon text was included with both portfolios.

⁴ The term, “Native American” is not universally accepted. Some indigenous peoples prefer “American Indian,” “Indian American,” “Indian American Indians,” “First Nations,” “First Peoples,” or “Indigenous Peoples of the Americas.” For clarity, I will refer to indigenous peoples as “Native American Indian.”

originated from a talk in which someone from the audience shared with the artist that, within the Midwest, “feather or dot” served as “shorthand” for distinguishing between the two Indian groups.⁵ In pairing the two portraits, each bearing a loaded cultural signifier—feather and dot respectively—Matthew instructs viewers to *recognize* the presence of South Asian Indians within the U.S., as we do Native American Indians. Also, ironically, despite being decimated and ultimately displaced by European-American colonial ambitions, indigenous peoples have historically served as visual symbols of the usurper nation. For example, not long after his inauguration in 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt commissioned sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens to design a new ten-dollar gold coin featuring the allegorical figure of Liberty and insisted that an Indian headdress replace the traditional Phrygian cap, an iconic necessity in French representations. After all, claimed Roosevelt, “American Liberty should have ... something distinctly American about her!”⁶ Therefore, by juxtaposing the two types of Indian, not only in *Feather Indian/Dot Indian*, but throughout the entirety of *An Indian from India*, Matthew, in her own words, attempts to “deal with her [South Asian] Indianness” by building upon imagery “familiar to Americans.”⁷

Of interest to this dissertation, *Feather Indian/Dot Indian* marks the second occasion in which Matthew makes use of the dot or *bindi*: a cosmetic mark associated with the Hindu religion that signifies when a woman is married. Part of her earlier *Finding India in America* (1995-97) series, *Bindi* (Figure 54; 1997) conveys the artist’s commitment to challenging

⁵ Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, email message to author, June 23, 2013.

⁶ See Willard B. Gatewood, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Coinage Controversy,” *American Quarterly* 18 (Spring 1966), 37. For an excellent source exploring how white Americans have used their ideas about Native American Indians to shape national identity in different eras beginning with the Boston Tea Party, see Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁷ Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, “Perception and Projection: Dual Identity as an Indian Artist in the U.S.,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (MONSOON 2002): 67.

stereotypes through her photographs. Specifically, this work achieves her intended aim by problematizing others' expectations of what a young South Asian Indian woman should look like. This impulse is not dissimilar to Tseng Kwong Chi's when creating *East Meets West* in which he photographed himself wearing a Mao suit during a period in America's history when the U.S. and the People's Republic of China were actively engaged in opening diplomatic channels. Also, like Tseng, who adopts clothing that aligns his image with China, despite never having visited the country Matthew is neither Hindu nor was she married at this time.⁸ Unlike the photographs from Tseng's *East Meets West*, however, *Bindi* reads as more of an abstraction than a true self-portrait, since it reveals very little of Matthew's identity. This may be due in part to the artist wishing to place greater interest on the visual detail of the *bindi* on her forehead being smudged, since as she observes, the mark's "various meanings apply to the identity of most Indian women and *not* to myself [emphasis mine]."⁹ By way of contrast then, in *Feather Indian/Dot Indian*, Matthew seemingly embraces the *bindi* as a signifier of Indian womanhood. For her portrait on the right, in Figure 53, the dot is bold, crisp and distinct. It also appears to be larger and ill proportioned to her more petite features. Within her portrayal the artist clearly wants us to identify her as South Asian Indian through the *bindi*'s exaggerated presence.

Self-portraiture, by its very nature, invites speculation with regards to the personal. For Matthew, this holds true for *An Indian from India*, as well as her earlier projects. Of the three artists that are the focus of this dissertation, each of whom employs the self-portrait, Matthew is the only one to have described her work as "a journey of photographic self-discovery."¹⁰ In fact,

⁸ In fact, Matthew and her family belong to the Syrian Christian Marthoma Church in Kerala, South India. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, "Exploring My Diaspora," *Exposure* 32, no. 1 (1999): 63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

she would be the first to admit that her artistic output is, in her words, “all about me, me, me and what I am going through!”¹¹ Before exploring how the making of photographs provides Matthew a means for interrogating her experiences, one should first consider how for newcomers to the U.S. solace may be found in seeking out reminders of one’s country left behind through engagement with its culture and its people.

Matthew’s *Finding India in America* began with the artist photographing the South Asian Indian community in America not long after beginning her graduate studies in the U.S.¹² A contemporary, Gauri Gill (b. 1970), who also left India to study in the U.S., felt similarly compelled to locate *Indianness* within her adopted environs. In her series, *The Americans* (2000-07), Gill embarks upon a photographic journey through America that, by her clever use of title, invokes the iconic imagery made by Swiss émigré photographer Robert Frank during his travels through the U.S. fifty years earlier. However, unlike Frank, who used his outsider’s perspective to produce for the world a vision of a postwar America that comprised individuals from all over the country and from all walks of life, Gill employs her outsider’s perspective to focus solely on the experiences of one community: South Asian Indian immigrants residing within the U.S.

Whereas Gill’s *The Americans* stems from a professed desire to portray the “cultural invisibility” of South Asians in America despite their “obvious rich material and social presence,” Matthew’s motivation for *Finding India* is much more personal in nature in that it

¹¹ Matthew, email message to author, June 23, 2013.

¹² Matthew’s *Finding India in America* won the Enfoco New Works Award. In 1997, she earned her M.F.A. in Photography, from the University of Delaware, Newark. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, email message to author, May 8, 2013.

serves as her attempt to “accept and acknowledge” what she describes as “my feelings of loss over my displacement from my culture.”¹³ She continues,

Through the images, I find my own little India in America—photographing gestures, movements and icons that remind me of my culture. In these images the people serve as symbols, without personalities.¹⁴

Matthew’s approach towards employing individuals as allegorical symbols of India is best illustrated in *New Jersey – Navrati Dancer* (Figure 55; 1995). This photograph of a female dancer, clad in traditional dress, arms laden with bracelets, was made during the fall Hindu festival of *Navrati*, or Nine Nights. If not for the work’s title, the average viewer would be hard pressed to locate the performance as having taken place in New Jersey. In fact, what had most attracted the artist to pursuing *Finding India* at this time is the simple fact that her audience only knows from the work’s title that its subject was photographed in the U.S., not India.¹⁵

In *Finding India in America*, then, Matthew capitalizes upon the photographic image’s limitation—that relying upon the visual evidence alone, one’s knowledge is confined to the information contained within its pictorial borders—as a means for South Asian Indian culture to transcend time and place. By way of comparison, returning to Gill’s *The Americans*, in *Party for Indian Entrepreneurs in Washington D.C.* (Figure 56), we encounter two men standing on a large outdoor balcony next to a small table littered with drinking glasses and cocktail napkins. Beyond the railing, on a hill in the distance, stands an imposing domed building. We know from the photograph’s title that the men are “Indian entrepreneurs” and that due to their location the structure behind them is the United States Capitol, the seat of the U.S. Congress. Whereas, in

¹³ Sarah Parsons, “The Americans,” South Asian Visual Arts Centre, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://savac.net/images/stories/2011/gauri-gill/gg-essay-parsons.pdf>; and Matthew, “Exploring,” 61.

¹⁴ Matthew, “Exploring,” 61.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Finding India, Matthew relies upon text and image to erase the geographic, cultural, and social distance between herself and India, Gill, in *The Americans*, seeks to establish a place and identity for the South Asian Indian community within the U.S. as Americans. If we were to approach their projects as creating a timeline for the immigrant's experience within the U.S., Matthew's *An Indian from India* picks up where Gill leaves off through her use of self-portraiture to establish not only the South Asian Indian community as American, but also herself. Again, given the personal nature of her work, *An Indian from India* (2001-07) dates to a period in the artist's life when Matthew was actively engaged in the experience of creating a home within the U.S. In the following section, I explore how in *An Indian from India* Matthew pushes this idea of "the personal" even further.

"It's personal"

On occasion, the photographic pairings made by Matthew in *An Indian from India* can be interpreted as autobiographical. More specifically, I am referring to the self-portraits in which a member of her immediate family poses alongside the artist, aiding her in her re-interpretation of the original archival image.¹⁶ Her purposeful inclusion of *the personal* within her work marks a departure from the performative photographic projects discussed in the previous chapters. For example, in *East Meets West*, although Tseng Kwong Chi photographed himself clothed as the ambiguous or unofficial ambassador with his sister and friends, he only did so during unscripted moments while frequenting Manhattan dance clubs. By contrast, in his more staged self-portraits made on location, Tseng's anonymous co-performer—a costumed Goofy at Disneyland (Figure

¹⁶ There is only one image in her *An Indian from India* series that does not have the artist in the diptych, and that is the one of her mother. Matthew's reason for including an image that even the artist describes as not fitting in conceptually is personal, which supports my argument. Of the work, *A Yurok Widow/A Malayalee Widow*, the artist notes that it marks "an important event in my life when my mother became a widow at 38." From Matthew, email message to author, June 23, 2013.

57), a uniformed U.S. astronaut at Cape Canaveral, and a bearded guard at Checkpoint Charlie (Figure 58)—the appointed side-kick, helped to inform audiences of the character of that particular tourist venue. As for *The Yuppies Project*, part of Nikki S. Lee’s larger *Projects*, the artist could have easily photographed herself in the company of her New York Korean friends, whom she categorized as “Asian Yuppies” and whose style she emulated for the eponymous subproject, but the foundation of her series rests upon the interrogation of affiliation through her meticulously crafted performance of within-group relations, as engaged in conceptually through her deliberate exclusion of the personal.¹⁷ For Matthew, the personal very much informs her series in that the very first photograph made for *An Indian from India* originated from the close relationship that she has with her stepdaughter Adina.

In *Traditional American Indian Mother and Child/Contemporary Indian American Mother and Stepchild* (Figure 59; 2003), Matthew highlights the photograph of the mother and child on the left as “the start” of her *An Indian from India* series, adding that, “I saw this image in a book and had an armchair that had a similar curve and that is when I put two-and-two together.”¹⁸ Perhaps, of more significance than the “curve” of the furniture upon which the figures are seated is the intimacy portrayed between mother and child within the original image on the left and Matthew’s digital re-imagining on the right.

Turning first to the *Traditional American Indian Mother and Child*, the two are positioned so close together that the little space that exists between them may be attributed to the physical limitation of their only being able to touch at the temples from the shoulders on upward.

¹⁷ William L. Hamilton, “Shopping with Nikki S. Lee: Dressing the Part Is Her Art,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2001.

¹⁸ Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, email message to author, June 23, 2013. The artist further shared that in addition to the archival photographs that she encounters during her research, inspiration for image-pairings also comes from the concepts that she wishes to express, as in the case of her *Feather Indian/Dot Indian*.

In *Contemporary Indian American Mother and Stepchild*, Matthew and Adina assume poses and attitudes nearly identical to those depicted by the original pair. The young girl folds her body into an awkward position, so that she and the artist may better imitate the American Indian Mother and Child's intimacy. This, however, is where similarities between the two images end. In contrast to the American Indian pair, Matthew's stepdaughter appears to be both too old and too large to be seated comfortably on the arm of the rattan chair. More to the point, her size seems to be on the verge of dwarfing her stepmother. More meaningful, perhaps, is how their stepmother-stepdaughter portrayal also raises the specter of race. Whereas the term "American Indian" is applicable to both mother and daughter in the first pairing, within the second pairing, "Indian American" applies only to Matthew. Returning to the portrait of the artist and Adina, despite the young girl's attire—a stack of bangles worn round her wrists, an anklet comprised of tiny tinkling bells, and sari, she is visibly Caucasian, *not* Southeast Asian.

Remarking upon *Contemporary Indian American Mother and Stepchild*, Matthew pointedly observes:

The image plays not only on the assumptions of someone who looks different but a relationship that contradicts expectations. I have known Adina since she was two years old. Our close, cross-racial relationship is also a reflection of our rapidly changing contemporary society.¹⁹

By including this intimate family portrait at the outset of her *An Indian from India* series, the artist communicates her intention to establish a place in America *for herself and her family*.

Matthew adds that, compared to the photograph of the Native American Indian mother and daughter, she and Adina importantly reflect "the changing face of families" in America.²⁰

Significantly, the "changing face of families" also involves the concurrent blending of different

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Sunanda K. Sanyal, "Talking to Annu P. Matthew," *artVarta Magazine* 4, no. 1 (2012): 49.

cultures. As Matthew further explains, she was raised Christian with “Indian values,” whereas her husband, Adina’s father David Wells, is white, once-divorced, and Jewish, thus making him from a “different religion and race.”²¹ In *Whiteman and Indian/Indian and Whiteman* (Figure 60; 2003) Matthew cleverly captures the complexity of their marriage with its interplay of varying cultures through the lens of American history.

Upon first viewing *Indian and Whiteman*, one may quickly assume that the artist has committed a mistake in her recasting of the image that she has titled, *Whiteman and Indian*. For, rather than casting herself as the pipe-carrying Indian on the right within the original image, it seems that Matthew has adopted the appearance—note the lustrous sheen of her hairstyle, long dark coat, and demeanor—of the white gentleman on the left. Returning to the extended title, *Whiteman and Indian/Indian and Whiteman*, when looking at this rather unconventional portrait of husband and wife, yes, Matthew, the “Indian,” is on the left and David Wells, the “Whiteman,” is on the right. What does one make of this seeming error? I believe that this diptych can be interpreted in one of two ways. By considering the history of “Indians,” as being dispossessed of their lands and having their numbers decimated by the actions of the “Whiteman,” one can view the position of the man on the left as being that of the white newcomer. I do not mean to intimate that Matthew, by assuming the place of the Whiteman, is communicating an interest in following the example of her predecessor. Rather, I propose that through her actions the artist acknowledges her position as an immigrant to the U.S. when seated alongside her husband, who was born in America—and is therefore the *native* in the picture.

²¹ Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, “Living Between Cultures” (artist talk for exhibition “POSTDATE: Photography and Inherited History in India,” Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS, September 25, 2015).

My second interpretation of *Whiteman and Indian/Indian and Whiteman*, admittedly, requires more background information as to the identity of the “Whiteman” being portrayed. Beginning with the text accompanying each of the portraits, where Matthew has credited *Indian and Whiteman* to “Wells and Matthew,” or the artist and her husband, Whiteman and Indian is attributed to “A. Shindler.”²² I contend, however, that it is unlikely that “A. Shindler,” or Antonio Zeno Shindler, was the photographer, since he had acquired the original glass negative for this image from the McClees gallery based in Washington, D.C. In fact, *Whiteman and Indian* is one of many portraits made by the studio of James Earle McClees during the winter of 1857-58 that represents the “first systematic effort to record photographically Indians on a delegation to the capital.”²³ In December 1857, a delegation of Yankton Indian leaders, led by head chief Struck by the Ree (Pa-la-ne-a-pa-pe), traveled to Washington to broker a treaty. Earlier that year, the tension over territory between white settlers and a Yankton band, led by Chief Smutty Bear (Ma-to-sa-be-che-a), resulted in the burning of the town of Medary.²⁴ Also, due to the U.S. Department of the Interior’s failure to get Yankton leaders to sign a treaty earlier that same year, the federal government asked trader John Blair Smith Todd, a former army captain, to try his hand at negotiations. Todd then enlisted the aid of Theophile Bruguière, a

²² “A. Zeno Shindler American Indian Photograph Collection,” American Philosophical Society, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://amphilsoc.org/mole/view?docId=ead/Mss.970.1.Sh6-ead.xml>. “The 95 studio portraits in the Shindler Collection were part of a suite of 201 images that comprised the first photographic exhibition at the Smithsonian, and are documented in the catalogue *Photographic Portraits of North American Indians in the Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution* (1867). The individuals depicted were members of the delegations sent to Washington during the years 1852, 1857-1858, and 1867-1869 from the following nations: Cherokee, Cheyenne, Chippewa, Choctaw, Dakota Sioux (Brule, Miniconjou, Sans Arc, Santee, Sisseton, Two-Kettle, Yankton), Osage, Pawnee, Ponca, Potawatomi, Sac and Fox, Seminole, and Ute. Shindler printed the earlier photographs (mostly taken by the McClees Gallery) and was photographer for the later delegations.”

²³ Paula Richardson Fleming, and Judith Lynn Luskey, *Grand Endeavors of American Indian Photography* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 21.

²⁴ De Raymond J. DeMallie, “Yankton and Yanktonai,” in *Handbook of North American Indians: Plains*, vol. 13, pt. 2, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 779.

French Canadian who had married into the Yankton Tribe, and Charles F. Picotte (Eta-ke-cha), a “mixed-blood Yankton leader and interpreter.”²⁵ The identities of *Whiteman and Indian* are, in fact, the “mixed-blood Yankton” Picotte on the left and Chief Smutty Bear on the right. In spite of his not being a “Whiteman” per se, I assert that Picotte’s historic role as a mediator and point of contact between Indian and White cultures makes him an ideal model for Matthew in *Indian and Whiteman*, since the artist through her photographs and within her own personal life seeks to bridge cultures. I also contend that referring to Matthew as “Indian” alone would be as inaccurate as labeling Picotte as “Whiteman,” due to the confining nature of labels being unable to capture the artist’s varied background—in that she was born in England, grew up in India, and now works and lives in the U.S.

An Indian from India conveys Matthew’s personal investment in exploring how her *masala* background continues to inform her continuously evolving sense of identity. At the same time, due to her position as an immigrant of color and therefore a minority within mainstream American society, I maintain that in her pursuit of *An Indian from India* Matthew also seeks to learn about the experiences of different marginalized groups within the U.S. Her interest in exploring her adoptive home’s history as told by its most overlooked members led her to Ronald Takaki’s influential book, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (1993). In this work, Takaki attempts to redress scholars’ unremitting narration of America’s past through the lens of its Anglo-European citizens by bringing to attention, instead, the long-silenced voices of its non-Anglo inhabitants—Native American Indians, African Americans, Jews, Irish Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos and others, who through their inclusion more accurately reflect our

²⁵ Patrick Coleman, “A Rare Find: The Treaty of Washington, 1858,” Minnesota Historical Society, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHHistoryMagazine/articles/59/v59i05p197-199.pdf>

nation's rich heritage. Significant to this dissertation, Takaki's text influenced Matthew's desire to create a body of photographs that connected with her own experience as an immigrant to the U.S., while in her words, "telling a different history" of its past.²⁶ Recall, also, that through her encounter of frequently being asked, "Where are you *really* from?" the artist became increasingly interested in learning about the *other* Indian. *An Indian from India* has provided Matthew the opportunity to learn about her adoptive country through its treatment of Native American Indians, a topic she had been "completely ignorant" of prior to coming to the U.S.²⁷

Also, of interest to my research, it was not until she began living in the U.S. that Matthew, also, began looking at colonial British ethnographic photographs of India.²⁸ Notably, from the beginning of her concurrent investigations, the artist has noted that the imaging of South Asian Indians being made during the nineteenth century is analogous to near-contemporaneous imaging of American Indians being made in the U.S.²⁹ In the section that follows, I will outline the "strange parallels and similarities" that Matthew has uncovered between both sets of Indians by grounding my observations of *An Indian from India* within the context of two multi-volume photographic compendiums: *The North American Indian* (1907-30) and *The People of India* (1868-75).³⁰

The North American Indian Meets The People of India

When giving public talks, Matthew will often explain the conceptual thrust that lies behind *An Indian from India* by turning to an observation made by Susan Sontag in *On*

²⁶ Matthew, email message to author, June 23, 2013.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Where Pictures Do the Talking," *Deccan Herald*, June 14, 2007.

Photography, which nicely outlines the power dynamic that plays out between (active) photographer and (passive) subject as follows:

[T]here is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.³¹

I propose that the artist, by coupling her self-portraits with historic representations of Native American Indians, attempts to wrest control from the original photographer responsible for creating the source images so that she may restore the humanity of the past individuals portrayed for a contemporary audience. The nineteenth and turn-of-the-twentieth-century portraits of American Indians that Matthew appropriates for use in *An Indian from India* came from the work of more than a half dozen photographers—for example, Frank LaRoche, J. N. Choate, B. A. Gifford, R. A. Rinehart, collaborators W. H. Case and Horace H. Draper, and those in the employ of the McClees studio in Washington, D.C. To understand the constructed nature of their images, I turn to the man pointedly missing from my list. I look to the work of Edward S. Curtis specifically, because since the revival of interest in his photographs in the 1970s, “Curtis’s Indians”—as the photographer himself referred to them—have become *the* portrayal of the Native American Indians for many Americans.³²

³¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1977; reprint, New York: Picador, 2001), 14. Matthew, email message to author, June 23, 2013; and Matthew, “Living.”

³² Clark Worswick, *Edward Curtis: The Master Prints* (Santa Fe, NM; Salem, MA: Arena Editions; Peabody Essex Museum, 2001), 24. For a thorough accounting of the sequence of events leading up to and circumstances surrounding the resurgence in popularity of Curtis’s work, see pages 14-15. Perhaps, as testimony to the enduring popular appeal of his imagery, even the Swedish decorating retailer IKEA has carried reproductions of Curtis’s Indians in its North American stores. For one example (amongst many) of scholarship attributing the lack of attention paid to Curtis’s contemporaries to the photographer, see Fleming and Luskey, *Grand*. I should also note that although Clark Worswick asserts that within the popular imagination, Curtis “was and is the great photographer of Native American Indian tribes,” the scholar is careful to add that, the photographer employed a number of people who helped in him in the studio and in the field, making his work “the product of joint labor.” In Worswick, *Edward Curtis*, 13.

Between 1895 and 1928, in pursuing his magnum opus, *The North American Indian*, Curtis and his assistants very likely made over forty thousand negatives for a work that comprised twenty volumes of narrative text and images, each accompanied by a portfolio of large photogravure plates.³³ When Curtis began photographing the first of what by the project's conclusion numbered over eighty different American Indian tribes, the Office of Indian Affairs, an agency of the U.S. federal government created as a division within the War Department in 1824, had been operating under the policy that Indians were to be assimilated into mainstream (i.e., white) society as rapidly as possible.³⁴ In *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, an account of the systematic destruction of America's indigenous inhabitants during the second half of the nineteenth century, its author, American historian and novelist Dee Brown, observes that except for the occasional outcry from those back East, the massacre of American Indians elsewhere in the nation occurred frequently and with increasingly ruthless technical efficiency until 1890, when as many as three hundred Dakota were killed at Wounded Knee, South Dakota.³⁵ Their killing had been justified under Manifest Destiny, the commonly held belief of the mid-to-late nineteenth century that it was America's God-given

³³ Curtis began making photographs for *The North American Indian* well before the publication of the first volume. "At first glance, this number seems like an unbelievably high figure. When divided, however, over thirty-three years, or just over twelve hundred images per year, this total number is not unimaginable." Bob Kapoun, "Introduction to the Photographs," in *Prayer to the Great Mystery: The Uncollected Writings and Photography of Edward S. Curtis*, ed. Gerald Hausman (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), xvii. Also, as Mick Gidley notes, "The collection of ethnological data for *The North American Indian*—including thousands of musical recordings as well as the images and the verbal data, such as myths and folklore—was achieved by a (changing) field team of ethnologists, Native American Indian assistants and informants, photographic technicians, and others." Mick Gidley, *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

³⁴ Examples of more expansive accounts of this period in Indian American history may be found in vol. 2 of Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); and Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate Indians, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, U.K. and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Another succinct and clear narrative is provided in Wilcomb E. Washburn, ed. *History of Indian-White Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 51-81, vol. 4 of *The Handbook of North American Indians*.

³⁵ Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), 417.

right to extend across the whole of the North American continent from sea to shining sea: from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. By the mid-1890s, then, although the Office of Indian Affairs recognized that different tribes and individuals would assimilate at varying rates, it agreed to define assimilation as *de-tribalization*, whereby the American Indian individual no longer viewed her-/himself as a member of a particular group with its own set of traditional practices, but as independent participants within a larger society governed by American law. This period also marked Congress's adoption of the General Allotment or Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, which authorized the federal government to survey collective tribal land and divide it into allotments for individuals. Indian owners were then encouraged to take up U.S. citizenship, which provided them no guarantee of a right to vote, since as citizens they were subject to the laws of the particular state in which they resided, the majority of which discriminated against Indians.

Therefore, as a result, Curtis embarked upon *The North American Indian* well after America's indigenous population had been subdued. Similarly, *The People of India*, an eight-volume publication comprised of "468 tipped-in albumen prints" and text from a great number of contributors came about only after the British Crown had established its foothold on the Indian subcontinent.³⁶ Anthropologist and historian Christopher Pinney observes that for the British colonizers at home and abroad *The People of India* served a "more pragmatic political edge" that related directly to "the pressing question of the sustainability of British rule in India."³⁷ As *The*

³⁶ Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 34. Pinney continues: during the administration of Governor-General Charles John-Canning, civilians and army officers had been encouraged to take cameras with them on their travels and deposit copies with him, prior to the photographic project taking on an official basis. It was not until 1863, when John William Kaye in the Secret and Political Department, saw fit to transform the project "aimed at national coverage of India's communities." Fifteen photographers were individually credited in the preface to the series.

³⁷ Pinney, *Camera*, 35.

People's preface directly states:

The great convulsion of 1857-58, while it necessarily retarded for a time all scientific and artistic operations, imparted a newer interest to the country which had been the scene, and to the people who had been the actors in these remarkable events. When, therefore, the pacification of India had been accomplished, the officers of the Indian services who had made themselves acquainted with the principles and practices of photography, ... went forth and traversed the land in search of interesting subjects.³⁸

Therefore, its true purpose as outlined by its authors stemmed from a desire for Britain to *maintain* control of its colonial holdings, effectively India's native inhabitants following the Sepoy Rebellion or Great Mutiny of 1857.³⁹ What began, in May 1857, as a number of indigenous units within the Indian army revolting against their commanding British officers led to a much greater movement "as leaders of the old order" who "had been displaced by the British—landlords, rajas, local chieftains—joined in the uprisings."⁴⁰ Until the events of 1857, historian Ainslie Embree observes that the British had believed themselves to be the executors of "good government," in that they provided the Indian people with "what they likely needed and most conspicuously lacked in their own political structures: efficiency, order, equal justice, and peace" for the past hundred years, and that the Indians "did not mind who ruled them as long as they were ruled well."⁴¹ Following 1857, rather than conclude that the Indians hated foreign rule, the Mutiny demonstrated that "errors" had been made in ruling India, such that—as Queen

³⁸ *The People of India*, preface, quoted in Pinney, *Camera*, 35.

³⁹ How one referred to the 1857 event, "rebellion" or "mutiny," depended where one stood upon the imperialist divide. For example, later generations of Indians, who were supporters of the nationalist movement during the twentieth century referred to the "Mutiny," as "the First War of Independence," or as the "Revolt or Uprising of 1857" or the "Great Rebellion." See Ainslie Embree, "The Rulers and the Ruled," in *The Last Empire: Photography in British India, 1855-1911*, ed. Clark Worswick and Ainslie Embree (New York: Aperture, 1976), 138.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 138-139. Embree notes that the consolidation of British power in India is essentially bound "on one end by the Battle of Plassey in 1757, which established British influence in Bengal, and on the other end by the Great Mutiny of 1857" (page 135).

Victoria concisely put it—the British people realized that “India should belong to me.”⁴²

When drawing parallels between the imaging of Native American Indians on the heels of the Dawes Act of 1887 and South Asian Indians following the events of 1857 for *An Indian from India*, Matthew highlights Christopher Pinney’s *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* as being illustrative of photography in which, paraphrasing Susan Sontag, “people are turned into objects that can be symbolically possessed.” Pinney attributes the dehumanization of South Asian Indians within *The People of India*, as being due in part to how the individuals represented were often referred to as *types* in terms of being representative of a particular tribe, profession, and/or class within society. He remarks:

In none of the images in *The People of India* is there any engagement with the face of the sitter. This project is concerned not with individuals but with categories, and in the absence of any plausible theory linking individual faces to social groupings and behaviour, single faces cease to be of interest. Because the work is singularly determined by a desire to classify groups by political allegiance, there is no space to speak of character and individuality.⁴³

Building upon ideas introduced by Pinney, Matthew observes that in both *People of India* and *North American Indian* its authors often refrain from referring to the photograph’s subject by name within the image’s accompanying title. She adds, “They always have a strange way of naming photographs in colonial countries. It will rarely show the names of the models, unlike photographs of their ‘Brit’ people. Instead, the pictures carry titles like ‘Noble Savage’ or ‘Red

⁴² Ibid., 139-141. This brought about the period of British rule on the Indian subcontinent often referred to as the *British Raj*, usually but not exclusively placed between 1858 and 1947. Some of the rulers, especially in Rajputana, traced their dynastic lineages back for a thousand years; most of them were descendants of military freebooters who had established themselves in the late eighteenth century. As the British conquered the more valuable and strategic areas of India, they had been content to leave chiefs in possession of their lands, in return for promises of support and an agreement not to make war on their neighbors. Prior to the Mutiny, it had been assumed that the Native States would one day be absorbed into British India. However, most princes had remained loyal during the uprising, so there was a desire to reward them while assuring their support in the future. The result was that while the actual autonomy of the native princes was even more circumscribed, they were given a new role in relation to British India: “pampered and petted favorites” and “bulwarks of the British Indian Empire.”

⁴³ Pinney, *Camera*, 44.

Indian.”⁴⁴ In Figure 61 (1868), we encounter a typical example of a group portrait excerpted from *People of India*. The caption beneath the image (and above the accompanying text on the facing page) identifies the subjects as “Bhali Sooltans. Mostly Mahomedans. Oude.” By labeling the men on the premise of tribe, religion, and geographic location, the three individuals represent a certain group, being thus rendered a type. The parts stand in for the whole, denying the men and the members of the Bhali Sooltan tribe their basic humanity.

To demonstrate the dehumanizing nature of referring to people as types, as opposed to individuals, within *An Indian from India* Matthew mimics the actions of the authors of *People of India* and *North American Indians* by labeling the subjects of her diptychs on the basis of tribe type. For example, in *Kutenai Female Type/Malayalee Female Type* (Figure 62; 2003) the artist appropriates the entire page—text and image—from Curtis’s *North American Indians* as her source for the image on the left.⁴⁵ Comparing the two images, Matthew imitates not only the pose and attire of Curtis’s original sitter, but the manner in which he has identified his subject, as “Kutenai Female Type.” By referring to the young woman by her tribe, like the authors of *People of India* with the Bhali Sooltans, Curtis robs this young woman of her individuality, her humanness. Classifying her, instead, in terms of sex and ethnicity, he treats his sitter as a specimen, to be found in the drawers of a natural history museum, or the pages of an encyclopedia and defined summarily along the systematic groupings of genus and species. By contrast, in viewing much of Matthew’s work, we, the viewer, become accustomed to the artist through her self-portrait series. For example, as in her work *Dot Indian*, Matthew has applied a

⁴⁴ Sanchita Sen, “Rendezvous with the Indians: Photographer Annu Palakunnathu Matthew’s Exhibition Portrays India and Indians,” *Mid Day*, June 6, 2007.

⁴⁵ Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, vol. 7, (Seattle, WA: E.S. Curtis; Cambridge, MA: University Press, 1911), facing page 136.

conspicuous *bindi* to her forehead, marking her as an Indian. Through the familiarity engendered by her art, I believe that viewers react to her as a person, more specifically, the artist Annu Palakunnathu Matthew. By self-labeling herself and therefore limiting her identity to her Southeast Indian ethnicity, as “Malayalee Female Type,” the artist reveals the clinical nature and dehumanizing role that such classification systems have played historically in paving the way for nations interested in justifying acts of westward expansion, as in the case of the U.S. government, and empire building in the case of the British. Again, the British believed their actions to be morally good in that they “provided the Indian people with what they likely needed and most conspicuously lacked in their own political structures: efficiency, order, equal justice, [and] peace.”⁴⁶ The objectification of the *other* and the justification of one’s actions through a reliance on platitudes such as, *to their benefit*, cloaks with the air of benevolence what amounts to naked ambition and avarice.

Another way in which the creators of *The People of India*, *The North American Indian*, and similar like-minded publications warranted the classification (and thus objectification) of South Asian and Native American Indians was by invoking, promoting, and playing to contemporary audiences’ notion of both sets of Indian being representative of a *vanishing race*. Christopher Pinney notes that throughout the nineteenth century, one of the photographic idioms that emerged in India during this time was the “salvage” paradigm, which was applied to what were perceived to be fragile and thus disappearing communities, to be recorded or captured before their extinction.⁴⁷ Likewise, American literature scholar Mick Gidley observes that

⁴⁶ Embree, “Rulers,” 135.

⁴⁷ Pinney, *Camera*, 44. In addition to the “salvage” paradigm, Pinney continues by stating that the second photographic idiom that emerged in India during this time was the very different “detective” paradigm, which “more commonly manifested when faced with a more vital caste society” and “stressed the value of anthropological depictions and physiognomic observations” as guides for identification.

Curtis's multivolume enterprise may be described as "salvage ethnology" with regards to the photographer's lifelong interest in recording traditional ways before they passed away.⁴⁸ The twin notions of the "Vanishing Race" and the "Noble Savage" directly stimulated Curtis' work, as conveyed by Theodore Roosevelt's forward for *North American Indian* in which he wrote,

The Indian as he has hitherto been is on the point of passing away. His life has been lived under conditions thru which our own race past so many ages ago that not a vestige of their memory remains. It would be a veritable calamity if a vivid and truthful record of these conditions were not kept.⁴⁹

By promoting the need for ethnographic salvage of the *other*, one also at the same time self-servingly communicates the success of Anglo-American and British colonial ambitions. The classifying of the *other* into types allows one to manage and therefore sustain the status quo, which in this case means maintaining the separation of indigenous peoples from those practicing sovereignty.

Curtis scholar Christopher Lyman ascribes Curtis's preoccupation with presenting Native American Indians as "savage" to the prevailing artistic and contemporary conventions of his day.⁵⁰ By titling the work, *Noble Savage/Savage Noble* (Figure 63; 2001), Matthew invokes Curtis's pandering to and therefore encouragement of his audience's belief in the uncivilized nature of the American Indian. Of this particular work, independent arts writer and former senior contributing editor to *Photo Review* Nancy Brokaw observes, "For my blood, Matthew takes the tinkering too far when she switches the original titles with inflammatory replacements, transforming the even-handed *Two Moons-Cheyenne* [provided by Curtis], for instance, into the

⁴⁸ Gidley, *Edward*, 22.

⁴⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, "Foreword," in *The North American Indian*, vol.1, ed. Frederick Webb Hodge (Seattle, WA: E.S. Curtis; Cambridge, MA: University Press, 1911), xi.

⁵⁰ Christopher Lyman, *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 83.

impolitic *Noble Savage*.”⁵¹ In this situation, I would tend to disagree with Brokaw, since I believe that Matthew in her use of text cleverly combines two competing images of Native American Indians. “Nobility” possesses positive associations referring to one’s having “outstanding qualities” or being of “high birth or exalted rank.”⁵² This connects with contemporary romantic portrayals within art and literature of Indians being the last of a dying, or vanishing, once noble race, who have a special kinship with the land, inaccessible to modern Anglo-man. In pairing nobility with savagery, which is defined as “lacking the restraints normal to civilized beings,” “wild, cultivated,” and “boorish, rude,” Matthew presents the competing stereotypes of Native American Indians being promulgated, while simultaneously undercutting their validity.⁵³ Although she cloaks her message with tongue-in-cheek humor, within this particular self-portrait, the artist does not look amused. The disgust conveyed by her expression—the challenging look in her eyes and the downturned corners of her mouth—reveals her contempt at being typecast, along with her model, Chief Two-Moons Cheyenne. Further broadcasting the pride with which she holds herself and her barely concealed anger, is the title that she applies to her own image, that of *Savage Noble*. Were he able to communicate with us, Two-Moons may very likely have shared Matthew’s sentiments. The caption that accompanied the original source image in *The North American Indian* identifies the heroic (depending on the audience) leader as follows: “Two Moons was one of the Cheyenne chiefs at the battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, when Custer’s command was annihilated by Sioux and Cheyenne.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Nancy Brokaw, “Colonizing the Colonizer: Annu Palakunnathu Matthew Takes on Edward S. Curtis,” *Photo Review* 26, no. 4 (2003)/27, no. 1 (2004), Special Double Issue: 41.

⁵² “Noble,” Merriam Webster On-Line Dictionary, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/noble>

⁵³ “Savage,” Merriam Webster On-Line Dictionary, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/savage>.

⁵⁴ Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, vol. 6 (Seattle, WA: E.S. Curtis; Cambridge, MA: University Press, 1911), plate no. 213.

By highlighting the Chief's role in the Battle of Little Bighorn, commonly referred to as Custer's Last Stand, Curtis intentionally identifies this Indian American as the white man's former enemy, now (rightfully) subdued. Long after Two-Moons's death, the defeated Custer continued to be revered as a hero who had fought valiantly against great odds. The brave deeds of the Lieutenant Colonel and his U.S. 7th Cavalry Regiment were even featured in reenactments performed before eastern audiences in Wild West shows that toured the country, contemporary with Curtis's working on *The North American Indian*.⁵⁵ In fact, Curtis, also, made sure to capitalize on the public's interest in George Armstrong Custer's final moments. The third volume of *The North American Indian*, as well as focusing on staged images of intertribal warfare, also recounted well-known battles featuring White-Indian conflict, including extensive coverage of Custer's defeat. In keeping with the sentiments of his day, within his account Curtis communicates greater distress over perceived examples of the "Indian slaughter of Whites" (in order to protect what little land remained in their possession) than for its reverse—in reality, a slaughter much more prevalent and less warranted.⁵⁶ Similarly, in travelogues contemporary with *The People of India*, alongside images of indigenous types were images of the sites and memories connected with "The Mutiny of 1857."⁵⁷ The imagery made to memorialize Custer's loss within the U.S. and the events of 1857 within the British Empire served as rallying cries for its respective audiences to support a view of Native American and South Asian Indians as other.

⁵⁵ Louis S. Warren, "Cody's Last Stand: Masculine Anxiety, the Custer Myth, and the Frontier of Domesticity in Buffalo Bill's Wild West," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 34 (Spring 2003), 55.

⁵⁶ "Although, the description of the 'Custer fight' was written by his historian friend, Edmund S. Meany, Curtis spent a great deal of time riding over the battlefield in Montana, trying with the aid of Custer's Crow Indian scouts, to retrace the action of the battle. At some point during these efforts Curtis was photographed with the scouts in front of a monument erected in Custer's memory." Lyman, *Vanishing*, 88.

⁵⁷ Zahid R. Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire: Photography in the Nineteenth-Century India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 13-14.

Through *An Indian from India* Matthew reflects upon her experience of being perceived as the *other* as an immigrant to the U.S. by what she describes as playing upon her ““otherness” with imagery familiar to viewers.⁵⁸ The artist adds that the series serves as “a reminder that in every culture there is the ‘other.’ It irks me that I can be called primitive and exotic just because I am different compared to the dominant culture.”⁵⁹ In the concluding section of this chapter, by revisiting the stories behind the photographs, we begin to understand how Matthew draws upon their rich history to create works that speak to us today.

Appropriating the Photographic Past

In an effort to make her work more accessible to viewers, Matthew tries to appeal to what she refers to as using a “universal voice” by looking to imagery—for example, Bollywood posters, Native American Indian portraits, and family photographs—already known to a non-art audience.⁶⁰ With *An Indian from India*, the artist addresses her “Indianness,” while at the same time building upon “imagery familiar to Americans.”⁶¹ More specifically, it is the artist’s self-professed interest “in the old, historical photograph and the stories that it can tell, but also hide” that has particular bearing on my investigation of *An Indian from India*.⁶²

I begin with Gary Hesse’s astute observation concerning Matthew’s selection of Curtis and his contemporaries’ photographs for *An Indian from India* written for his introduction to Matthew’s exhibition, “Bollywood Cowboys and Indians from India”:

At the time of their creation these photographs were presented as documents of this culture, although, it is commonly known that in the case of Curtis many of the images were staged and in some cases fabricated to make the final images appear

⁵⁸ Matthew, “Perception,” 68.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ The artist was not aware that this image had not been published during Curtis’s lifetime. Matthew, email message to author, June 23, 2013.

⁶¹ Matthew, “Perception,” 67.

⁶² Ibid., 52.

more dramatic, or closer to the idealization of what whites imagined or expected Indian Americans or Indians to look like. By viewing these subjects as exotic natives and curiosities these images and similar representations functioned more as fetish objects rather than historical records of indigenous peoples.⁶³

A decade prior to Matthew's *An Indian from India*, Christopher Lyman's *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis* sought to temper the resurgence in Curtis's popularity by informing the public that "the composite image of 'the Indian' that Curtis bequeathed us was a product of his consciousness and was designed to appeal to the consciousness of his audience."⁶⁴ As Lyman notes, Curtis's portrayal of American Indians in *The North American Indian* conformed to "the lineaments of the white man's Indian" of the period, and was therefore not unique.⁶⁵ That Curtis's work was the most comprehensive, well-funded, and best-known enterprise, accounts for his photographic project being viewed as paradigmatic. This is why Matthew, when discussing *An Indian from India*, states that within her self-portraits her South Asian Indian attire is "'made up,' similar to Edward Curtis' contrived posing and dressing up" of his subjects.⁶⁶

In *The Vanishing Race*, Lyman outlines for readers how Curtis's belief that a "truthful" depiction of Indians involved removing any reference to "White culture" influenced the making of his photographs.⁶⁷ For example, one way in which Curtis constructed his representation of the Indian American was by supplying props and costumes to sitters to create the "illusion of

⁶³ Gary Hesse, "Introduction," *Annu Palakunnathu Matthew: Bollywood Cowboys and Indians from India*, in *Contact Sheet*, no. 115 (Syracuse, NY: Light Work, 2002), 2.

⁶⁴ Lyman, *Vanishing*, 17.

⁶⁵ Gidley, Edward, 6. Refer also to Robert Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1982); Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1986), 102-130.

⁶⁶ Matthew, "Perception," 68.

⁶⁷ Lyman, *Vanishing*, 63.

ethnicity.”⁶⁸ Matthew draws attention to Curtis’s proclivity towards clothing his subjects in meaningless costumes in her *Woman’s Primitive Dress/Indian Woman’s Primitive Dress* (Figure 64; 2003). For her own portrayal, the artist responded to Curtis’s interpretation of authentic tribal attire by assembling in her words, “a jumble of fabrics from different parts of India—a motley ensemble that you’d never encounter in the new world.”⁶⁹ Note, also, Matthew’s humorous title for the portrait pairing in Figure 63 that refers to the source image’s model’s dress, as well as her own, as “primitive.” Lyman further adds that in order to maintain this “illusion of ethnicity” post-production, Curtis and his assistants would also retouch both the photographic negatives and the reproduced photogravure prints in order to “perpetuate the project’s subscription to an ethnographic present,” since the objects removed hinted at the invasive presence of modernity outside the tipi’s walls in “the form of clocks, wagons, parasols, hats, and product labels.”⁷⁰ Lastly, Curtis exerted control over his representation of the Indian American when deciding which images would be published and made available to the American public.

Interestingly, the portrait on the left, Matthew’s source for *Navajo Smile/Malayalee Smile* (Figure 65; 2003), is a photograph that came from Curtis’s “unpublished archive.”⁷¹ When comparing the photograph that Matthew has re-titled *Navajo Smile* to the original image that Curtis and his studio selected as being suitable for publication, *Navajo Woman* (Figure 66;

⁶⁸ Ibid., 42, 65-69, 90. The author goes on to discuss at great length how although feather bonnets are only worn on rare occasions, they appear regularly throughout volumes three and four of *The North American Indian*: “Same bonnets and shirts show up repeatedly on individuals of different tribes.” Lyman, also, adds that the feather bonnet often assured that the sitter “look Indian” to the casual observer by its being a prop typically associated with Indian Americans in addition to concealing short hair, which did *not* look Indian.

⁶⁹ Brokaw, “Colonizing,” 40.

⁷⁰ Lyman, *Vanishing*, 76.

⁷¹ For more on Curtis’s “unpublished archive” see *Prayer to the Great Mystery: The Uncollected Writings and Photography of Edward S. Curtis*, ed. Gerald Hausman (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

1904), photography editor Bob Kapoun observes that the first depiction possesses a striking degree of “naturalism,” noting that within this previously unpublished Curtis photograph, the viewer “sees a subject who appears not to be intimidated by the camera and is in a relaxed posture.”⁷² By way of contrast, Kapoun describes the second portrait as being “more formal,” “even stultifying.”⁷³ Returning to Matthew’s portrait pairing, *Navajo Smile/Malayalee Smile*, we see the artist making an editing choice that counters Curtis’s. For her self-portrait, the artist instinctively opts to model herself after his *unpublished* portrait, the one that reveals the humanizing and less *othering* of the two images; she presents herself in a more relatable positive light, in line with how a newcomer to the U.S. would wish to be perceived.⁷⁴

Tempering Lyman’s criticism of Curtis, then, I would add that his was not a singular vision of the Native American Indian, which is in agreement with Mick Gidley’s observation that Curtis was not so much an *author* of words and images—but *subject* (emphasis in original) to what Wai-Chee Dimock would refer to as the “controlling logic of culture.”⁷⁵ Therefore, by concluding with portraits made by Curtis’s contemporaries, I wish to address an issue of great importance to America’s past, present, and future—an issue faced not only by Native American Indians but also by immigrants to the U.S. such as Matthew: the pressure to assimilate into mainstream society. In self-portraits modeled after historical figures, Tom Torlino (Figures 67 and 68; 2001 and 2003) and Quanah Parker (Figures 69 and 70; both 2003), Matthew performs

⁷² Kapoun, “Introduction,” xviii.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ The artist was not aware that this image had not been published during Curtis’s lifetime. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, email message to author, July 7, 2013.

⁷⁵ Wai-Chee Dimock, *Empire for Liberty: The Poetics of Individualism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1989), 7, quoted in, Gidley, *Edward*, 12. Gidley adds that Dimock’s argument about Herman Melville appeals as a paradigm for Curtis stating, “Melville’s authorial enterprise can be seen...as a miniature version of the national enterprise.”

“Indianness” as a response to the pressure faced by immigrants to “assimilate into American culture.”⁷⁶ In pursuing *An Indian from India*, then, the artist expresses her desire to portray the ideas communicated by the original images, in her words, “rather than the subjects themselves, [as] a sort of reversal of the gaze, so that the viewer is forced to reevaluate his thoughts and perceptions about what is in front of him.”⁷⁷

In Figures 67 and 68, Matthew turns to archival *before-and-after* portraits made by J. N. Choate, the official photographer of student life at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Richard Henry Pratt, a career military officer and zealous reformer, had founded the institution in Carlisle Pennsylvania in 1879. As a young army officer working in Indian Territory with Plains Indians, Pratt became convinced that tribal peoples could and should be assimilated into the territorially advancing white civilization. Part of Carlisle’s main purpose, then, was to dismantle the reservation system, which Pratt held responsible for maintaining tribal society. As he often stated, “To civilize the Indian, [we must] get him into civilization. To keep him civilized, [we] keep him there.”⁷⁸ Likewise, Pratt summarized his program for assimilation, as “The Indian must die as an Indian to live as a man.”⁷⁹ American studies scholar Lorna M. Malsheimer importantly notes that for individuals like Pratt to “live as a man” meant moving “from barbarism into civilization,” a phrase which not incidentally became one of the school’s most oft-repeated mottos.⁸⁰

Beginning with the *before* pairing (Figure 67)—*Tom Torlino, Navajo, On Entry to Carlisle School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania* and *Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Indian, On Entry to*

⁷⁶ Matthew, email message to author, June 23, 2013.

⁷⁷ Artist quoted in Madhuri Valegar K, “Beyond the Lens,” *Femina*, August 1, 2007.

⁷⁸ Pratt quoted in Lorna M. Malsheimer, “‘Imitation White Man’: Images of Transformation at the Carlisle Indian School,” *Studies in Visual Communication* 11, no. 4 (Fall 1985): 55.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

the United States of America—we encounter two long haired, jewelry laden, traditionally attired individuals. For her self-portrait on the right, Matthew assumes the same blank countenance and vacant stare as that of her counterpart. Upon moving next to the after photographs (Figure 68)—*Tom Torlino, Navajo, Three Years Later, Carlisle* and *Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Indian, Nine Years Later, Providence*—we are confronted by visual testimonial of Torlino’s and the artist’s outward transformation “from barbarism into civilization.” Rather tellingly, many of the civilizing characteristics that Pratt wanted to instill upon Carlisle students, such as “competitive,” “serviceable,” “industrious,” “productive” and, perhaps, most significant, “self-supporting” bear a striking resemblance to traits desired by Americans for its newly immigrated population.⁸¹ With her tamed mane, understated accessories, and conservative suit jacket, Matthew, in this self-portrait, communicates, in her words, that she has successfully assimilated into the ranks of “civilized university professor.”⁸² Her image presents someone who will contribute to her newly adopted nation’s continued economic success, rather than be a drain on its resources.

As Carlisle’s founder and tireless booster, Pratt used Choate’s *before-and-after* photographs of Torlino and his fellow students as a propagandistic tool, providing visual evidence of the institution’s success at engendering cultural transformation. As Pratt explained to interested audiences all over the country, he was conducting a twofold educational program: “We have two objects in view in starting the Carlisle school—one is to educate the Indians—the other is to educate the people of the country ... to understand that the Indians can be educated.”⁸³

⁸¹ The full list of civilizing characteristics desired by Pratt, includes “virile,” gentlemanly,” “peaceable,” “thrifty,” “prudent,” “Christian,” “individualistic,” and “as he paradoxically put it, ‘obedient.’” See *ibid.*, 55. Malsheimer also outlines the adjectives often applied by Pratt to tribal societies: “savage,” “communistic,” “dirty,” “peace destroying,” “ignorant,” “imprudent,” and “wild.”

⁸² Matthew, “Living.”

⁸³ Pratt in the *Daily Evening Sentinel*, June 4, 1891, quoted in Malsheimer, “Imitation,” 62. Before-and-after photographs were sent to benefactors and potential donors, as well as being included in Pratt’s lobbying

Malsheimer observes that along with Torlino's portraits, two additional group portraits—an Apache duo and Sioux threesome—were frequently selected to demonstrate Carlisle's success at rendering transformations.⁸⁴ She further adds that the selection of the three pairs was probably in part the result of aesthetic considerations—variety ensured by the type of portrait (large group, small group, and individual) and by the three different styles of native dress. More important, perhaps, were the tribes presented, in that the Sioux, Navajo, and Apache were “prominent groups, all regarded by contemporary whites as particularly recalcitrant, isolated, and hostile.”⁸⁵ Malsheimer also acknowledges that the three pairs of photographs have visual commonalities, suggesting that selection was also made to exaggerate the contrast between the two states depicted.⁸⁶ Finally, within the original prints of all three pairs there is marked contrast in skin color; as Malsheimer explains, “these particular students appear literally to be getting whiter.”⁸⁷

Returning to Matthew's *before-and-after* portraits in Figures 67 and 68, the artist, too, seems to be “getting whiter.” Her attentiveness to complexion's role with regards to discussions of race and ethnicity is evinced in an earlier work, *Fair & Lovely* (Figure 71; 1998) from her Bollywood Satirized series, as well as another work from her *An Indian from India* series, *Red Indian/Brown Indian* (Figure 72; 2001). In *Bollywood Satirized*, Matthew uses image-editing software to alter the appearance of an actual Bollywood film poster, so that she may explore her

correspondence with local, state, and national political and administrative officials who had the power to either aid or hinder him in his work. Photographs received an even wider distribution. Photographer J. N. Choate recognized their commercial value and made his images of the school available for public purchase, advertising in area newspapers, on broadsides, and on the backs of Choate-made cabinet cards. Drawings were also later made from the photographs, and when halftone reproductions were possible they were printed in the national magazines of the period.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 64.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid. Malsheimer adds, “Indeed, [Carlisle students] may well have been getting whiter, since they arrived at Carlisle in the early fall and thereafter spent few hours in the sun. Other photographs indicate that they began to adopt contemporary white habits of protecting themselves from the sun as well.”

experience of rejecting certain traditional women's roles and behaviors while growing up in India—actions that she attributes to having “lived in England's more egalitarian society.”⁸⁸ Specifically, in *Fair & Lovely*, through her choice of the title the artist cleverly invokes the name of a popular skin whitening cream. In addition, through her imagery—photographs of Matthew during her childhood, alongside portrayals of mature women, one involved in a romantic embrace—and text—“Don't play in the sun...you'll get dark and no one will marry you”—the artist creates her critical response to a well-intentioned aunt who informed a young Matthew how being perceived as too dark can adversely affect one's marriage prospects.⁸⁹ Turning next to *Red Indian/Brown Indian*, one can see how through the work's title alone the artist addresses how nineteenth-century ethnographic systems of classification have infiltrated the English language, such that Indian type can be determined solely on the basis of a reference to skin color.

Matthew hopes that the viewer, by engaging with the portrait-pairings in *An Indian from India*, “starts to question what to give credibility, what is patently contrived, and how the two are not as far apart as we would like to observe.”⁹⁰ Malsheimer concludes her investigation of Choate's *before-and-after* pairs by noting that for contemporary audiences the images suggest an effortless cultural transformation that was far from the truth for the individuals represented.⁹¹ Knowing the breadth of work that Matthew has created in an effort to make sense of the various cultures—English, Indian, and American—that inform her sense of self, by looking to the historical figure of Tom Torlino we know that the two bear scars hidden from the prying eye of the camera's lens. I agree with Nancy Brokaw's assessment that in her “most affecting images,”

⁸⁸ “Annu Palakunnathu Matthew interviewed by Andrew Cohen (2010),” Annu Palakunnathu Matthew: Portfolios: Selected Articles, accessed January 23, 2016, http://www.annumatthew.com/articles/Cohen_Tasveer.pdf.

⁸⁹ Matthew, “Perception,” 66.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁹¹ Malsheimer, “Imitation,” 73.

Matthew asks viewers “to contemplate the ‘other,’ to confront the actual experience of the individuals being portrayed.”⁹² To Brokaw’s mind, then, Tom Torlino, in the first photograph, looks “Navajo through and through, the assimilated Torlino looks like a particularly unhappy bookkeeper, stuff shirted and straight-laced.”⁹³ For Brokaw, Matthew’s self-portrait allows the artist to appear alongside both of Torlino’s incarnations, “like a medium communicating with a long-gone spirit and extending a hand across the decades in sympathy.”⁹⁴

Consequently, by bringing historic imagery to our attention in *An Indian from India*, Matthew invites us to reevaluate the ideas being presented in order to make connections to the experience of individuals living outside mainstream society today. As was the case with Malsheimer’s questioning of the seamless transformation presented in the before-and-after pairings, I maintain that through Matthew’s engagement with Torlino’s *before-and-after* portraits the artist works to highlight the difficulties that attend assimilation. This does not mean, however, that Matthew is not invested in becoming part of her adoptive country on her own terms, as evinced by her portraits modeled after Charles Milton Bell’s studio photographs of Quanah Parker (Figures 69 and 70). A Cheyenne statesman and seasoned warrior, Quanah Parker spoke of the need for mutual cooperation and respect between Native American Indians and whites so that the two may coexist peacefully.⁹⁵

⁹² Brokaw, “Colonizing,” 40-41.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁹⁵ On May 18, 1836, Quanah Parker’s mother, Cynthia Ann Parker, was abducted at the age of four during an attack on Fort Parker in the Republic of Texas by a war party comprised of Comanches and Kiowas. In time, she became the wife of Peta Nocona, a prominent war chief, and bore him three children. As a child, Quanah was separated from his mother and a sister named Topsannah, when Texas Rangers attacked their camp in 1861 and the two were restored to Cynthia Ann’s white relatives. Her daughter died within three years, and the unhappy Cynthia Ann in 1879. In William T. Hagan, *Quanah Parker, Comanche Chief* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 4, 6-7.

Unlike the Carlisle school's *before-and-after* presentation of Torlino, in Bell's representation of Parker we encounter a man who seems equally confident in both cultures. In Figure 69, leaning in relative ease against a fake rustic wall, Parker, dressed in tribal attire, assumes a proud pose signaling to the viewer that he is not to be underestimated. Figure 70 presents Parker as being formally attired in coat and tie. At his neck, conspicuously displayed within both portraits, is the diamond brooch that had been presented to him as a gift of thanks, along with an engraved revolver, by a group of white Texas cattlemen.⁹⁶ In fact, Bell's studio portraits were made on the occasion of Parker's travelling to Washington during the 1890s to represent a consortium of white ranchers seeking to renew their leases on reservation land.⁹⁷ Parker, likewise, was also well respected by many of his fellow Plains Indians. As legal scholar Rennard Strickland observes, "The great warrior established his bravery when he and a group of Comanches refused to accept the dictates of the Treaty of Medicine Lodge and battled to the end at Adobe Wells in Texas in 1874."⁹⁸ I contend that, together, Figures 68 and 69 illustrate Parker's resistance to wholesale assimilation. Notice that despite his adoption of the more conventional attire in Figure 68, Parker insists upon keeping his two braids. In addition to retaining his traditional hairstyle, Parker also clung to the tradition of having multiple wives (eight total) and the use of peyote in religious observances up until his death in 1911.⁹⁹ On her appropriation of Parker's Washington studio portraits, Matthew had this to say:

In Parker, I was very aware of [his biography]. I do research the history but some have more well known histories than others. Parker is one of them. I liked how he could traverse both cultures with ease. In the case of Parker, it was part of the selection process, but that wasn't always the case.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Ibid., 127.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁹⁸ Rennard Strickland, *The Indians in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 46.

⁹⁹ Hagan, *Quanah*, 113.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew, email message to author, July 7, 2013.

Upon learning more of Parker's story, one can see how for an immigrant to the U.S., like Matthew, who does not want to have to choose between two cultures, his engagement with both cultures would be appealing. Earlier, we discussed that *An Indian from India* also communicates the artist's desire to belong on her own terms. The work from this series that, perhaps, best visually captures this impulse is her *American Indian Woman Wearing Flag/Indian American Wearing Flag as Sari* (Figure 3; 2003).

Standing in the center of the same sparsely furnished room, two women smile for the camera. On the left, the American Indian woman, dressed simply in a long dark skirt and blouse, stands proudly. Two American flags are draped upon her upright form. The Stars of the front flag cover her torso, whereas, the Stripes of both flags cascade to the ground in elegant folds before and behind her. Beneath this image is the caption, "Photograph from the Wanamaker Expedition, 1913." Rodman Wanamaker was the son and partner of John Wanamaker, founder of the famed Wanamaker Department Stores of Philadelphia and New York, as well as the employer and sponsor of Joseph Kossuth Dixon. In fact, the Wanamaker North American Indian expeditions occupied much of Dixon's career as "educational director" of the Wanamaker stores from 1908—he had been hired as a publicist in 1906—until his death in 1926.¹⁰¹ Like Curtis, Dixon was a highly skilled photographer, known for making dramatic works in the Pictorialist style, an aesthetic movement that favored romantic subject matter, rendered in soft-focus with rich tonalities.¹⁰² The 1913 "Expedition of Citizenship" marked the third Dixon-Wanamaker collaboration. The first expedition, in 1908, involved the making of a silent film of Longfellow's *Hiawatha* with Crow Indians serving as cast. In 1909, for the second expedition Dixon returned

¹⁰¹ Alan Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans 1880-1930* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 214.

¹⁰² Fleming and Luskey, *Grand*, 103.

to the Crow Agency for his staging of “The Last Great Indian Council” on the site of Custer’s last battle. *American Indian Woman Wearing Flag* arose from the third expedition. The events leading up to the making of the portrait were as follows.

On May 12, 1909, Rodman Wanamaker proposed to Congress that a national monument be erected in the harbor of New York to honor the memory of North American Indians. Essentially, the impetus behind Wanamaker’s and the American public’s support of this monument and the expeditions stemmed from the same source. The U.S at this time was beginning to view itself as a player on the world’s stage. In order to establish its legitimacy, America’s citizens felt it imperative that its native population “capitulate gratefully” so that Americans could rightfully declare, “we have triumphed, but in triumphing we are just.”¹⁰³ Had the monument been completed, it was to take the form of a colossal statue, larger than its neighbor the Statue of Liberty, and be set atop an imposing base that would also double as a museum of Indian culture. As for the bronze Indian’s appearance, Dixon explained:

The bow and arrow, with the left hand hanging entirely at full length, indicates that [the Indian] is through with his war weaponry; the uplifted hand, with the two fingers extended toward the open sea, is the universal peace sign of the Indian. Thus he gives, in bronze, a perpetual welcome to the nations of the world, as he gave welcome to the white man when he first came to these shores.¹⁰⁴

Ultimately, by casting the Native American Indians’ *vanishing past* in a romantic light, Dixon, Wanamaker, and their contemporaries sought to justify the country’s ascendance at the cost of its former sole occupants.

¹⁰³ Russel Barsh, “An American Heart of Darkness: The 1913 Expedition for American Indian Citizenship,” *Great Plains Quarterly* (Spring 1993): 93.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Kossuth Dixon to Rodman Wanamaker, July 7, 1912 and marked proofs, “National American Indian Memorial Association,” (c. 1913), William Hammond Mathers Museum, Indiana University; quoted in Barsh, “An American,” 96.

Four years later, on the anniversary of George Washington's birth, a groundbreaking ceremony for the North American Indian monument took place on a hilltop at Fort Wadsworth Bridge, Staten Island, New York. President Woodrow Wilson, Cabinet members, diplomats, Army and Navy officers, and the general public watched as thirty-two chiefs dressed in traditional garb from eleven different tribes signed a Declaration of Allegiance to the U.S. government and, for the first time in their history, hoisted an American flag. Perhaps, the most compelling speech made during the ceremony was by Red Hawk, chief of the Oglala Sioux, whom the Indians had chosen for their spokesman; he stated:

It is my strong belief that we were created by the Great Spirit to live in this country. You white men found me here. I am here today. I was the ruler here in that time when you first crossed the great Atlantic, and I thought you had merely come as a visitor. From that time to this day you have improved our country. You have made me as a part of this country. You have had me raise the flag of the glorious United States today, and from today I shall consider myself a member of your country. The dress I wear I gave up long ago by your advice. I put on these things today to show that they are things of the past.¹⁰⁵

Soon after, in 1913, inspired by the groundbreaking ceremony, and another in which he was presented with a buffalo-tooth necklace and bestowed the Indian name, "High Crow," by Mountain Chief, a Blackfoot, Rodman Wanamaker sponsored the "Expedition of Citizenship." His objective on this occasion was for Dixon to take the American flag, as a "symbol of citizenship," from Ford Wadsworth, the site of the proposed national monument, to every one of the existing 189 tribes.¹⁰⁶ The expedition was to give a flag to each tribe, so that they may raise

¹⁰⁵ Red Hawk's words were translated on the spot by Edward Swan, President of the Black Hills Council. In Reynolds, "Introduction," 2.

¹⁰⁶ Fleming and Luskey, *Grand*, 105. For six months, Dixon and his team traveled the country by train. At each stop, they played a speech by President Wilson on the new portable recording machine, just invented by Thomas Edison's company. In that speech, Wilson included the reassurance that "The Great White Father now calls you his 'Brother,' not his 'Children.'" The purpose of the expedition he financed was set out by Rodman Wanamaker as follows: "In undertaking these expeditions to the North American Indian, the sole desire has been to perpetuate the life story of the first Americans and to strengthen in their hearts the feeling of allegiance and friendship for their

it over their homes, as a reenactment of the ceremony in New York.¹⁰⁷ Dixon, in accordance with Wanamaker, observed that those “grizzled old warriors” had expressed “such a thrill of patriotism” during the flag raising that he was determined to make sure that every Indian in the U.S. had the opportunity to share in that inspiration.¹⁰⁸

Emma Kickapoo, the subject of the source image that Matthew titled *American Indian Woman Wearing Flag*, serves as an ideal model for an artist as immigrant who aspires to bridge historic and present cultural misunderstandings through her photography. In a contemporary article, published in *The Shawnee Daily News Herald*, Emma is introduced to readers as the woman responsible for “saving the day” with regards to Dixon’s Citizenship ceremony.¹⁰⁹ The unnamed author relates that due to a “misunderstanding” between the tribe and Dixon that arose during the signing of the Declaration of Allegiance to the U.S. government, the Kickapoos had refused to take further part in the exercises. Furthermore, the tribe members’ cited that their refusal arose from their having “signed so many things in the past, to their sorrow, that they were leary [sic] of signing this, not fully understanding it.”¹¹⁰ The Kickapoo also expressed, thanks to an interpreter present, their total disinterest in the Stars and Stripes, since they already have “the

country...for this purpose...expeditions were sent forth to gather historic data and make picture records of their manners, customs, their sports and games, their warfare, religion, and the country in which they life.” From his foreword written for Joseph Kossuth Dixon, *The Vanishing Race: The Last Great Indian Council* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1913), quoted in Fleming and Luskey, *Grand*, 106.

¹⁰⁷ Prior to the departure, Thomas Edison, “vehement over the wrongs perpetuated upon Indians,” delegated a member of his staff to go to the White House and record a speech for the Indians by Woodrow Wilson. Edison also supplied a portable phonograph for playing back President Wilson’s speech at each ceremony. In Reynolds, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁰⁸ Joseph K. Dixon, in *Rodman Wanamaker Expedition, The Purpose and Achievements of the Rodman Wanamaker Expedition of Citizenship to the North American Indian, Summer and Autumn of 1913* (Washington, D.C.: s.n., 1913), 5.

¹⁰⁹ “Kickapoos Fail to Sign the Oath of Allegiance. Likewise Refused to Accept Flag Offered by Mr. Wannamaker. Woman Saved the Day. Emma Kickapoo Only Member of the Tribe to Participate in Ceremonies,” *The Shawnee Daily News Herald* (Shawnee, Oklahoma), June 21, 1913, The Gateway to Oklahoma History, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc91984/m1/1/zoom/>.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

flag their gods gave them and that was enough.” The article closes by stating that “a well-known Indian woman and a member of the tribe,” Emma, joined in the flag-raising ceremony, with the flag intended for the Kickapoos being bestowed upon her personally.

The Kickapoos’ reaction to the Citizenship ceremony was not uncommon. At subsequent appearances, Dixon often found himself having to explain to audiences that the ceremonies were “only meant to inspire citizenship, not confer it,” and as in the case of the Kickapoo, that the signing of the Declaration did not represent “another land cession.”¹¹¹ The most negative indictment of Dixon’s actions, however, came from educated Indians who resented his advocacy of citizenship and Indian rights.¹¹² Founded in 1911, the Society of American Indians boasted a membership of several hundred Indian members, most of them professionals. Within the Society’s journal, in an article mockingly titled “The Dixon Expedition of Citizenship,” the anonymous author observes that Dixon’s speeches “revealed the astounding egotism of the man,” noting the expedition leader’s overreliance upon the first-person singular: “*I took the flag in my hands, I ordered the Indians to bow their heads, I dedicated the Indians to the flag; I dedicated the flag to the Indians*” (emphasis in the original).¹¹³ The same author also importantly points out to readers that the main events of the ceremony were subordinate to the “taking of pictures,” since Dixon would stop mid-sentence or wave his arms “at the command of the film-box operator,” and that in general his methodology had “smack[ed] of fakery.”¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Richard Lindstrom, “‘Not from the Land Side, but from the Flag Side’: Native American Responses to the Wanamaker Expedition of 1913,” *Journal of Social History* 30, no. 1 (Autumn 1996): 215-217.

¹¹² Barsh, “American,” 107.

¹¹³ “The Dixon Expedition of Citizenship,” *Journal of the Society of American Indians* 1 (1914): 5-6.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Another approach to understanding the Kickapoo's tribe's response to Dixon is to explore the key messages being imparted by him to his audience.¹¹⁵ In his speech, the former reverend promoted ideas that Native Americans were "unfit for the modern world," that "real" Indians only existed within the context of an idealized past, and that by engaging with the flag participants were entering into a "new era of justice and fair dealing on the part of the U.S. government toward its (remaining) Native American inhabitants."¹¹⁶ Also important to the present study, in researching the 1913 Expedition American studies scholar Alan Trachtenberg notes that in addition to justifying America's ambitions towards becoming a world power, the public's interest in changing the status of Native Americans from "vanishing race" to "first American" was also related to increased demand for the restriction of non-WASP immigration and the exclusion of "aliens."¹¹⁷ Consequently, Trachtenberg maintains that the Wanamaker expedition comes to address the question, "Who is and who might be American?" This question is at the heart of the immigration debate.

Within their portraits the artist Matthew and her model Emma Kickapoo, convey that each would make a viable candidate for American citizenship. Like Matthew, Kickapoo's past is marked by her engagement with multiple cultures. On November 23, 1898, Emma Kickapoo arrived at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania as "Pen-e-the-ah-quah" or "flying past."¹¹⁸ After leaving Carlisle in 1905, she returned to her native Oklahoma, where

¹¹⁵ Lindstrom, "Not," 210-214.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 213-214.

¹¹⁷ Trachtenberg, *Shades*, 212-213.

¹¹⁸ "Emma (Pen-e-tha-ah-quah) Kickapoo Student File," Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource File, Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource File, accessed February 27, 2016, http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/student_files/emma-pen-e-tha-ah-quah-kickapoo-student-file. Emma Kickapoo Williams Ellis was born around 1883 and died in 1942. Charles Callender, Richard K. Pope, and Sarah M. Pope, "Kickapoo," in *Handbook of North American Indians: Northeast*, vol. 15, edited by Bruce G. Trigger (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978), 666.

she became a housekeeper and married, “Lloyd Williams, a white man.”¹¹⁹ In another photograph made twenty years after the 1913 Expedition image (Figure 73; 1931 or 1932), Kickapoo, now Emma Kickapoo Williams Ellis, is shown wearing a “fine blue woolen robe with ribbon and applique silver ornaments.”¹²⁰ The woman who had once “saved the day” by signing the Declaration and accepting the U.S. flag for the Kickapoo, and who participated in the making of a photograph in 1913 that speaks against the idea that “real” Indians are “unfit for the modern world,” within her later portrait appears to favor more traditional ways. Prominently placed on the wall behind her, however, is a quilt that features a donkey, not incidentally the symbol of the Democratic Party. In fact, Kickapoo made this “Democratic Quilt” for Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first presidential campaign and even wrote to him that she would send him the quilt if elected.¹²¹ Within her studio portrait, Kickapoo illustrates for her contemporaries (and for us today) that pride in her Indian heritage need not preclude her from full participation in America’s democracy, even to the extent of teasing a future president.

Conclusion

In 2004, upon becoming a citizen, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew was presented a brochure titled “A Welcome to USA Citizenship.” It read, “Today you have become a citizen of the United States of America. You are no longer an Englishman, a Frenchman, an Italian, a Pole. Neither are you a hyphenated American.”¹²² For an artist who openly acknowledges the role of her Indian heritage and her early childhood spent in England on her life and her art, to abandon these influences so completely seemed an unreasonable expectation. It led her, in 2006, to

¹¹⁹ “Student file.”

¹²⁰ Callender, “Kickapoo,” 666.

¹²¹ “Notes (Subject-Name: Ellis, Emma Kickapoo Williams),” Smithsonian Institution, accessed February 27, 2017, <http://siris-archives.si.edu/ipac20/ipac.jsp?&profile=all&source=~!siarchives&uri=full=3100001~!83819~!0#focus>

¹²² Doug Norris, “‘The Virtual Immigrant’; University of Rhode Island Gallery Exhibition Explores Issues of Identity,” *South County Independent*, November 2, 2006.

pursue The Virtual Immigrant series. For this work the artist made lenticular prints—two photos spliced together and reassembled against a lenticular lens to give the illusion of transformation or movement—of call center workers from her native Bangalore. Significantly, each work is identified by the subject’s name. For their jobs, employees must shed their Indianness and become Americans for the workday. To do so, they are trained and instructed to incorporate American slang and references to popular culture in their phone conversations with customers overseas. This switching back-and-forth between two cultures, part of the increased interconnectedness of our globalized worlds, has made them immigrants of sorts. Except, as Matthew notes, they, unlike her, remain in their native India.

The lenticular portrait of *Anirudh* (Figure 74; 2006) may be interpreted as the modern-day equivalent of J. N. Choate’s Tom Torlino. This particular work is a composite photograph of the young Southeast Asian Indian man. Were we able to view the lenticular portrait in person, from one angle, we would see that he wears a long-sleeved shirt and gray slacks; from another angle he is dressed in traditional attire, arms bare, legs outstretched as if dancing. For both portraits, he wears the same serious expression. When exhibiting *The Virtual Immigrant*, in addition to supplying the names of the sitters, Matthew incorporates their experiences in the form of recorded interviews. In his discussion of Edward S. Curtis’s Indians, Mick Gidley observes that the photographer’s images were influential for so long, and “why they retain their influence still,” is due to their indebtedness to “the controlling logic of culture.”¹²³ At the time that Matthew began pursuing her *Virtual Immigrant*, Americans were having faceless interactions with her fellow Southeast Asian Indians, which they resented; customers wanted their questions to be addressed by representatives working within the U.S. In both this and her *An Indian from*

¹²³ Gidley, *Edward*, 12.

India project, then, the artist forces her audience to look at the “other” as individuals in order to break the damaging persistence of authoritative stereotypes. Her crusade is a personal one, as her self-portraits in *An Indian from India* testify. By inserting herself into America’s past through the appropriation of its historic representations of the “other,” she communicates her desire to be part of its present and its future. Returning to *Indian American Wearing Flag as Sari*, we encounter an artist who views herself as equally Indian and American. Her direct gaze and erect stance communicate an unspoken challenge to anyone who asks her to choose between the two.

Chapter 5: Two Photographs

I close with two images that have shaped my thinking about the connection between immigration, photography, and self-portraiture. Figure 75 features a smartly dressed Asian woman pleasantly seated before a large flowering bush that threatens to engulf her petite frame. Figure 76 is a rather odd picture of four men—two well-groomed Asian men book-ended by shaggy, bare-footed white hippies—casually posed in front of the White House. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, my mother is the woman in the first image; my father is the third man from the left in the second. When these photographs were made, neither of my parents had any idea that the other existed. Admittedly, while growing up, this was part of the pictures' charm, that my parents had lives before my brother and me, that they had lives before each other. Of significance to my research, both images were made shortly after my parents' arrival to the United States from the Philippines.

As part of my research, I have learned that since the passage of the Immigration Reform Act, fifty years ago, fifty-nine million foreign-born individuals have come to the U.S., more than quadrupling the number of immigrants who were in the country in 1965, and bringing their share of the population close to the peak of another great influx a century ago.¹ I am proud to say that included within this number are my parents, who emigrated during the 1970s to address America's shortage of well-trained professionals in the fields of medicine and engineering. Sadly, I have not always been proud of being a child of immigrants. Although I was born in the U.S., growing up with this difference caused me to feel distanced from my peers. It probably did not help that my brother and I were the only people of color in the private school that we

¹ "Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065," Pew Research Center, accessed September 28, 2015, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/09/28/modern-immigration-wave-brings-59-million-to-u-s-driving-population-growth-and-change-through-2065/>.

attended from pre-school through eighth grade. Looking back now, I realize that I had not felt American, because my parents did not view themselves as American, even after having gained U.S. citizenship. They referred to my white friends as American, implying that as a family we were something apart, different. In my parents' defense, I do not believe that it was for lack of trying, since when I look at my parents' early photographs of when they first came to the U.S., I see two young people who embraced their adoptive country, wanting so very much to belong.

This *desire to belong* is what drew me to Tseng Kwong Chi's *East Meets West*, Nikki S. Lee's *Projects*, and Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's *An Indian From India*. Interestingly, in making their pictures my parents employed strategies similar to those present within the three artists' series. My father, like Tseng, selected a recognizable tourist site for his photograph. Also, like the artist, my father included in his clowning a friend, my future godfather. As if taking a cue from Lee, the two in this image seem to have infiltrated our nation's capital's flower power community for their humorous photo op. Unlike my father, my mother came to the U.S. knowing no one. This led her to write frequent letters home that included a packet of her most recent snapshots, along with U.S. dollars to support her younger siblings in their studies. In Figure 76, my mother looks happy and unconcerned, as she is literally being swallowed up by her surroundings when posed in Austin, Texas, during a break while taking the exam that would give her the certification she needed to practice nursing in the U.S. Perhaps she was smiling to reassure the photographer and her family that her new environment, her test—everything—was going well for her and that they need not worry. In fact, this positivity was characteristic of all of the photographs that my mother sent home to the Philippines. As with Matthew's self-portraits, Figure 76 reflects how my mother wished to be viewed. In fact, the common thread that binds Figures 75 and 76 to my three artists' photographic series is that my parents' pictures

provide a much-needed corrective to depictions of the immigrant experience because they do not portray contemporary newcomers to the U.S. as *other* and do not reinforce the idea that the *only acceptable immigrants* to the U.S. were identical to those who came before. This re-imagining of immigrants is important because portrayals and their underlying narratives can serve an exclusionary purpose, defining *Who* or *What is American*.

Listening to NPR last October as I was finishing this dissertation, I paused in my morning routine to attend to a story that fits my own experience as an Asian American living in the U.S. To many listeners the narrative probably seemed harmless, another gaffe made by Donald Trump while stumping on the presidential campaign trail at the No Labels Problem Solver Convention in New Hampshire. On this occasion, Harvard student Joseph Choe had attempted to ask the Republican candidate a question about South Korea only to be cut off by the inquiry, “Are you from South Korea?” After an uncomfortable silence, Choe began again, but then abruptly stopped to say, “I’m not. I was born in Texas, raised in Colorado.” I can sympathize with Choe’s discomfort, because no matter how many times I am asked, as Matthew puts it, “Where I am *really* from?” I am still taken off guard. I agree with sociologist Jennifer Lee’s assessment that individuals who pose this question are, in effect, “challenging this idea of who is American, which is, at the core an offensive question.”²

That Asian Americans continue to be perceived as *not* American, that they are in effect perpetual foreigners or as Tseng would say, “permanent visitors” conveys the need for a particular kind of knowledge, the need for a wider national understanding of the multiple

² Asma Khalid, “South Korea? Trump’s ‘Where Are You From’ Moment,” National Public Radio (NPR), accessed January 16, 2016, http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/10/15/448718726/south-korea-trumps-where-are-you-from-moment?utm_source=npr_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=20151018&utm_campaign=npr_email_a_friend&utm_term=storyshare.

narratives that inform America's history, beginning with how we portray newcomers to the U.S. In response to the spate of racial discrimination protests that shook institutions of higher learning in the fall of 2015, Yale University student Aaron Z. Lewis observed that, if anything, these demonstrations were a call for conversations to address the issue of "microaggressions," "cultural appropriation," and the demand that "universities provide a safe space for students of color."³ I agree with his assertion of what *really* matters:

We all need to have empathy for the experiences that people of color have *even if we don't have those experiences ourselves* [emphasis mine]. ... It really is hard to believe because we want to believe that we're a postracial society, but it's just not true.⁴

As the three artists' self-portraits demonstrate, as long as we see raced bodies, we live in a racial society. We can begin fostering empathy for the experiences that people of color have by acknowledging and recognizing that alternative histories even exist. Growing up in the Midwest, at school I encountered immigrant narratives that were restricted to those of the Mayflower pilgrims or, closer to today, those families and individuals who arrived in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. Perhaps this is why my parents' photographs have served as a touchstone for me over the years: their portrayals illustrated the contemporary narrative unfolding within my very own home. It was also significant to me that my parents had authored their photographs, making visual records that years later continue to relate the story that my mother and father wanted to tell.

Tseng Kwong Chi's *East Meets West*, Nikki S. Lee's *Projects*, and Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's *An Indian from India* have helped me to fill in the gaps missing from my parents'

³ Aaron Z. Lewis quoted in Anemona Hartocollis and Jess Bidgood, "Racial Discrimination Protests Ignite at Colleges Across the U.S.," *New York Times*, November 11, 2015.

⁴ Aaron Z. Lewis, in *ibid.*

photographs. Although important to me as I gained a deeper understanding of how my parents made a life, of home and family, within the U.S., the art works that I have addressed within this dissertation hint at experiences that my father and mother may still be reluctant to share. The performative series pursued by Tseng, Lee, and Matthew make further strides towards redressing the continued imbalance in the telling of America's history. In *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, notable multiculturalism scholar Ronald Takaki concludes with a statement that I believe bears repeating. He looks to Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," in which the poet sang, "Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion ... I resist any thing [sic] better than my own diversity."⁵ The narratives told from the perspective of the minority individuals themselves shared within *A Different Mirror*, the works explored within this dissertation, and my parents' photographs: these assist all of us in answering the questions, *Who* or *What is American*, with, I hope, a firm response that an American can be "of every hue and caste," and "of every rank and religion." Anything less encompassing is and should be unacceptable.

⁵ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 36; quoted partially in Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York: Little, Brown, 1993), 428.

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