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Of Being In-Between:
Reconfiguring the Asian American Body as Site/Sight of (In)Difference

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

VISUAL STUDIES

by

Michelle Yee

September 2021

The Dissertation of Michelle Yee is approved:

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Professor Boreth Ly, chair

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Professor Susette Min

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Peter F. Biehl
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2021

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Abstract

Of Being In-Between:
Reconfiguring the Asian American Body as Site/Sight of (In)Difference
Michelle Yee

Racial discourse in the United States has arguably been defined by the prevailing racial binary of Black and white. As Claire Jean Kim insightfully argues in her 1999 article, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," Asians in the United States occupy the in-between, cast as perpetual foreigners and excluded from the belonging offered by citizenship. Since its inception in 1968, one of the major political and pedagogical interventions in Asian American and Ethnic Studies is fighting for inclusion, citizenship, and belonging. In the subsequent decades after the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, Asian immigrants poured into the country. Importantly, the international 1967 Protocol protected the waves of Southeast Asian refugees entering the United States. The changing demographic complicated the racial identity of Asian Americans, a point made in Sau-Ling Wong's 1995 article, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads." Still, the difference that defines Asian American ethnic identity and cultural experiences in the post-1965 era has rarely been critically considered as holding potential for a radical ethnic coalition.

My dissertation, *Of Being In-Between: Reconfiguring the Asian American Body as Site/Sight of (In)Difference*, considers the contradictions of Asian American racial identity by looking closely at art projects created by contemporary Asian American artists whose connection to a singular ethnic identity is nebulous at best.

By investigating the works of established multi-disciplinary artists Allan deSouza, Binh Danh, Laurel Nakadate, Ali Wong, Hasan Minhaj, and Christine Sun Kim, this dissertation considers how they challenge stereotypes of their respective racially-marked bodies as sights/sites of resistance, subversion, and contestation. Yet, their works do not exhibit a crisis of belonging and citizenship. Instead, their bodies reconfigure identity politics by navigating the racial ideology that structures their lived experiences. Through the interdisciplinary lens of what cultural studies scholar Ien Ang calls "togetherness-in-difference," I argue that the works of these artists offer a window into how the Asian American body, in its varying phenotypes, negotiate the politics of race and representation within the ideological spaces that their bodies occupy. The disidentification of Asian American bodies from a uniform Asian American identity reveal the mutability of their attendant stereotypes. The artists considered in this dissertation work toward the de-normalization of Asian Americanness, a disruption that paradoxically insists on an Asian American identity, but in difference.

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Preface
In Its Own Time: Asian American Identity in 2021

This dissertation was conceived and developed at a time in which racial tensions in the United States have reached particularly remarkable heights. Begun in the wake of Donald Trump's election to the Presidency of the United States and Colin Kapernick's decision to take a knee during the National Anthem to highlight racism and police brutality, this dissertation was researched and written through the murder of George Floyd that stoked nationwide protests against police brutality and institutional racism (and, indeed, inspired worldwide rallies). As the Black Lives Matter movement gained visibility, calls for reckoning reached across the racial spectrum. Meanwhile, in 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic stoked an exponential increase in anti-Asian rhetoric, not just in the United States but around the world. Asian Americans experienced a correlating rise in hate crimes that targeted Asians in general, but even more so and disturbingly the Asian elderly. As Donald Trump blamed China for COVID, casually yet calculatingly using terms like "Kung Flu" and the "Chinese virus," Asians in the United States found their relative invisibility diminishing and their presumed safety called into question. Suddenly *looking* Asian was a visible target on one's back. When, on March 16, 2021, a gunman went on a shooting spree targeting Asian massage parlors in Atlanta, Georgia, eight people were killed, six of whom were Asian women. As police officers and the media quickly landed on a narrative of the perpetrator's sex addiction, Asian American activists rang the alarm to change the story, noting the

inextricability of sexual and racial stereotypes that consistently plague Asian American women, and in this lethal case, led to their death.

Even still, Asian Americans were frequently called out as complicit with a racist white majority and decried as privileged citizens who do not and cannot understand the plight of brown and black bodies in the United States.[1] In my introduction, I begin with a discussion about the sole Asian character in Jordan Peele's movie, *Get Out* (2017). I draw attention to the portrayal of this economically successful, obviously East Asian character who speaks with a heavy accent, to showcase the persistence of the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes that plague perceptions of Asian Americans. Further, the comparison of lived experiences of Asian bodies versus Black bodies reflects a frequent assumption that comparing racialized experiences can objectively provide insight into degrees of harm of different racisms. The years that passed during the development of this dissertation has, most unfortunately, proven the criticality of this dissertation project. In this project, I emphasize lived experiences over and over as the lens through which racial identity formation should be considered because the past few years have proven that a

[1] Examples continue to emerge from daily life in the United States in the current era of Trump's presidency. A few examples include the doctor who bent the knee on twitter only to be lambasted as privileged (Tanya Chen, "People Are Claiming This Asian-American Doctor Who Took a Knee is Too Privileged to Speak Out, *BuzzFeed News*, 27 Sept 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/tanyachen/asian-american-doctor-taking-the-knee?utm_term=.wcgYDd4XM#.co7P9vNwm), an Asian America family in San Francisco who received racist and threatening notes after displaying a Black Lives Matter sign on their window (Chris Fuchs, "Asian American Family Threatened after Displaying Black Lives Matter Sign, *NBC News*, 22 Sept 2017, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/asian-american-family-threatened-after-displaying-black-lives-matter-sign-n803916) and an example of Asian American crowdsourcing an open letter to their parents about why Black Lives Matter (Frances Kai-Hwa Wang, "Asian Americans Crowdsource Open Letter to Families: 'Black Lives Matter To Us, Too," *NBCNews*, 9 July 2016, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/asian-americans-crowdsource-open-letter-explain-blacklivesmatter-elders-n606441).

refusal of race is not an option. Asian Americans can no longer be treated with indifference. It has become increasingly important to understand the diversity and complexity of Asian American lived experiences, to consider the role of visuality in how Asian Americans are perceived, to explore and undermine the various stereotypes that seek to define Asian Americans, and finally, to recognize that Asian American artists are agents of social change, and through their work, a complex and nuanced understanding of how Asian Americans live, fight, and thrive in the United States can be gained. Through an acknowledgement and celebration of difference itself, the artists and works discussed in this dissertation reveal that indifference veils the ambivalence of stereotypes. In so doing, their work does not brand race as irrelevant, but instead creates space in, around, and through the ideologies that structure their lived experiences.

Introduction
Of Being In-Between:
Reconfiguring the Asian American Body as Sight/Site of (In)Difference

In 2017, actor, comedian, and filmmaker Jordan Peele released his first horror film, *Get Out*. The film was widely celebrated as an incisive and scathing critique of current-day race relations. The main character is a young Black photographer who meets his white girlfriend's parents at their home in a wealthy suburban area. Little does he know that his girlfriend has set a trap for him in bringing him to her childhood home. Once there, his body will be carefully examined, and if found fitting, will become the vessel for the brain of a white person. Through his Black body, the white mind can remain alive. His body, like those of slaves, will be auctioned off to several wealthy and interested individuals who must, of course, trade their own white and aging body in for his young, strong, and healthy body. I evoke Peele's film to introduce a dissertation on Asian American art and visual culture because of a short but poignant scene. During a family party, the protagonist meets various family friends, not knowing that each person is assessing him as a suitable vessel for his or her aging mind. Among this group of older white people is a single Asian man who is also a potential bidder. During his short appearance in the film, the Asian man, with a thick foreign accent, asks curiously, "Is the African American experience an advantage or a disadvantage?" Only later does the viewer realize that the man is considering purchasing the character's body as a repository for his brain, and his question, despite its seeming innocence, is posed as a comparison between the experiences of Black bodies and Asian bodies in a primarily white society.

Peele's film would have lost little of its racial commentary and aesthetic quality if he had decided to eschew the Asian character. Peele's decision to include the Asian character suggests his recognition of the nuanced and complex nature of America's racial structures. Yet, while the inclusion of the Asian character in his film disrupts the dominant binary of racial discourse in his film, the character reiterates stereotypes of Asians as foreign, economically successful, and visibly East Asian. I begin with this example from Peele's movie because it offers an incisive look at how Asian Americans are perceived in this country and sets the context for this dissertation project. On one hand, Asian Americans are able, to a certain degree, to blend into a white majority and function as such, often being called 'honorary whites.'[2] Certainly, they are perceived economically advantaged enough to be a potential bidder for the purchase of the black body.[3] On the other hand, the Asian man is foreign, marked by both his appearance and his accent. His foreign body acts as a disruption to the otherwise idyllic, white suburban American scene. The disruption is subtle, however. The character's inclusion does little to disrupt the film's dominant Black-white binary. Despite his disruptive presence, he is mostly met with indifference by both his fellow characters and by the audience itself.

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[2] The term "honorary white" holds political and cultural capital and implications in a variety of scenarios. Most insidiously and profoundly, the term was used in South Africa to indicate who was eligible to receive rights typically granted only to white people. It was most specifically granted to East Asians living in South Africa. In the United States, the term is often used colloquially to indicate a group or groups that have achieved economic success to allow them to "overcome" the pitfalls of being a member of a minority group.

[3] Iyko Day, *Alien Capital* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). In *Alien Capital*, Iyko Day draws elucidates the complex relationship of money, economics and Asian Americans, examining how money or economic success is used to construct and organize understandings of Asian Americans in the United States in a manner that Day calls the "racialization of capital."

Indifference suggests a lack of interest, concern or sympathy. It represents a place devoid of emotion and even judgment. If something causes indifference, it must be perceived as neither good nor bad and thus can be disregarded. I use the word "indifference" to consider the positioning of Asian Americans in the racial fabric of the United States. Caught in-between a Black and white discourse, Asian Americans occupy a space of indifference in which they are perceived as neither harmful nor beneficial, as belonging and yet foreign. Within Asian America, the demographic is defined by an overwhelming diversity of cultures, ethnicities, experiences, and identities. In *Of Being In-Between: Reconfiguring the Asian American Body as Site/Sight of (In)Difference,* I consider how Asian American artists negotiate their identities in a nation-state that largely treats them with indifference except in moments of crisis. Moreover, I ask how one might define Asian Americanness through a lens of paradox in which Asian Americans are vastly different from one another and yet categorized under a singular racial category. To do so, I examine the artworks of six multi-disciplinary artists, Allan deSouza, Binh Danh, Laurel Nakadate, Ali Wong, Hasan Minhaj, and Christine Sun Kim whose commonalities are nebulous at best, but who are nevertheless placed under the umbrella of Asian Americanness. Though my selection of these artists and their respective works may seem random, I brought them together because each of these artists confront how stereotypes both define and are evoked by their respective racially-marked bodies. I contend that stereotypes function as the primary mode through which indifference toward Asian Americans is maintained. The artists' differences brought together in

this dissertation, offer an opportunity to consider how Asian American bodies, in their various iterations, function as sites/sights of disruption and contestation within the ideological spaces they occupy, spaces that are oftentimes scripted by a national racial discourse that is seemingly indifferent to them. Instead of being approached with indifference, this dissertation looks to their difference as a potent sight/site to rethink and reconfigure "Asian American" as a racial category designated by the nation-state. I turn to cultural studies scholar Ien Ang's formulation of hybridity that she calls "togetherness-in-difference" to consider how Asian American bodies paradoxically forge an Asian American identity that is refracted in difference.

The Perpetual Other: The Asian American Fight for Belonging

The vast differences captured under the umbrella of Asian America has always presented a conundrum to one of the major political and pedagogical interventions in Asian American and Ethnic Studies since its inception in 1968: the fight for inclusion, citizenship, and belonging. The history of Asian America is a fairly young one, beginning with the Asian American Movement in the 1960s that coincided along with and supported the Black civil rights movement. When the term "Asian American" was effectively coined in 1968, Asian Americans were no longer "Orientals," but as important as the re-naming was, they were still perceived as foreigners in their own country. Moreover, until that particular moment, the "face" of Asian America was primarily, though not exclusively, an East Asian face. After the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, which abolished the quota system based on national origins – a system that had been the United States' immigration policy for

the four decades prior – and with the protections and monetary support offered to refugees by the 1967 International Protocol, the "face" of Asian America began to change as waves of Southeast Asian refugees entered the United States. The changing demographic further complicated the term and idea of "Asian American." Inevitably, the term insists upon a nation-based identity that resists the transnational reality of many Asian American lives while also suggesting a binary nature of being both Asian and American which may feel antiquated to, for example, a fourth-generation Japanese American who identifies as primarily American. Of course, it also suggests a monolithic identity that is meant to encompass vastly different immigrant groups, American-born Asians, migrants, and refugees from a variety of nations and cultures.

Furthermore, the use of a hyphen in between the Asian and the American has its own problems and has been highly contested. The Japanese Americans Citizen League advocates for the lack of a hyphen, viewing the Asian as an adjective to describe American.[4] The implication, of course, is that they are Americans first with "Asian" functioning as a descriptor more than a cultural or ethnic designation. In fact, the term "hyphenated Americans" was formerly used in a derogatory sense with both President Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson making public speeches about the inherent dangers of "hyphenated Americans" who threaten American security with their two-faced loyalties. Despite these polarizations and debates, the

[4] Lorraine A, Strasheim, "'We're All Ethnics': 'Hyphenated' Americans, 'Professional' Ethnics, and Ethnics 'By Attraction,'" *The Modern Language Journal* 59: 5 & 6 (1975): 240–249.

coalescing of groups of people into racialized identities are necessary for political coalition-building. For instance, the adoption of "Black" used in lieu of "African American" to describe a group of citizens who may or may not have memories or personal ties to the continent of Africa has been successfully mobilized in politicizing a particular community in the U.S. No such term has emerged for a complicated Asian American population, which holds unclear, fluid, and yet existent, ties to both the U.S. and Asia.

Herein lies the paradox of Asian Americanness. An insistence on racial unification offers an opportunity for critical political potential even as it diminishes the important diversity and vital differences within Asian American communities. Yet, it is ultimately impossible to erase or disavow the ambivalence and mutability of the Asian American body. I argue that the site of the chameleonic Asian American body holds the potential to disrupt coherent narratives of racial relations or structures within the United States. As *Get Out* illustrates, the Asian American body is a site of perpetual but subtle disruption. It disrupts the binaries of racial discourse in the United States. The positionality of the Asian man in Peele's film recalls Claire Jean Kim's 1999 essay, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." Kim posits the situating of Asian Americans between Black and white in terms of racial superiority, but far more foreign in relation to Blacks in the United States. In this assessment, Kim breaks with a linear idea of racial hierarchy and complicates the notion of racial assimilation within the United States, asserting that "Asian Americans have not been racialized in a vacuum, isolated from other groups; to the contrary, Asian Americans

have been racialized relative to and through interaction with black and whites."[5] My claim that Asian Americans exist in a nation that largely treats them with indifference emerges from the recognition that Asian Americans are often held up in relation to or against other races, as Kim argues. Instead of recognition and consideration as a community in and of themselves, they are used as pawns for competing racial priorities. As law professor Frank Wu has suggested, the "perpetual foreigner syndrome… shows us that some lines that are supposedly based on citizenship actually cover up lines that are based on race."[6] In tracing the "perpetual foreigner" status through the history of domestic laws enacted because of foreign policy between the U.S. and various Asian nations, Wu demonstrates how holding Asian Americans in a static position ironically allows them to be championed or scapegoated as needed depending on nation-state priorities in any given historical moment.

The Marked Body: Difference in Phenotype and Racial Stereotypes

In light of this indifference, I find potential in the Asian American body as site/sight of contestation precisely because of its visuality. As such, visual art and culture offers an effective approach to consider stereotypes – like the concept of race that they so closely follow – and their primary enunciation on and through the body. My approach emphasizes the role of artists as artistic and racialized agents who negotiate their bodies and their lived experiences as primary points of reference.

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[5] Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27:1 (1999): 106.

[6] Frank Wu, "Where Are You Really From?: Asian Americans and the Perpetual Foreigner Syndrome," *Civil Rights Journal* 6 (2002): 22.

Their bodies are sites upon which the public projects identities and assumptions are projected, but they also function as the artists' primary source of agency and voice. As such, bodies are not pure. They do not function in isolation in the world, but rather, depending on place and context, carry and negotiate signifiers that evoke or suggest particular identities, histories, pasts, and truths. In brief, these racialized subjects are inherently part of political ideology, race, gender, and society.

To better understand how racialized bodies evoke and carry meaning, I turn to theories on race and identity and postcolonial studies written by scholars such as Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha whose analyses expose the structures of race that remain invisible within American culture and yet continue to construct and impact the lives of all Americans. Asian Americans are a vital part of the racial discourse, breaking apart the binary between black and white, functioning as a disruptive voice that offers a paradigmatic shift in American racial discourse and discussion of visual representation. I return again and again to psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon's oft-discussed corporeal malediction in *Black Skin, White Masks*, to consider how racial identification directly linked to vision and sight and is predicated on both the viewer and the viewed. When he describes the small child on a the train who, upon seeing him, said to his mother, "Maman, look, a negro; I'm scared!," Fanon positions the visible as the core of racial identity formation, a formation that is forced upon the body, marked with physical signifiers of race and identity.[7]

[7] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles L. Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 91.

The Asian American body is certainly marked, albeit not only through skin tone. Certain bodily characteristics stand as signs for racial identification. Long black hair, slanted eyes, flat round faces, and yellow skin have continued to hold similar significance in identifying an Asian American as much as the pigtail functioned as a signifier of Chineseness in the nineteenth century.[8] Stereotypes necessarily change according to historical context. After the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 abolished the quota system that had effectively kept Asians from immigrating to the United States, immigrants and refugees poured in as the U.S. continued military campaigns in parts of East and Southeast Asia. The U.S.'s historical ties to the Philippines as well as well as the totalitarian rule of Ferdinand Marcos led to an influx of Filipino immigrants as well. As the face of Asian America literally began to change, so too did the visual stereotypes that accompanied the discourse about them. The confusion of what Asian America really looked like worked simultaneously to complicate and contort the stereotypes that defined them. Asian Americans were suddenly not just gangly, emasculated, yellow, and slanty-eyed. They were also brown and big-eyed.

Furthermore, as more and more educated immigrants continue to come into the United States, they and their children have demonstrated academic and economic success, which has given way to the model minority stereotype. Asian Americans seemed to climb to the high echelons of finance, tech, and engineering jobs. While

[8] John Kuo Wi Tchen, "Believing is Seeing: Transforming Orientalism and the Occidental Gaze" in *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Asia Society, 1994),12-25.

the model minority stereotype has primarily been discussed in economic terms, the visualization of model minorities is just as pernicious. The oft-cited Time Magazine cover published in 1987 depicted primarily East Asian students who while certainly sporting the styles of the 1980s nevertheless became the representation of the nerdy Asian student.[9] While the cover depicted East Asian Americans, the stereotype nevertheless applied to Indian American students as well. In a 2014 article in *The Atlantic* titled “The Spelling Bee: America’s Great Racial Freaks-and-Geeks Show,” Sameer Pandya discusses the perception of Indian Americans as “geeks” embedded in a competition in which “cheering for the Asian kid means cheering for a colorblind society.” [10] The “geekiness” that both South and East Asian Americans register as functions as a visual trope despite the obvious differences in their ethnic backgrounds. The elision of difference that has become necessary in conversations about stereotypes is the primary reason for why the stereotype(s) of Asian Americans hold particular potential to analyze, interrogate, and negotiate the Asian American body and its visualization.

In brief, these already complex and multivalent stereotypes are made even more convoluted by stereotypes of their opposite: those of Asian Americans working in nail salons or squatting behind Chinese restaurants. Not only have Asian Americans conformed to American trappings of success, they have also

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[9] *Time Magazine*, vol. 130, no. 9, (New York: Time Incorporated, August 31, 1987), Print.
[10] Pandya, Sameer, “The Spelling Bee: America’s Great Racial Freak Show,” *The Atlantic*, 11 June 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/06/the-spelling-bee-americas-great-racial-freak-show/372528/

simultaneously been situated as working-class, dirty, and foreign. The shifting and fluid nature of Asian American stereotypes point to their inherently unstable natures, and yet, they continue to function in practice to shape and affect lived experiences. It is primarily through the markers on the body that stereotypes are assessed and fixed. But bodies are slippery and unstable, and through them, stereotypes are revealed to be mutable. In this dissertation, I rely on Homi Bhabha's definition of stereotype in which stereotypes exist as a perpetually volleying sites of identity rooted in ambivalence.[11] Bhabha's notion of stereotype as requiring reiteration and repetition to gain the illusion of fixity also serves to reveal the inherent mutability and instability in stereotypes.

In considering the Asian American body, marked with shifting stereotypes, as a site of inquiry requires a careful visual studies approach that is multi-disciplinary by necessity. Visual studies combines art historical methods of formal analysis and the politics of aesthetics with the potential to expand into psychoanalysis, critical race theory, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies. As such, I am indebted to a history of significant scholarship working toward an Asian American art history and visual culture.

Toward an Ambivalent Asian American Art History and Visual Culture

In the 1990s, an influx of groundbreaking exhibitions in the 1990s sought to place Asian American art and artists into the milieu of American art and art history, while situating, at the forefront, the relationship between Asia and America and the

[11] Bhabha, 94.

diasporic-based identity of Asian Americans. In 1991, Margo Machida's groundbreaking exhibition, *Asia/America: Identities in Asian American Art,* offered the first major overarching Asian American-themed exhibition to be presented at a major art institution, the Asia Society. The exhibition featured contemporary Asian American artists, most of whom were not born in the United States, negotiating issues of migration, settlement, belonging, and of course, citizenship. The artists' fluid identities emphasized the continued flow of exchange and interaction between these artists' lives in the United States and their Asian heritage, despite the call for acceptance into the echelons of American art embedded in exhibitions such as *Asia/America*, *The Decade Show*, and the 1993 Whitney Biennial.

Yet, the debates of the 1990s that focused on negotiating Asian American race and identity would receive a generational response from a younger generation of Asian American artists who found that being "Asian American" didn't necessarily have to dictate how their work should look or what it could say. In 2006, Susette Min, Karin Higa and Melissa Chiu staged an exhibition that has been widely viewed as a follow-up to *Asia/America*. *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now* presented a new generation of Asian American artists, many of whom were not directly dealing with issues of racial identity, per se. Instead, their work foregrounded additional themes such as home, family, youth, and politics. In her essay for the exhibition's catalogue, Susette Min wonders, "How can we build a community of singularities where affiliations, attachments, and bonds are unmarked, absent any shared value (of citizenship, say) or experience (for example of

oppression)?"[12] The temptation to separate art from race is one often negotiated in discussions of Asian American art, defined as it is, unsettlingly by race.

As such, like the conceptualization of Asian America itself, Asian American art scholarship has thus found itself embedded inside a constant negotiation of its position within the art world, negotiating both the canon of American art history and the larger global art market. In 2008, another major corpus of Asian American art scholarship emerged which sought to emphasize the Americanness of Asian America. Margo Machida's *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* recognizes the complexities of Asian American experiences as part and parcel of a constantly changing and shifting demographic. For Machida, art functions as "expressive capital, a form of capital that adds greatly to a society's repertoire of collective responses to its moment and place in the world."[13] Machida's project is predicated on race and identity as a continued shared space through which Asian American art can be understood, even as diverse as those identities might be. While recognizing the increasing transnational and diasporic points of collision that continues to shift Asian American art discourse, Machida finds "American" to continue to be the point at which these various Asiatic groups find shared ground. The comprehensive *Asian American Art: A History*, edited by Gordon Chang, Mark Johnson, and Paul Karlstrom, was published alongside an exhibition staged at the de

[12] Susette Min, "The Last Asian American Exhibition in the Whole Entire World" in *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, exh. cat. (New York: Asia Society, 2006), 39.
[13] Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 6-7. Margo Machida use of "expressive capital" is taken from Bourdieu's work. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, eds. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

Young Museum in San Francisco, *Asian/American/Modern*. Both projects were recuperative projects highlighting significant Asian American artists who, though working within well-known art circles in the United States, were nevertheless written out of American art history. More recently, ShiPu Wang published *The Other American Moderns* (2017), performing the call from Claire Jean Kim, in examining the role of Asian American artists working within transracial social structures. Rather than seeing Asian Americans existing in some sort of racial vacuum in the United States, Wang's project functions as a historical grounding of key Asian American artists who have been primarily forgotten and yet were working within legible contexts of multiracial exchange in the U.S.

Still, a frustration at the teleological tendency to organize Asian American art according to Asian immigration patterns (thus foregrounding the art of East Asian American artists who made up the bulk of early immigrants) and within an established American art canon has led to a handful of new more recent volume of essays edited by Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe. *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art* (2017) is a compendium of essays that attempt to situate Asian American artists through a self-reflective lens that considers Asian American artists who negotiate their own positionality as outside of the heteronormative discourse of Asian American communities. Editors Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe strive, within the nonnormative Asian American body, to "trouble the archives of American

art history," which at the time of its publication included the teleological art history of the 2008 compendium.[14]

Kina and Bernabe situate their work through the lens of Jose Munoz's queertopia, a utopic lens through which contemporary Asian American art is seen as a "queer horizon" that "constitutes a type of utopian thinking." Though the authors acknowledge and encourage the potential for social change, they nevertheless dwell in a space that finds productivity within utopian imaginaries that establish a "queer futurity – a forward time and space that does not shun the past but rather renders it a source of inspiration for Asian American artists working in the present."[15] This queer futurity imagines a time and a moment when Asian American art is no longer viewed through the lens of heteronormative discourses both within the Asian American art community and American art history at large.

Together, this brief history of approaches to the understanding and framing (and unframing) of Asian American art has been produced by scholars who have carefully considered the role of Asian American artists in the past, present, and future of American art. Unlike these projects, my dissertation's main prerogative is not to consider how the selected artists fit into a history of American art or how their Americanness is negotiated through their belonging in a particular national canon. Instead, I question the role of visuality itself in both structuring and challenging

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[14] Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe, *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 17.
[15] Kina and Bernabe, 26.

surrounding ideological spaces. [16] How do the optics of the Asian American body disrupt American art and its narratives? How does visual culture provide a unique lens in understanding the Asian American experience from the perspective of the body itself from which lived experience emanates and is embodied? How might the inevitable in-betweenness of the Asian American body, per Jeff Chang, function not as a problematic space from which one must crawl out of, but rather as a productive space capable of "[creating] the space of epics?"[17]

In her 2018 book, *Unnamable: The Ends of Asian American Art*, art historian and curator Susette Min raises the potential in leaving artists, "unnamable." As she explains, "The politics of naming art 'Asian American' at this historical juncture within an ethnic-specific exhibitionary framework subjugates or constrains the work, burdening it with a ready-made set of interpretations already embedded in the

[16] My use of the term "visuality" is derived from Hal Foster's edited volume, *Vision and Visuality*. In the preface for the book, Foster identifies visuality as "[involving] the body and the psyche." He further explains that vision and visuality are predicated upon hierarchies of vision that dictate not only how one sees, how one is seen, but also a *perpetual relationship* between how one is allowed to see and how one is made to be seen. Further, Nicolas Mirzoeff pointed out Foster's evasion in actually defining visuality, pointing instead to Scottish historian, Thomas Carlyle, who defined visuality as that which orders the chaos of the modernity. Mirzoeff, however, historically contextualized his analyses, pointing out that "visuality" is defined by the same discourses that determined how it functioned within a particular context. As such, my use of visuality points to how bodies are seen and also how bodies see and acclimate themselves to a world in which they are being seen. See: Hal Foster, "Preface" in *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), viii. See also: Nicolas Mirzoeff, "On Visuality," *Journal of Visual Culture* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006).

[17] In his chapter, "The In-Betweens" in his book *We Gon' Be Alright: Notes on Race and Resegregation*, Jeff Chang ruminates, "Most of your life has been in-between. The scholarship kid who wasn't a "hardship case" but still served your peers on the lunch line… The yellow face neither FOB nor ABC… On matters of race, America teaches everyone to think in binaries – zero or noe, this or that. There is no in-between. You know this, you refuse this, but you know how hard it is to complicate a conversation the Other prefers not to have." Jeff Chang, *We Gon' Be Alright: Notes on Race and Resegregation*, New York: Picador, 2016: 144-146. Yet Chang recognizes that this complicated "in-betweenness can create the stuff of epics." Chang, 148.

collective imagination."[18] For Min, by not naming a work or an artist as "Asian American," the weight of pre-existing interpretations can be held back from affecting interpretations of the artist and work. In this way, race is no longer the defining priority in considering an artist's position both within exhibitions (for Min) and within scholarship generally. Like Min, art historian Alpesh Kantilal Patel argues in his 2017 book, *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories*, for a lens of "productive failure" to approach South Asian Art Histories that "[allow] for multiple meanings, and thereby [underscore] that meaning-making and the writing of art histories can be nothing but provisional."[19] Min's and Patel's projects negotiate the complicated paradox of race-based scholarship that recognizes that artists are already framed by their ideological contexts and yet argue for methodologies that are not solely defined or dictated by race.

The influence of these scholars on this dissertation project cannot be overstated. I, too, recognize the limitations and pitfalls of utilizing an identity meant for political coalition building to structure or categorize artists. Yet, the artists in this dissertation were undeniably brought together at least partially because they are all considered to be Asian American artists. Moreover, while it is evident and incontrovertible that racial identities and stereotypes are externally placed upon these artists, I also argue in this dissertation that we are all products of our ideological surroundings and contexts – it is inescapable. That being said, the artists in this

[18] Susette Min, Unnamable: The Ends of Asian American Art, New York: New York University Press, 2018: 27.
[19] Alpesh Kantilal Patel, xviii.

dissertation create, because their bodies inevitably evoke and are read through stereotypes, productive spaces within which these artists resist, struggle, contest, and rework. In centering difference as the critical element upon which Asian Americanness as a racial identity can be predicated, I intentionally move away from multiculturalism which serves to homogenize difference and away from coalition building as a politically informed goal. Moreover, this dissertation is not an argument for either the Americanness or the diasporic nature of Asian Americans. Instead, as Ien Ang posits, hybridity – and the differences that hybridity cannot and should not smooth over – "is not only about fusion and synthesis, but also about friction and tension, about ambivalence and incommensurability, about the contestations and interrogations that go hand in hand with the heterogeneity, diversity and multiplicity we have to deal with as we live together-in-difference."[20] As the works discussed in this dissertation reveal, Asian Americanness is always already complicated and resistant to homogenization, and yet paradoxically also already exists as a singular identity, especially in moments of crisis such as increasing racial attacks on the Asian-looking body. Asian American art is ambivalent and thus treated with indifference. Yet, its very ambivalence is the place in the in-between: in-between Black and white, in-between singularity and complexity, in-between political priorities and lived experiences, in-between Asia and America, in-between social indifference and cultural relevance, and in-between immigration patterns and

[20] Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*, London: Routledge, 2001: 200.

generational differences. In embracing this paradox, this dissertation seeks to make space in the race-based (admittedly or not) art scholarship of Asian American art specifically, and American art more generally, to reckon with the inevitable racial structures that are a part and parcel of lived experience, centered or not. It offers a way to think about how Asian Americans can live, resist, and be together-in-difference.

The following chapters examine the artists brought together in this dissertation who represent just a part of the diversity embedded in Asian America. They are variably cosmopolitan, East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, mixed-race, and Deaf women and men. They inhabit multiple identities and experiences. To that end, I emphasize the relevance of lived experience in each of these artist's works, not in an attempt to create an ethnographic study, but because the lived experience is the place where body and place collide. Recognizing the potential limitations of an emphasis on lived experience, I nevertheless argue for the potential of artists and their work to offer the analytics to consider and structure the complexities of the Asian American identity.

The first chapter on Allan deSouza grapples with the cosmopolitan Asian body. Utilizing Ien Ang's concept of togetherness-in-difference, a condition of hybridity defined by tension, I examine how deSouza's body is marked constantly by stereotypes (even as those stereotypes shift). To understand this, I turn to Homi Bhabha's definition of stereotype as a perpetually volleying site of identity rooted in ambivalence. In this chapter, I argue that deSouza's *X* reveals how the Asian

American body is defined by difference even as it crosses national borders and boundaries. As such, I propose that a more apt way to define Asians in the United States is to center that definition on difference, a tension-filled identity, I call, "American-in-difference." This chapter establishes the inescapability of national identity which continues to dictate how American bodies function in international spaces.

The second chapter on Binh Danh examines the racialized ideological conditioning of landscapes and spaces. In examining Danh's *Yosemite* series, a daguerreotype project in which Danh photographs recognizable vistas of Yosemite National Park, I argue that his reframing of Yosemite through the medium of daguerreotypes reflects and reveals the racialized bodies that are made invisible by canonical landscape imagery. In so doing, he summons the haunting embodiments of this landscape that evoke the peoples and the histories that have been rendered invisible. Both the first and the second chapter consider how the Asian American body negotiates its ambivalence within particular spaces that render it invisible.

The third chapter continues the exploration of vistas and landscapes of the American West and how iconic images of the West evoke American mythologies of self-sufficiency and ruggedness. In examining Laurel Nakadate's 2009 *Lucky Tiger* series, a collection of snapshot photographs of the artist posing and crouching in skimpy clothing against generic American West backdrops, I argue that the artist's mixed-race, sexed body placed in anonymous but suggestive landscapes reveals the gendered nature of those American mythologies. The photographs produce an

awkward ambiguity that interrupts the visual construction of nationhood and national identity. In contrast to the first two chapters, Nakadate's body projects a pointed hypervisibility that is further explored in the next chapter.

The fourth chapter examines the Netflix stand-up comedy specials of Ali Wong and Hasan Minhaj. In their respective performances, they explore varying common stereotypes associated with their respective Asian American bodies. I revisit Homi Bhabha's conception of stereotype as requiring reiteration and repetition to create the illusion of fixity. I argue that Wong and Minhaj's performances reiterate and repeat their attendant stereotypes not to fix them, but to enunciate them in order to channel connection with their intended audience. By doing so, they do not counteract, disrupt, or destroy stereotypes, but rather relocate them outside of whiteness. Wong and Minhaj's reiteration of stereotypes allow their Asian American audiences to be *seen*, while refusing a collapse of the audiences' identities into the caricature of the stereotypes.

Finally, I end this dissertation with the fifth chapter on Christine Sun Kim. The bulk of Kim's oeuvre negotiates a critical part of her identity as a Deaf person. Her work rarely directly addressed her racial identity or even her cosmopolitan positioning as an Asian American artist based out of Berlin, until the COVID-19 pandemic. In this chapter, I focus on drawings from Kim's 2020 series, *Trauma, LOL*, made during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown to consider how her racial identity necessarily took on import at a moment of international crisis in which Asians in the West were scapegoated for the virus. I argue in this chapter that Kim's

work offers an opportunity to consider a future of Asian American art scholarship in which racial identity is inescapable but can be productively negotiated alongside and with other identities. Expounding on legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, I argue that Kim's most recent work demonstrates how racial identity is inextricable from one's lived experience even when it is not centered.

Clearly, the six artists discussed in this dissertation are vastly different. Their preoccupations have some, but not many overlaps. Yet, each of them recognizes that their lived experiences unfold in the bodies that they live in, bodies that are indelibly marked by a difference that, while not always the same kind of difference, inevitably places them under the umbrella of Asian America. The works that I consider take as the site of inquiry and negotiation the artists' own bodies and offer a complex re-orientation of the potential embedded in exploring and excavating how racial identity and stereotype has structured their lived experiences. Their works offer an insight that brings hope to a powerful understanding of Asian American identity as living together-in-difference.

Chapter One
American-in-Difference:
The Marked Body in Allan deSouza's *X*

In 2004, Allan deSouza enacted a performance titled *X* during Yong Soon Min's gallery opening for an exhibition of her new work at Ssamzie Space Gallery in Seoul, South Korea. *X* was an unannounced performance that unfolded over the course of the evening. While Min rubbed shoulders with Korea's art elite, a quiet, barefoot Allan de Souza, dressed in a crisp, white, button-up shirt and dark slacks, made the rounds handing out beverages to the various guests. (Fig. 1.1) Near the end of the evening, deSouza made the rounds again, picking up the discarded, half-empty cups that had been scattered around the gallery. At a basin set up in the corner of the gallery, deSouza proceeded to empty the leftover liquid into the basin. With a simple razor

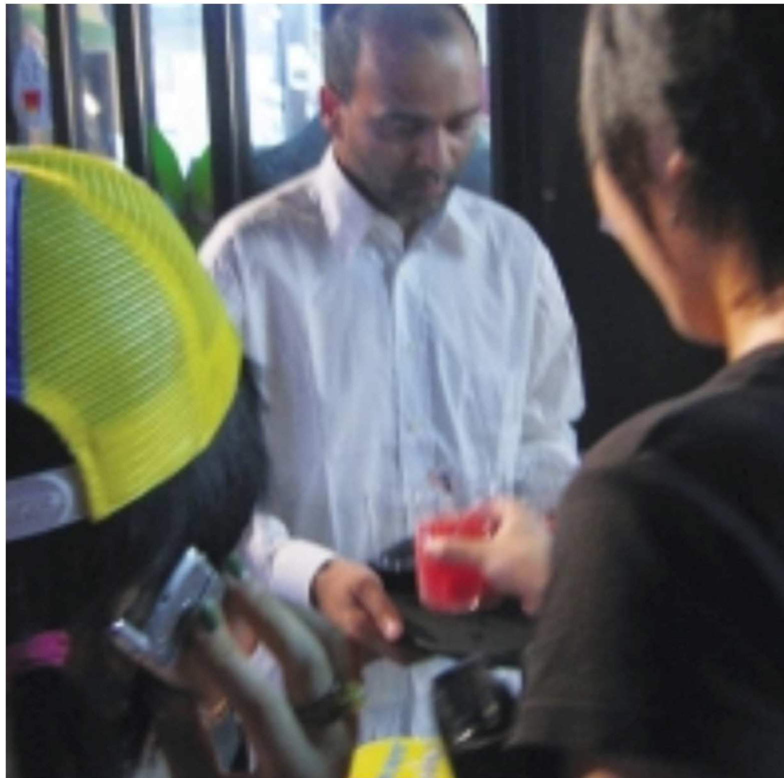

Fig. 1.1 Allan deSouza, *X*, 2004, Ssamzie Gallery, Seoul, Korea.

and shaving cream, deSouza utilized the leftover drinks to shave. (Fig. 1.2) Into the basin, the shaving cream and deSouza's hair went. Once this ordinary, quotidian ritual was completed, deSouza refilled the cups with the now hair- and shaving cream-filled liquid. Once again, deSouza made the rounds to the guests, re-serving the stunned guests. When de Souza handed the drinks to the guests, it was in that startling moment, that they then forcibly contended with deSouza.[21] This performance brought to the forefront the ambivalence of deSouza's racialized body, its

Fig. 1.2 Allan deSouza, *X*, 2004, Ssamzie Gallery, Seoul, Korea.

[21] I was not present at the one and only live performance of this work which, critical to its understanding and unfolding, unfolded in the context of Yong Soon Min's exhibition, *Xen: Migration, Labor, and Identity*. My knowledge and understanding of how the performance unfolded is drawn from the exhibition catalogue, a talk presented by Yong Soon Min and Allan de Souza during a conference hosted by the Clark Art Institute called *Art History and Diaspora : Genealogies, Theories, Practices* which took place on April 25 and 26, 2008 in Williamstown, Massachusetts, and a subsequent conversation with the artist on March 3, 2021.

simultaneous hyper/in-visibility, and its potential in revealing and disrupting stereotypes. In this chapter, I examine deSouza's *X* to consider the hyper/in-visibility of deSouza's body and its mutability that is dependent on its place and context. Utilizing Ien Ang's concept of togetherness-in-difference, a condition of hybridity defined by tension, I examine how deSouza's body is marked constantly by stereotypes (even as those stereotypes shift). In this case, I turn to Homi Bhabha's definition of stereotype as a perpetually volleying site of identity rooted in ambivalence. In this chapter, I argue that deSouza's *X* reveals how the Asian American body is defined by difference even as it crosses national borders and boundaries. As such, I propose that a more apt way to define Asians in the United States is to center that definition on difference, a tension-filled identity that I call, "American-in-difference," a concept borrowed from and inspired by cultural scholar Ien Ang.[22]

The 2004 performance *X* brings forth several elements that expose the complexity of identity when examined both through the lens of national identities, and against the realities of transnational experiences. Performed during the opening of Yong Soon Min's solo show at the Ssamzie Gallery, the project offers an opportunity to compare two Asian American artists who, in the cosmopolitan city of Seoul, embodied two very unique positions. DeSouza's invisibility occurred in a country where "help" is often composed of migrants from South and Southeast Asia.

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[22] Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*, London: Routledge, 2001: 200. I turn to Ang to find a way of being within the contradiction of identity that is simultaneously rooted within national ties and allegiances and also transnational and global connections.

By acknowledging that their own brown, South Asian body served to make them invisible, deSouza's performance forces their own moment of what Frantz Fanon called "corporeal malediction."[23] Fanon's corporeal malediction refers to the state in which a body is marked, not by the subject themself, but through external perceptions that are inescapable. In that moment when they handed a cup of hairy, foamy liquid to a gallery goer, the gallery goer looks down at the cup and immediately, in the moment of surprise and disgust, looks up to see who would give them such a thing. One can imagine that, in that very moment, in that encounter struck through with confusion and dismay, the gallery goer *saw* Allan deSouza for the first time.[24] Despite their ubiquitous presence throughout the evening and their role in maintaining the comfort of the gallery guests, they were assumed to be merely a migrant laborer, hired for the purpose of serving.[25] By contrast, Yong Soon Min's Korean American body floated seamlessly throughout the gallery existing in the space in between the hypervisible and the invisible. She, in a way that deSouza was not able to be, *belonged*.

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[23] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, New York: Grover Press, 1952, 93. By corporeal malediction, I refer to Franz Fanon's formulation in which he describes and discusses the construction of subjectivity not by the subject himself but rather through external structures.
[24] In my discussion of invisibility and hypervisibility, I am not speaking of a body actually being unseen. Instead, visibility – with its attendant nuances – is afforded only to those who are allowed a normalized passage through particular spaces. In speaking with the artist regarding the performance and the audience interactions, I was made aware that the artist's presence was always noted from the moment he began serving through to the end of the opening. It was not his presence that changed throughout the various stages through the performance, but *how* his presence was registered by those around him.
[25] Allan deSouza, Interview by author. March 3, 2021. In my conversation with Allan deSouza, he noted that a few of the guests actually launched quiet complaints to the gallery staff that it was inappropriate to hire a migrant laborer to serve at an art gallery opening.

Belonging and Asian American scholarship

I begin my analysis of *X* and its relationship to Asian American art not with the ethnic or racial identity of either Allan deSouza or Yong Soon Min, but instead with how the performance informs concepts that have long dominated the narratives of Asian American-ness within both Asian American and Ethnic Studies scholarship. Belonging is, after all, a concept that has certainly made its rounds in Asian American scholarship and Ethnic Studies. Both deSouza and Min are regularly written about in the annals of Asian American Studies and Asian American art history. Allan deSouza, in particular, occupies an interesting and unique role in both the field of contemporary global art and in Asian American art. Heralded, along with Min, their former partner, as pioneers of Asian American art during the 1990s in New York City, deSouza was a member of Godzilla, an Asian American art collective composed of members such as Margo Machida, Byron Kim, Karin Higa, and Ken Chu, among others. This group of artists, by and large, initiated and established the burgeoning field of Asian American art in the shadow of the 1980s Culture Wars, spearheading demands for representation and involvement within the bastions of contemporary American art.

DeSouza's performance in conjunction with Min's exhibition offers an opportunity to reconsider what is implicated when "belonging" to a nation-state and its ideologies is not only desired, but necessary. Such a metaphorical search for a sense of belonging almost always seems to be dependent specifically on the ideologies of nationalism, insisting on shared beliefs and mythologies that are only available to some, never to all. In her book, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis,*

Assimilation, and Hidden Grief, Anne Anlin Cheng considers the position of Asian Americans within the U.S. racial fabric through a psychoanalytic lens that identifies the melancholic grief that accompanies difference and exclusion from the accepted majority. Throughout her book, Cheng carefully considers psychological structures upon which Asian American belonging and citizenship is predicated. Cheng references Lisa Lowe's critical and groundbreaking essay, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Difference," in order to consider the risks of essentialism within racial discourse. Both Lowe and Cheng, ovarian scholars of Asian American studies, structure their scholarship and analysis on an assumed desire to belong within a societal structure that, at its very core, is dependent on the exclusion of anyone outside of the dominant racial group and class.[26]

In the "traditional" sense of Asian American Studies, belonging is a longed-for ideal that is necessarily structured upon citizenship – and the right to that citizenship. And yet, belonging is something more amorphous. In this case, although deeply political, *X* offers the opportunity to think about belonging outside of the bounds of nation-state citizenship. In bringing difference into an art gallery in South Korea, deSouza expands the idea of belonging beyond the borders of the nation-state and beyond the boundaries of citizenship. This performance thus reveals the limitations of ideas of citizenship and belonging in Asian American studies. Here, after all, is an

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[26] Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, and Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1 (1), 24-44. I cite here two examples of critical nascent scholars of Asian American Studies whose respective work thinks through some of the early complexities and challenges of being Asian in the United States.

example of two Asian American artists who took their projects overseas to a non-American art gallery. Certainly, despite his important place in Asian American art history, deSouza has never been only an Asian American artist. As deSouza notes in the introduction of their book, *How Art Can Be Thought: A Handbook for Change* (2018), their involvement with Godzilla was merely one of several exhibitions and collectives that they had been a part of during that time including the Black Arts Movement and as a member of a small delegation of "Black British" artists to the 3rd Havana Biennial.[27] Despite the ethnic and racial specificity of these various coalitions and projects, deSouza seemed to fit comfortably in each of them, fully belonging within their respective parameters while still existing beyond their definitions. For deSouza, identity is an insufficient phrase – suggesting a singular meaning to one's existence. Instead, deSouza prefers terms such as "identification," which, as the artist explained, suggests that identity is defined by relationships and thus always temporary, fleeting, and shifting, rather than being a singular or concrete entity. deSouza also used the terms "alliances" or "alignments" in thinking about how his identification is one based on relationships.[28]

Underscoring the mutability of their identities, as it were, deSouza's perspective of an identity based on relationships explains the seemingly seamless transition between various groups defined by racial or ethnic difference. However, what is also revealed is a lack in that deSouza always bled over the borders. At a particular point,

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[27] Allan deSouza, *How Art Can Be Thought: A Handbook for Change*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, 7.
[28] Allan deSouza, personal interview, March 3, 2021.

the artist pointed out that when involved with the Black Arts Movement in the UK, they found that there was no space for the exploration or consideration of what it means to be a South Asian person from Africa. Still, the artist's preoccupation is not so much with their own identity, but more how their history opens up pathways into histories that, for the artist, are not remarkable. In fact, in locating their own's family path from Goa to Kenya to London, deSouza remarked that this micro-migration belonged to larger macro patterns of migration that were occurring at the time.[29]

Thus, the artist's own history can be viewed as a doorway through which the artist's interests lie. *X*, focused on migrant laborers, is a project about migrant bodies and how slippery those bodies are in terms of ethnic and racial identifiers. DeSouza mentioned that, while in Korea, their body stood out as a laborer. The performance occurred in 2004, but prior to that, deSouza had visited Korea during the 2002 Korea and Japan-hosted World Cup. DeSouza noted that during their earlier visit in 2002, even young children would welcome them to the country, assuming they were a foreign visitor for the games. At other times, they were ignored, assumed to be a poor laborer looking for work. Revealing the overarching slipperiness of meanings that are attributed or assigned to marked bodies, deSouza's varying experiences in Korea, as well as his body's perceived role in the gallery alongside Yong Soon Min's body, shows how similar issues of belonging and exclusion that has so deeply dominated Asian American scholarship and discourse, finds relevance in this international

[29] Allan deSouza, personal interview, March 3, 2021. It truly struck me as somewhat radical to identify one's own deeply complex history of migration as nonchalantly unremarkable.

context. It is, of course, shortsighted to assume that issues of belonging, exclusion, and citizenship are relevant only in a particular nation-state. They, of course, are issues that emerge in various places across the globe. But it is also important to recognize that, for Asian Americans, in whom foreignness is always a presumed, this matter – rooted as it is in national identity – oftentimes takes precedence over other concerns.[30]

Expectedly then, within Asian American scholarship, nation-based issues of citizenship and belonging dominate academic discourse which subsequently place all Asian Americans under one umbrella. Academia and scholarship are designed to categorize and quantify. Also, emerging from the roots of activism, Asian American scholarship necessarily is dependent on building coalitions over shared values, priorities, and issues. Yet, in the world of Asian America – an umbrella term embodying a vastly diverse group marked more by difference than similarity – the minimalization of that difference has come at a cost and has grown increasingly frustrating. By its very definition, difference defies academic analysis and categorization. For Asian American scholars, a turn away from the dominant narratives of belonging and difference recognizes the limitations implicit in those narratives, demonstrating a need to capture a variety of Asian American lived

[30] The "perpetual foreigner" stereotype is frequently discussed in Asian American scholarship and is a common sociological condition associated with the Asian American condition. Notably, social psychologists, Sapna Cheryan and Benoît Monin have conducted extensive research to better understand how Asian American positionality as American is not recognized by other Americans. Sapna Cheryan and Benoît Monin, "Where are you really from?: Asian Americans and Identity Denial," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 89* (5), 2005: 717–730.

experiences more fully and expansively. Similarly and frustratingly, it can feel that despite decades of scholarship arguing for belonging of Asian Americans within the U.S. social fabric, Asian Americans continue to be marked by foreignness and unbelonging.[31] Thus, theories of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism may seem to offer a potentially more fluid and adaptable lens since to better explain and understand their subjects of inquiry.

I turn to cultural studies historian Ien Ang, whose concept of "togetherness-in-difference" is defined as a state of being that embraces the "fundamental uneasiness inherent in our global condition." Ang's "togetherness-in-difference" is a perspective on hybridity that is "not only about fusion and synthesis, but also about friction and tension, about ambivalence and incommensurability, about the contestations and interrogations that go hand in hand with the heterogeneity, diversity, and multiplicity we have to deal with as we live together-in-difference."[32] The unease that Ien Ang identifies is not even so much simply with a state of being but more so with the desire to consider difference as a matter worthy of inquiry within the parameters of both nation-state and cosmopolitan identities.

An Asian American's Transnational Identity

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[31] This has become increasingly evident in 2020 and 2021, during the writing of this dissertation as attacks on Asian Americans across the country has increased exponentially since the COVID epidemic positioned Asians as being both carriers and spreaders of the virus. This perception has been exponentially encouraged by statements by political leaders calling COVID-19 the "Chinese virus" or the "Kung Flu."

[32] Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (London: Routledge, 2002), 200.

Ang offers a particularly relevant lens through which to consider Allan deSouza. Arguably, no better example of a cosmopolitan and transnational artist exists than Allan deSouza. Born in Nairobi, Kenya, to a father from Goa, India and a Goan mother born in Kenya, deSouza moved, as a young child, to London, England. Their education in London was furthered in the United States, where they eventually moved and stayed. deSouza is currently a Professor of Art at the University of California at Berkeley. Despite their permanent residence in the United States, deSouza is widely acknowledged as a cosmopolitan and transnational artist while still remaining a stalwart subject for scholars of Asian American art. They are often championed as a shining example of the multiply-situated artist who fights for political visibility. As May Joseph elaborates, "For many diasporic South Asians like Allan de Souza, now a resident of the United States, political visibility involves struggling between the legal and the unofficial, between multiple categories of identity such as Asian American, Goan, East African, queer, Black British, and the arenas of ambiguity and disaffiliation generated around sexuality, nationality, and belonging."[33] Joseph is not alone in seeing in deSouza a quintessential case study to negotiate the complexities surrounding identities, nation-state boundaries, and the effects of globalization. They are, in many ways, the exemplary global artist who arguably and singularly embodies the conundrums of twenty-first century identity.

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[33] May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 146.

This seeming contradiction of multiple identities simultaneously based in nation-state belonging and the fluidity of transnational movement offers an opportunity to think about the intersection of identity and lived experience, to consider how lived experience complicates identity, and to consider how identity, rather than a fixed constant, is perhaps better understood as a constantly changing relationship between self-understanding and external observations and assumptions.

Of course, it is in the twenty-first century – in an era defined primarily by the increasing use of daily technology whether through travel, work, or leisure – that the movement embedded within cosmopolitan and transnational experiences becomes paramount. I first encountered *X* at a 2008 conference hosted by Williams College and The Clark in Williamstown, Massachusetts. The conference, focused on the growing interest in cosmopolitanism and transnationalism within contemporary art, underscored the importance of acknowledging and analyzing the increasingly interconnected world, both digitally and physically and its effects on artists and art production. Also present throughout the conference presentations and roundtables was a general hopefulness for how such expansive theories may lead to a more idealized reality where nation-state boundaries are rendered fluid and racial/ethnic identities worked less to restrict and more to foster increasing communication. Echoes of such idealism can be found in the Asian American turn toward transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. A few years prior to the performance of deSouza's *X* at Min's opening for *Xen: Migration, Labor and Identity*, the two artists

performed one of their most well-known projects, *Will **** for Peace* (2002-2003).[34] (Fig. 1.3) The performance was an obvious and intentional re-creation of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's original bed-in first executed in 1969. (Fig. 1.4) Lennon and Ono's bed-in utilized their honeymoon – a time that followed massive public interest in their marriage – to peacefully protest the Vietnam War. Inviting the general public into their Amsterdam hotel bedroom for a week, Lennon and Ono – although not ostensibly creating an art project – nevertheless created a work of performative engagement that certainly referenced, if not fully embraced, the burgeoning field of performance art. Ono, of course, already well-known in the New York art scene would have fully understood the implications of her and Lennon's bed-in. The performance in Amsterdam was followed by another in Montreal. Interestingly, Lennon and Ono's plans to perform it in New York City were jettisoned when Lennon was not able to re-enter the U.S. without risking arrest due to an earlier conviction for the possession of marijuana.[35]

[34] The performance is referenced differently on each artist's respective websites. Yoko Ono titles the peace *Will ---- for Peace* while Allan deSouza titles the peace *Will **** for Peace*. Simply because this chapter focuses on Allan deSouza, I have elected to follow the convention set by deSouza.
[35] Robert J. Kruse II, "Geographies of John and Yoko's 1969 Campaign for Peace: An Intersection of Celebrity, Space, Art, and Activism," in Johansson, Ola; Bell, Thomas L. (eds.). *Sound, Society and the Geography of Popular Music*. Ashgate, 2009: 15-16.

Fig. 1.3 Yong Soon Min and Allan de Souza, *Will **** for Peace*, 2003, Oboro Gallery, Montreal, Canada.

Fig. 1.4 John Lennon and Yoko Ono, *Bed-In for Peace*, 1969, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

I introduce Lennon and Ono's project not only because it is the direct referent for Min and deSouza's project, but also because it silently negotiates several similar transnational issues raised by Min and deSouza's project. Just as Lennon and Ono recognized that their marriage and their actions were interesting to a global audience, Min and deSouza's interest in performing *Will **** for Peace* in Canada points to their recognition that the actions and decision of the U.S. government finds resonance in other places. In fact, on deSouza's website, a write-up about the project focuses almost solely on the Canadian performance except for a passing reference that the Minneapolis performance "had been difficult for an American audience."[36] His reference to Americans was followed by an acknowledgement that, while the confrontation with American policies might be difficult for American audiences, that confrontation would be a certain kind of relief to a Canadian audience that, presumedly unlike the American one, was already pre-disposed to be against the war. In other words, the Canadian audience's supposed shared sympathy with the activist cause would make the work less challenging. Within this project is a glimpse into the

[36] Allan deSouza and Yong Soon Min, *Write-up for Will **** for Peace*. Allandesouza.com

ideal belief that expanding beyond the literal and metaphorical boundaries of the United States might allow a respite from the preoccupations and ideologies of the U.S. While subtle, this optimism, as it were, functions as a subtle gesturing toward a cosmopolitanism that is defined by the transcendence of nation-state ideologies.

However, while Min and deSouza's first three-day performance took place in Minnesota, the second was, like Ono and Lennon, performed in Montreal. The original 1969 performance protested the U.S.'s involvement in Vietnam. Min and deSouza's subsequent 2002/2003 performance protested the U.S.'s involvement in Afghanistan in the post 9/11 era. Although the protests and the activism were directly addressing the foreign policies of the United States, it nevertheless made sense to both sets of artists to perform their projects in non-U.S. locales, revealing that issues of war and foreign policy are always inherently transnational. What an American does when not on American soil can still very much be read as an American intervention into American policies. While, on one hand, the turn toward the transnational and cosmopolitan reflects the frustration with nation-based issues of identity, citizenship, and belonging, it also, on the other hand, reveals how the nation-state is inescapable for the cosmopolitan individual just as the cosmopolitan individual is always already rooted in nation-state ideologies.

The inextricability of nation-states and a cosmopolitan ideal is a critical element being negotiated through the performance of *X*. The performance was intended to make manifest the major themes of Yong Soon Min's exhibition. *Xen: Labor, Migration, and Identity* was an exhibition that specifically addressed Min's

observations of and concerns about foreign labor in South Korea. Recognizing that "transnational flows of migrants…have become a major force in shaping contemporary nation states," Min's exhibition focused specifically on the identities of the many migrant laborers whose labor enabled the economic development of South Korea.[37] De Souza's performance addressed the same themes, their body functioning almost as a stand-in for the migrants that were represented in Min's project. The invisibility that marked their presence echoed the same invisibility that Min noticed actual migrant laborers were met with by her South Korean colleagues. And yet, as Min points out, South Korea is a country in which "non-Koreans readily stand out," making the invisibility of laborers as one that is marked by intentional assumptions of class and worth.[38]

Labor and Cosmopolitanism

According to the International Labour Organization, labor migration refers to the movement of peoples in search of work opportunities who move in order to meet demand for workers when local residents cannot or will not fill the available positions. Many labor migrants are vulnerable to labor exploitation and abuse.[39] Labor migration is particularly prominent in wealthy Asian nations such as South Korea, China, Singapore, and Taiwan, where migrant laborers often fill domestic and service roles. Labor migration is an often overlooked and key component of

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[37] Yong Soon Min, "Transnationalism from Below," *Xen: Migration, Labor, and Identity*, exh. cat., Seoul: Ssamzie Space, 2004, 10.
[38] Min, 4.
[39] "Labour Migration in Asia and the Pacific," *International Labour Organization*, accessed February 1, 2019, https://www.ilo.org/asia/areas/labour-migration/WCMS_634559/lang--en/index.htm

globalization and cosmopolitan trends - a legitimate and persuasive instigator of movement of bodies around the world. In highlighting labor migration, deSouza's performance rejects the idealism of cosmopolitanism – that it has the potential and capability of erasing the borders and boundaries that divide and separate and that it creates the cosmopolitan citizen at home everywhere – and instead, gestures to a different type of cosmopolitanism. For deSouza, cosmopolitanism and nation-state ideologies not only do not stand in opposition to one another, but in fact, frequently uphold one another. Without the invisible and silent labor of migrants within public, domestic, and private sectors, the nation-state structured on neoliberal economics would be threatened. DeSouza's project, together with Min's exhibition, challenges the idealistic cosmopolitanism that is often understandably decried as a condition of privilege.

Cosmopolitanism evokes the travel and movement of bodies that are not bound by nation-state borders, but rather – through air travel, technology, and other forms of privilege – are able to move fluidly across such borders. However, the movement and transplantation of bodies is not a phenomenon exclusive to the twenty-first century. Since humans have existed, their lived experiences have been defined by encounter and exchange. In this sense, cosmopolitanism, as a concept, is as capable of being defined as human beings are of being rooted to one place from birth to death. As the editors of *Cosmopolitanisms*, Carol Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, state in their introduction, "We are not certain what [cosmopolitanism] is, and figuring out why this is so and what cosmopolitanism may

be raises difficult conceptual issues. As a practice, too, cosmopolitanism is yet to come, something awaiting realization…. Cosmopolitanism may instead be a project whose conceptual content and pragmatic character are not only as yet unspecified but also must always escape positive and defined specification, precisely because specifying cosmopolitanism positively and definitely is an uncosmopolitan thing to do."[40] This rather cheeky introduction to their book purportedly on the very subject that they claim is impossible to define lays out the underlying utopic idealism of cosmopolitanism. I raise this because deSouza's project negotiates cosmopolitanism even as it practices a particular type of cosmopolitanism. Just as deSouza and Min's earlier performance (as well as Ono and Lennon's original bed-in) established them as artists who could traverse and cross the borders of a particular nation-state, so too does *X* begin to negotiate whether not being physically-bound lessons the power of the nation-state itself. What, after all, does it mean to be a cosmopolitan artist, and perhaps more pointedly, does that positioning actually offer a particular fluidity of identity that frees oneself from the constraints of national citizenship and belonging?

The labor embedded in deSouza's *X* and negotiated throughout Yong Soon Min's exhibition offers up a specific form of cosmopolitanism that is defined by travel and movement, but hardly by privilege, especially the privilege of protection by a nation.[41] Propelled by economic need and desperation, the labor migrant moves

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[40] Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Cosmopolitanisms" in Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, eds., *Cosmopolitanism*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002, 1.

[41] Pnina Werbner, "Vernacular Cosmopolitanism," *Theory, Culture and Society* 23, vol. 2-3 (2006): 496-498. Werbner defines and discusses the term vernacular cosmopolitanism as "an oxymoron that joins contradictory notions of local specificity and universal enlightment" while rooting the oxymoron

through spaces landing in places where they are rendered invisible, used solely for their cheap labor, without the privileges or protections of the nation-state. Performed as it is in South Korea, in an art gallery space, deSouza's project points not only to the invisibility of migrant workers in Korea - the brown skin that sets them apart in the East Asian nation – but also underscores the economic and labor disparities that occur all over the world and ultimately, the bodies that embody those disparities.

The "Corporeal Malediction" of the Ambiguous Body

During the first portion of the evening, Allan deSouza's body, while certainly present, was not particularly expected. Performing at the intersection where the structures of service, economy, and migration meet, deSouza's body functioned as a tool that produced the mechanisms and products of economic labor – in this case, producing and serving beverages to the various gallery guests. Within that particular system, their seemingly migrant body became invisible, and like so many other migrant bodies, slipped through boundaries and borders. Like others, their body flitted in the periphery, working in the background keeping this particular system of service moving smoothly just as other brown, migrant bodies in South Korea worked in various spaces to keep domestic and societal systems running. However, during the second portion of the evening, when deSouza took center stage to shave their head and face into a basin in the gallery then proceeded to serve the liquid, now filled with their bodily detritus to the guests, deSouza exited those pre-ordained roles within

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in the scholarly work of Anthony Kwame Appiah, Homi Bhabha, and James Clifford. Beyond Werbner's definition, Paul Gilroy has focused on cosmopolitanisms that exist in the margins and along the lines of lived experiences rather than a universalizing approach.

which a body that *looked* like them was allowed to inhabit. Once outside of those mechanisms, migrant bodies flash outward into hypervisibility – scorned, demeaned, and rendered abject.[42]

Within this polarized space of simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility (for simple visibility is not possible for the marked body), *X* explores how meaning is rendered on bodies. The serving of de Souza's facial hair to the gallery goer paints his body as abject through the actual shedding of the hair. For Julia Kristeva, the concept of the abject is predicated upon its liminality - its position in the in-between of subject/object. The abject is neither the self, nor the object which can be assimilated. Instead, "[it] beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced."[43] Kristeva's casting of the abject out of one's self - through the materiality of vomit or excrement, or a dead body - is a reflection of one's self. In identifying something as abject, it inevitably reflects back upon oneself in which the self finds its mirror image. In this sense, corporeal malediction - the inflected body marked with difference and pointed to as different - is abjection embodied. In being pointed at, the marked body is thus named as separate and different, reviled because it reflects too closely on the pointer.[44] In the

[42] I was also particularly struck by artist's description of the the audience's reaction to the artist who, when deSouza began shaving, naturally formed themselves into an attentive audience standing in a semi-circle while giving the artist/performer a wide berth. Even when they were being served the hair-filled fluid, the audience continued to perform their presumed role of spectator. While some refused the beverage, most politely took the cup and held it throughout the evening until they could quietly and discreetly dispose of it.

[43] Julia Kristeva, transl. Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, 4.

[44] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press) 2008: 93.

serving of their facial hair - the abjected part of their body, de Souza points to their whole body as abject, scripted as simultaneous invisible and hypervisible. This liminal space of denied-visibility renders their entire body as abject as their facial hair.

This denied-visibility, however, of deSouza's body within the performance of X does not so much function as a denial of their subjectivity as it insists on the production of identity that is predicated on uncertainty and ambiguity. The performance's title, *X*, suggests a number of meanings. As Min discusses in her catalog essay:

> "The term 'X' is used in mathematics and more generally to denote an unknown or unknowable factor. Its use as a name suggests one whose former name is lost or unknown, as in Malcolm X, the black American activist who refused to be known by his 'slave name.' 'X' also refers to a branding mark, used in slavery and for livestock, but more commonly as a marker to make an object more visible, such as for a target or to denote ownership. 'X' also marks the place where one writes one's signature; in other words, the place where one marks one's own individual distinctiveness, a paradoxical counter to the other ways that 'X' is a marker of the unknown." [45]

X is about belonging and identifying, about verifying and being, but it is also about mutability, about invisibility and hypervisibility. The performance is centered upon deSouza's body which performs the invisible migrant worker and the hypervisible minority. In this way, it is critical to the mechanisms of a world that is predicated on neoliberal, capitalist systems of exchange that are dependent on dispensable and replaceable bodies. These are the bodies that are the first to be targeted in times of

[45] Min, 7.

crisis, made visible only to be destroyed. In asking the gallery goers to consume their body, deSouza forces the gallery goers to reckon with the daily consumption of labor performed by these bodies, labor that enables nation-state ideologies.

In the utilizing of their own body – a common practice in deSouza's work, deSouza recognizes and gestures to their own body as a potent site/sight of meaning. Because deSouza does not *look*, as it were, like a particularly recognizable ethnic identity, his body functions as both the sight of racial ambiguity and the site upon which racial meaning is produced, created, and disrupted. What deSouza's 2004 performance demonstrates is not only the complexity of identity, but also the impossibility of defining or insisting on one particular type of Asian Americanness. I began this dissertation with this chapter because, for a project that purports to be about one specific racial group within the United States, Allan deSouza and their body (of work) exemplifies how a specific racial group does not, in fact, translate into a specific ethnic group. It uncovers, in its complexity, the difficulty of defining Asian Americanness and yet reveals how deeply affected their life and career are by those very definitions and identities. deSouza's work underscores the intimate separation between how they are perceived and their own lived experience. By intimate separation, I mean to point out the wide gulf between who they are - ethnically, racially, and nationally - and how they are perceived - brown, foreign, and a signifier of peoples that range across a vast expanse of geographical land while also making clear that these two realities - experience and perception - are intimately and mutually relevant in one's identity as it is constantly shaped and defined.

At the heart of deSouza's performance, is their body. It tempers any idealistic belief that cosmopolitan and transnational bodies are somehow able to sidestep their marked characteristics that, while unstable, still nevertheless are variably imbued with meaning that is read as certain and fixed. deSouza's body, while mutable in its meaning, remains solid in its existence. The undeniable physicality of their body puts the brakes on any idyllic attempt to explain away stereotype and judgment, insisting that – even when transgressing the boundaries of ethnic and national boundaries – the body continues to remind us of its markers – and that those markers can variably render bodies invisible, visible, or hypervisible.

X, in its insistence on the artist's body, depends on the functionality and the continued effectiveness of stereotypes in order to succeed. As Homi Bhabha articulates in "The Other Question… Homi Bhabha Reconsiders the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," "…stereotype… is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place,' already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated…"[46] Bhabha defines stereotype not so much as fixed ideas (although he does position it as a form of fixity) but rather as a perpetually volleying site of identity that is rooted in ambivalence. Bhabha's understand of stereotype and of fixity is ironically paradoxical. Yet in this paradox, Bhabha recognizes the conflict between stereotype as a perceived absolute and the reality of stereotype as a part of a

[46] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question… Homi K Bhabha Reconsiders the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse" in *Screen* 2, no. 6 (1983):18-36. Fixity, for Bhabha, is an "ideological construction of otherness" meaning that it is always necessarily a paradoxical mode of representation that while suggesting rigidity, at all times, it simultaneously presents as disorder, chaos, and degeneracy.

lived experience that finds its associate stereotype mutating and changing despite its claim to an absolute and known meaning. Most importantly, Bhabha recognizes that stereotype and its ambivalence is rooted in a greater priority than the stereotype itself – in other words, it is always defined by the power structure or ideology that its existence upholds. DeSouza's heightened awareness of how stereotype, without fail, comes to define and structure their interaction with the world around them allows for the stereotype to become the structure upon which the performance is built. In this way, deSouza's body both reifies and challenges stereotypes and embedded in that tension is where identity and lived experience collide and embrace. It is also in that tension that I would argue is where Asian Americanness lies.

Spaces of Relational Performances

In her catalog essay, Yong Soon Min states, "…the simple act of servitude had a profoundly unsettling and disturbing effect on the gallery-goers who are used to an informal atmosphere in which refreshments are usually self-service. With *X*, deSouza enacted the figure of the migrant, whose labor services the nation but who, as a person, remains a foreigner or a stranger."[47] Min discusses how deSouza's presence as a server did not disrupt the evening solely because of the performance itself, but also because they were serving in a space in which people were not used to being served. While the performance itself is predicated upon the shock of being served bodily detritus from a human body, it disrupted the gallery experience from the very moment deSouza began to serve beverages to the guests. The project underscores how

[47] Min, 8.

certain spaces require certain performances, and how such spaces circumscribe the performance and actions of bodies. The discomfort stemmed not only from deSouza's brown body but also from a body interacting and encountering other bodies in a way that was outside of the scripted code of conduct. De Souza's performance, executed as it was in a fine art gallery in South Korea, counteracted the behavior accepted within those types of spaces and, in so doing, caused a confrontation within an art space that was built upon and dependent upon the same capitalist system that produces and reproduces systems of class disparity.

Its unfolding in a major cosmopolitan city during an exhibition opening, a common occurrence in major cities around the world, brings to light the uniformity or, at the least, the ubiquity of the art opening – similar in nature, attitude, and activity, regardless of where in the world the activity occurs. In performing *X* during a gallery opening, deSouza created a direct confrontation with gallery goers that opened an opportunity to consider the role of the art world in prescribing and dictating circuits of privilege and acceptance both within and outside the lens of Asian Americanness.

As I discussed above, Min and deSouza's re-creation of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's bed-in as a performance taking place within art galleries not only worked to situate Lennon and Ono's original activist performance within the realm of performance art, but also established their own bed-in as a natural successor and relevant project within that same realm. *X*, deployed within an art gallery, also works within the same vocabulary and world of performance art, in which artists utilize their

bodies in order to critically negotiate how those bodies in and out of prescribed social orders and scenarios. Among these artists, Yoko Ono whose painful-to-watch *Cut Piece*, performed in 1964, saw the artist sitting silently on a stage while viewers were invited to take a pair of provided scissors and cut off a small piece of her clothing which was then theirs to keep. Although that work can be and has been interpreted through a number of lenses, I am interested in how her body – silent, unintimidating, and still – was offered up to an audience that casually took of the clothing that enrobed that body. Bearing a certain resemblance to *Cut Piece*, Allan deSouza's *X* saw the artist as an intentional and adamant provider of his body. Instead of inviting the audience to take of his body, deSouza actively served it.

It is helpful here to look to relational aesthetics to think about how deSouza's 2008 project expanded beyond Ono and her fellow performance artists of the 1960s. According to Nicolas Borriaud, relational aesthetics refers to a body of work that he deemed to be "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social contexts rather than an independent and private space."[48] Thinking about *X* through the lens of relational aesthetics put an emphasis on, first, the art gallery space as a space of social context, and second, on the exchange that occurs between deSouza and the gallery goer that while, as noted above, is possibly struck through with disgust in the moment of exchange when the guest looks down at their cup only to see bits of flotsam of the

[48] Nicolas Borriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, transl. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods, Mathieu Copeland, Paris, Les presses du reel, 2002, 113.

artist's body floating in the liquid they were supposed to consume. Just as important in that moment of horror is also the feelings that follow – the feelings that emerge from the insistence that the person who served them was indeed, just that, a person. They were no more and no less a person. Although their body marked them as so many other things – a migrant, a laborer, lower-class, a servant, so on and so forth – this moment of *visibility* emerged from that moment of human exchange. It is there that deSouza was able to transcend from invisible to hypervisible and finally, to simply being visible. In that moment of visibility, deSouza embodied all the identities that their body marked them as while simultaneously opening up their identity to the many other identities that – sometimes conflictingly – make up the complexity of his lived experience.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to negotiate the role of both Asian American studies and theories of cosmopolitanism within Allan deSouza's performance. It has also confronted the confounding and revealing contradictions of Asian American artists whose works frequently negotiate and take place in spaces outside of American borders through an analysis of Allan deSouza's own place among a pantheon of Asian American artists. This seeming conflict lies between deSouza's undeniable Americanness and this nation-state identity and the inevitable reality of deSouza's cosmopolitan body which not only takes on mutable identities, but also as a physical entity, moves fluidly, though not seamlessly, throughout the world. This conflict, however, is not so much a conflict within deSouza's own oeuvre and lived

experience, but rather within perceptions of what it means to be American and/or what it means to be cosmopolitan. That the two might perhaps be fully compatible and also present a complicated, blended state of being experienced by many Asian Americans might seem almost revolutionary.

I argue that *X*, performed in a South Korean gallery by an American artist whose skin color and other bodily markers refuse a rooted or defined identity, serves to expand the underlying assumptions of what it means to be considered an American. Instead, deSouza's project brings forth what I am calling "American-in-difference." Clearly drawing from Ien Ang's together-in-difference, I coin this adjacent term in an attempt to open up the boundaries of Americanness to embody both the rights of citizenship and the complicated sense of unbelonging that is marked by different bodies, different languages, and different experiences. Ang states about her concept of hybridity, "This, of course, is what togetherness-in-difference is all about: it is about co-existence in a single world."[49] In writing about Asians in the United States, the defining differences implicit in Asian identities can seem to overwhelm any sense of shared identity. Yet her complicated and contrarian approach to hybridity not only gestures to the difficult nature of being a so-called Asian American but also makes room for that contradiction to be the defining characteristic of identity. Ang offers a way to think about differences co-existing together in a single nation-state. Moreover looking at Asian Americanness through this lens refuses an inevitably unrealized search for some mythical geographical, physical, or cultural characteristic that might

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[49] Ang, 200.

unite Asians as a singular unit, but rather finds unity insistently predicated on difference. As such, in this chapter, I emphasize the necessity and importance of recognizing the Americanness of cosmopolitan artists such as Yong Soon Min and Allan deSouza. Though inevitably cosmopolitan, they are also inevitably American.

Chapter Two
The Haunting Legacy of Whiteness: Re-seeing Yosemite Through the Eyes of Binh Danh

These photographs are familiar; their subject matter is instantly recognizable. (Fig. 2.1 and 2.2) The crags of the mountains and the cascading water of the majestic

Fig. 2.1 Binh Danh, *Yosemite Falls*, 2012

Fig. 2.2 Binh Danh, *Cathedral Rocks*, 2012

falls are iconic visual markers of American identity, immediately recognizable. Indeed, this series of photographs of Yosemite National Park seem, at first glance, like its many predecessors – famous photographs taken by renowned American photographers, Carlton Watkins and Ansel Adams. (Fig. 2.3 and 2.4) Even the medium recollects older American photography: daguerreotypes tinged in a slight blue cast. But this series, simply entitled *Yosemite* by Vietnamese American artist Binh Danh is a contemporary project made in 2012. Yosemite National Park in California is a must-see for the approximately four million visitors that enter the park

Fig. 2.3 Carleton E. Watkins, *View of Cathedral Rocks*, 1861

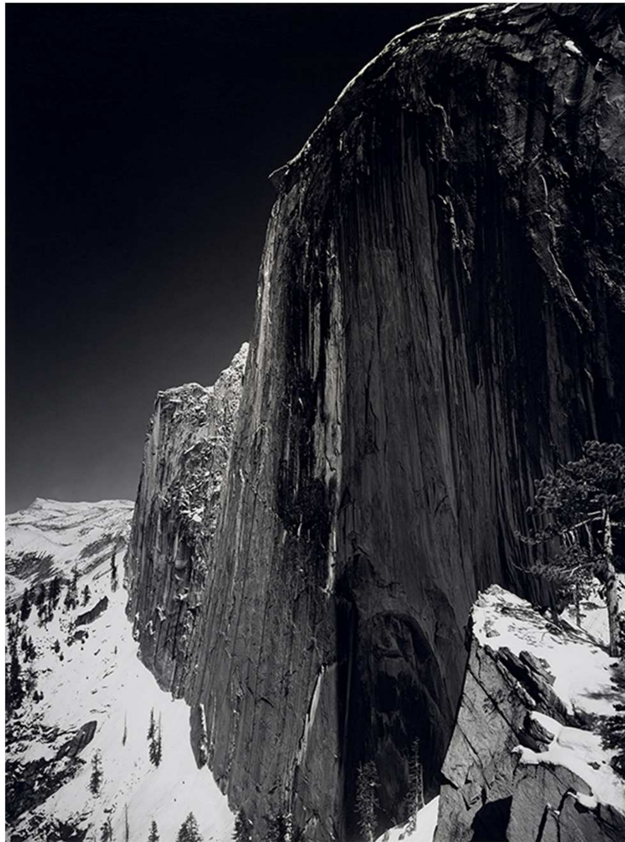

Fig. 2.4 Ansel Adams, *Monolith, The Face of Half-Dome*, 1937

each year.[50] The park and its visual icons have become synonymous with an American identity defined by coast-to-coast landscapes of wide-open spaces and

sublime formations. Like Watkins and Adams, Danh renders his landscapes primarily devoid of people. Danh's photographs, however, offer an understanding of how landscapes are haunted by human identities. In this chapter, I examine Danh's Yosemite series, and in so doing, reveal the racialized ideological structures that haunt images of landscapes of the American West. I argue that Danh's daguerreotypes reframe Yosemite by reflecting and revealing racialized bodies and faces made invisible by canonical imagery thus summoning the haunting embodiment of this landscape.

For Vietnamese American artist Binh Danh, Yosemite is synonymous with a history of photography that takes as its subject matter key American monuments to emphasize a uniquely American perspective and style, one of many visual markers of "Americana." As he states in an interview with art historian Boreth Ly, "…one cannot photograph Yosemite Valley without Watkins and Adams peeking over his shoulder."[51] While this history is a deeply complex narrative, it is, as Danh recognizes, written through the images of notable American photographers such as Carleton Watkins in the late nineteenth century and Ansel Adams in the mid-twentieth century who presented iconic photographs that often concealed histories more than they revealed desires and beliefs about American identities and destinies.

[50] "History and Culture: Yosemite National Park," *National Park Service*, last modified Dec. 11, 2015, http://www.nps.gov/yose/learn/historyculture/index.htm.
[51] Boreth Ly, "Conversation between Binh Danh and Boreth Ly, August 2012 on the subject of 'Binh Danh: Yosemite'," in *Binh Danh: Yosemite*, exh. cat. (San Francisco, Haines Gallery, 2012), 5.

In order to understand how Danh's images function in dialogue with the renowned and identifiable images of Yosemite with which they share numerous visual commonalities, it is important to examine how those images function in the narrative of the American West. The lands west of the Mississippi River in the mid to late nineteenth century served as a tangible space for ambitious settlers seeking opportunities such as wealth, a better life, religious freedom, etc. In addition, it served also as a space of mythical knowledge – tenuous yet tantalizing. In their groundbreaking books, scholars such as Barbara Novak in her 1980 book *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* and Angela Miller in her 1993 publication, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* chronicled the relationship between the fascination and documentation with the American West and the larger socio-political concerns that viewed the unexplored West as lands to be conquered and a destiny to be fulfilled.[52] Novak and Miller primarily focused on paintings by artists such as Albert Bierstadt whose massive paintings offered a grand and sublime view of the West to primarily East Coast audiences. (Fig. 2.5) Such paintings became enshrined in the minds of people whose identities as American began to be shaped, not merely by their usually city-bound lifestyles, but also by the ownership of natural formations that rivaled the

[52] See Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

Fig. 2.5 Albert Bierstadt, *Valley of the Yosemite*, 1864

grandness of European architecture and development.[53] Despite having never seen the lands of the West with their own eyes, Americans looked to images to fill out the curves of their burgeoning identities.

Similar texts have been written about the photography of the early West. In fact, the accepted history of the American West is framed as such. When, in 1851, Yosemite was first "discovered," it was already identified as the most "celebrated symbol of the grandeur and beauty of the American West."[54] Yet, this very discovery

[53] See Martin Berger, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005), 58. In his book, *Sight Unseen*, Martin Berger explains how understanding of the grand scale and sublimity of Western landscapes contributed to the development of an American (white) identity that delineated itself from a European (white) identity. He says, "While European culture had provided the architectural forms that lent characteristic names to Yosemite's features, white Americans interpreted their older, and more monumental, geological "domes" and "arches" as signs of their cultural ascendancy over old-world society." Such an understanding recognizes the fluidity of racial identification while also suggesting the intimate relationship between landscape and race.

[54] Keith F. Davis, Jane Lee Aspinwall and Marc F. Wilson, *The Origins of American Photography: From Daguerreotype to Dry-Plate, 1839-1885* (Kansas City, Mo: Hall Family Foundation, 2007), 217.

was, in fact, made by a detachment of soldiers from the Mariposa Battalion who rode in to round up the remaining two-hundred-plus members of the Ahwahneechee people led by Chief Tenaya, who refused to go to a reservation along the Fresno

Fig. 2.6 Artist unknown, Portrait of Chief Tenaya, date unknown

River.[55] (Fig. 2.6) Soon thereafter, James Mason Hutchings, a writer and publisher, arrived in July 1855, with a party of tourists. Within that same year, the first trail and hotel were constructed and tourism in Yosemite began.[56]

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[55] Davis, 217. Davis's source for this provides an in-depth historical context for the events. See also David Robertson, *West of Eden: A History of the Art and Literature of Yosemite* (El Portal: Yosemite Association, 1984).
[56] Ibid, 217.

Already from the initial writing of Yosemite's place in American history, Yosemite is defined by the seizing of the land from an indigenous "other" that stood in the way of the priorities of European settlers. Within a decade, Charles L. Weed, the likely first photographer to arrive in Yosemite in 1859, was commissioned by Hutchings to photograph Yosemite for a magazine.[57] (Fig. 2.7) When those initial images were viewed, a public hunger for the images made them an immediate commercial success.[58] Vying for a piece of this success, Carleton E. Watkins, by far

Fig. 2.7 Charles L. Weed, *Mirror Lake and Reflections*, 1864

the most famous of the valley's photographers, went to Yosemite in 1861 and emerged with one of the most poetic sets of photography that to this day, continue to dominate the framing of that particular landscape. As Keith Davis writes, those

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[57] Some histories write that Watkins was in fact the first to photograph Yosemite and that Weed was just a minor assistant who would later learn from famous photographer, Eadweard Muybridge, how to take monumental photographs of Yosemite. Davis, however, argues that evidence exists that Weed was first commissioned by Hutchings.

[58] As Davis points out, Weed's work has since fallen out of favor with contemporary audiences who see his work as lacking poetic imagination. Davis, 218.

photographs "are generally thought to be the most personal and lyrical he created there, but all are united by a distinctive vision. Watkin's pictures are at once bold and subtle: the graphic strength of his images is matched by a richness of tone and a delicacy of detail." The tone of Davis' writing is art historical, placing Watkins within a pantheon of art historical achievement.[59] However, as Martin Berger argues in his chapter, "Landscape Photography and the White Gaze," American landscape photography and racial identities were indelibly linked. For Berger, Watkins's photographs of Yosemite were "produced and viewed through the lens of whiteness" in which white Americans "saw in the images affirmation of their history and ambitions."[60] The landscape, through its representation in the form of photographs, is written upon with a language and code that is legible only to particular groups. In turn, the landscape itself – as monument, as tourist destination, and as a part of American identity, becomes accessible only to that same group.

On one hand, Hutchings followed behind a military battalion to begin a tourism industry within Yosemite and on the other, started the business of photographing the landscape. Both commercial endeavors produced a celebratory understanding of the landscape as claimed, conquered, and dominated while simultaneously encouraging and underscoring narratives of preservation and maintenance. The juggling act of maintaining the magnificence of the presumably untouched landscape and the desire to conquer and control the landscape was a

[59] To further this point, Davis later compares Watkins' work to Muybridge's, seeing Muybridge as more Baroque – a bit derivative of Watkins' more Renaissance, classical-styled restraint.
[60] Berger, 79.

paradox that seemed to be lost to nineteenth-century individuals who saw no contradiction in simultaneously developing the landscape and celebrating its wild magnificence. Such an understanding of the land serves to empty the land of its actual history, to minimize any potential damage that development could cause to the land itself, and thus, to render the magnificent views seemingly timeless and eternal. As such, the invading white man is cast as an assumed and naturalized part of the landscape. In such a way, devoid of context, spaces like Yosemite remain forever conquerable by white men whose presence is defendable because the histories of people prior to their arrival are deleted, and their own invasive actions are folded into the natural order of nature. Furthermore, no matter how large and impressive in size a painting or photograph might be, the acts of "capturing" the view and scenery inevitably renders the landscape as a consumable landscape. No matter how much paintings and photographs proved the enormity of the West to a disbelieving East, they also presented proof that the West could be navigated and thus dominated.

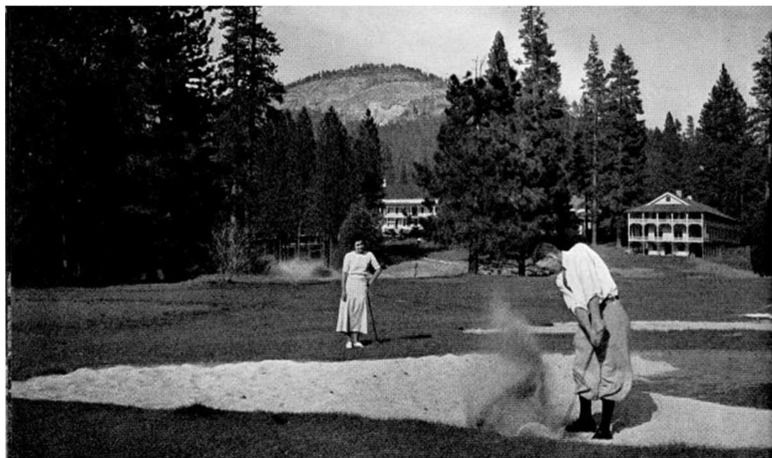

Fig. 2.8 Ansel Adams, *Untitled*, 1939

In the steps of Watkins, Weed and other early photographers came Ansel Adams, another notable figure in the production of images that worked to define Yosemite in the American imagination, and an artist whose photographs of Yosemite were particularly influential for Danh. Almost a century later, Adams entered Yosemite to take photographs that looked jarringly similar to Watkins's. Adams' first images of Yosemite were part of a commissioned photographic project titled *The Four Seasons* in 1937. (Fig. 2.8) His mission was to capture the park in each season, highlighting both the natural, sublime beauty of the park and the recreational possibilities available to tourists. However, the images that emerged most vividly into the art market and into the public imagination were ones that echoed Watkins'

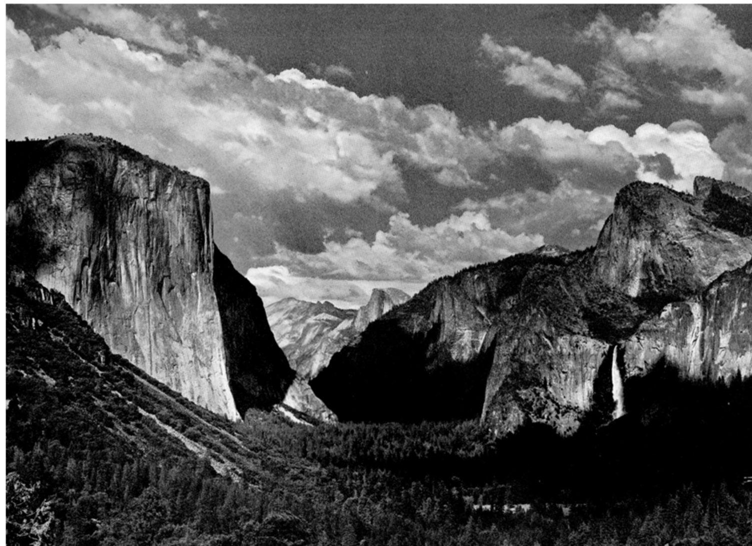

Fig. 2.9 Ansel Adams, *Yosemite Valley from Tunnel View*, 1949

aesthetic of wide sweeping vistas, bubbling brooks and towering rock formations. (Fig. 2.9) His images that included people engaging with the park's hotels, golf courses and other recreational activities were relegated to tourist brochures and are, to

this day, rarely publicly attributed to him and certainly outside of the mythic celebrity of Adams today.

The photographs of Weed, Watkins and Adams that ultimately entered the canon are notable because of their negation of a human presence. This characteristic establishes these spaces as pure and pristine and also as uninhabited and thus available. To this day, popular and professional photographs of Yosemite continue to mimic the sublimity of Watkins' early photographs. In fact, a quick Google Image Search of Yosemite produces beautifully rendered photographs of Yosemite noticeably different from Watkins' and Adams' only in their vivid coloring. Viewpoints, settings and framing all mimic their predecessors. That contemporary imagination of Yosemite remains as a vast, sweeping, sublime space devoid of human involvement speaks to a continued reading of Yosemite National Park as empty of history and social context. This insistence on purity is a whitewashing technique that refuses a diverse and multi-faceted American identity. How then, does a Vietnamese American's daguerreotypes work within this system of racialized visual representation?

As a child, photographs of Yosemite haunted Danh. They were "magical and mysterious" images that defined Yosemite, only a few hours from his home in San Jose, California where Danh's family settled after escaping the Vietnam American War when Danh was two. In an interview with National Geographic, Danh confirms that his family never visited Yosemite. It wasn't even an option, he states, "My parents wouldn't know how to get there and if they did want to go, closing our TV

repair shop for a day was out of the question," Danh said in the interview, emphasizing the economic imperatives that dominate many immigrants' lives in which financial constraints meant that leisure time was an impossible and out-of-reach luxury. For the budding photographer, "I was left to only visiting Yosemite in photographs."[61] The photographs were made available to him as books and, most significantly, in the travel albums of his American friends whose trips to Yosemite with their families were frequent and normal occurrences.

Perhaps it was this sense of difference that made Yosemite a mysterious place that, "as an adult… paralyzed him."[62] The artist goes on to say, "Those photographs kept me away from visiting the park. It seemed all views of Yosemite had been taken and there was no more that I could say about it."[63] Embedded within this statement is one of inclusion and exclusion. The idea that Yosemite had already been taken and claimed is one that speaks to an exploration that becomes a part of American identity, especially growing up in the West. To be rendered voiceless and silent in the shadow of an already established myth of Yosemite speaks to Danh's positioning as a Vietnamese American boy who grew up in a refugee household. As Danh says in an interview with art historian, Boreth Ly:

> Growing up in a Vietnamese American family, the outdoors to me was a "white" space…Camping for me was what white people did; it was not for people who ran through the jungles at night to get onto a fishing boat and head into the South China Sea. As a family, we already camped in a refugee camp before coming to the United States.

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[61] Becky Harlan, "Yosemite in Blue: An Antique Process Unlocks an Artist's Vision," *National Geographic*, August 31, 2015, http://proof.nationalgeographic.com/2015/08/31/yosemite-in-blue-an-antique-process-unlocks-an-artists-vision/.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.

> So it never made sense to my parents to take the family out into the woods and expose us to the elements. But like most Asian American kids, we wanted to fit into the mainstream culture. I remember visiting my best friend's home and seeing his vacation pictures in the woods, and I wished that I was in those pictures.[64]

In this quote, the artist raises two specters of being a refugee and a non-white American – the idea that there was a "white" space in which a Vietnamese American did not feel welcome and could not access, but nevertheless felt a yearning to be a part of that space. Perhaps that desire to be "in those pictures" is what led to Danh's use of the daguerreotype for this project.

Danh's use of the daguerreotype as a medium speaks to the artist's experimental artistic projects from the beginning of his career. His first foray into the art world was with a unique photographic process that photosynthesized photographs into living leaves that were then embedded in resin for posterity. The process *was* the project, and in his earlier photosynthetic portraits of dead American soldiers embedded into the leaves of the Vietnam landscape, Danh intertwined the United States and Vietnam demonstrating their utter inextricability in the history of the Vietnam War. (Fig. 2.10) Leaves became embodied by the faces that were photosynthesized into them on a cellular level. In Danh's photographic process, the medium functions as a key component of the content, and photography functions as a tool to further the work itself. Danh's focus on process in these large-scale daguerreotypes is also a key characteristic of his larger body of work and is

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[64] Ly, 4-5.

significant not only as his medium but also in the meaning the medium injects into his project.

The daguerreotype is one of the first forms of photography. It was invented by nineteenth-century Frenchman Jacques-Louis-Mande Daguerre.[65] Daguerreotypes have no negatives and cannot be reproduced in the characteristic sense of positives being printed from negatives. In the nineteenth-century, daguerreotypes expanded rapidly, becoming the first commercially viable photographic process. Though large format daguerreotypes in the size of 6.5 inches by 8.5 inches (also known as full-

Fig. 2.10 Binh Danh, *One Week's Dead*, 2006

[65] For more information about the history of photography and the development of the daguerreotype, please see: Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*, New York Museum of Modern Art, 1964.

plates) were available, they were rarely used. Typical daguerreotypes were generally smaller – usually a half plate or quarter plate - to be both reasonably affordable and manageable. The surface of the daguerreotype was shiny, reflective like a mirror and the reflective surface required that light must hit the surface at a particular angle in order for the image to appear.

Since the invention of subsequent photographic processes, daguerreotypes have largely, due to their cost, their irreproducibility and other limitations, been relegated to the histories of the rapidly evolving field of photography. While Danh is not the only contemporary photographer utilizing the daguerreotype process, he is one of the rare ones who, for Yosemite in particular, creates daguerreotypes *en plein air*, meaning that he develops inside the camera itself on site rather than in the dark room – a more contemporary form of daguerreotype production.[66] Danh's large scale daguerreotypes are also impressive because of their size. Danh's daugerreotypes are full plates measuring 8.5 x 6.5 inches recalling the older, more expensive and rarer daguerreotypes. As mentioned before, daguerreotypes were traditionally palm-sized. They can be easily carried and are highly mobile, making them automatically intimate objects that can be negotiated directly and easily, requiring a flick of the wrist to catch the image. Danh's, however, are not so easily accessible.

[66] Danh's camera and developing materials are carried in his daguerreotype truck which he nicknamed Louis after Daguerre. Sam Whiting, "Binh Danh's Yosemite Daguerreotypes: Catching Up with Binh Danh," *SF Gate*, September 24, 2012, http://www.sfgate.com/art/article/Binh-Danh-s-Yosemite-daguerreotypes-3889834.php.

The Anxiety of Inheritance: Against a White Ideology of American Landscape

Up to this point, I have discussed the history of Western landscape photography focusing on depictions of Yosemite, the history of Yosemite itself, and the early developments of photography in order to better understand and situate the various histories in which Danh's series resides. Collected by major American museums such as the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, his project exists within a heavily weighted history of photography, and hung in contemporary art galleries, these daguerreotypes establish Danh's place in the pantheon of great American photographers. While not the artist's intention with the project, it is nevertheless significant not only that Danh recognizes the haunting pictorial legacy of whiteness and landscape ideology embedded in the photographs of Watkins and Adams in his photographs but also that he intentionally chose to photograph the same vistas that these prior photographers had made iconic. Danh's decision to photograph the same vistas, mimicking the giants of American West photography, represents his own negotiation and insistence on his *right,* as it were, to capture those views. Photography, in this instance, functions much as photography did in early nineteenth-century surveys in which the captured images stand in for the knowledge of a land that would be claimed and developed by settlers.

In his article "Reflections in a Mirrored Eye," Danh once again repeated that, as an adult, "those Adams pictures paralyzed [him]. [He] couldn't imagine that [his] photography of Yosemite would be anything new since all views of Yosemite were

taken, and there was no more that [he] could say about it."[67] Evidently, more could be said, albeit not in the form of unique views of Yosemite that hadn't already been taken. Instead, Danh's decision to capture those similar views suggests that the value lies precisely in actually replicating these photographic giants, and in so doing, placing himself, an Asian American artist, as their rightful successor.

Further, Danh's use of the daguerreotype as his medium speaks to the emphasis of each photograph as a unique art object. As stated above, daguerreotypes are not reproducible. While they reproduce the image as faithfully as any form of photography, they themselves are nevertheless positive images that exist in their singularity. The daguerreotype itself is difficult to reproduce even with contemporary twenty-first century digital photographic efforts. Reproductions of Danh's images as seen in exhibition catalogues, in the many articles about his work, and here in this chapter, appear black and white with a slightly blue tinge. (Fig. 2.1 and 2.2) In reality, daguerreotypes do not appear as flat uniform surfaces. They are ghostly images that appear only at certain angles catching light and color from its surroundings rather than from its own objectness. In ensuring that his photographs are singular and unique art objects, Danh's photographs enter into an art market that privileges and prizes collectibles, limited editions, and one-of-a-kind pieces.

Although Danh's photographs, like the ones that he is replicating, are devoid of human presence, in the reflectivity of the daguerreotype surface, Danh effectively inserts the invisible colored body into a photographic history that has already been

[67] Binh Danh, "Reflections in a Mirrored Eye," *The Daguerreian Annual*, Dec. 2017, 191.

coded white. In so doing, he opens up these landscapes for bodies like his that are barred from these histories and these spaces. Although his photographs are evidently empty of human bodies, bodies are nevertheless what are constantly implicated in the work. In exhibitions, these large-scale daguerreotypes are hung on the wall like a painting, and the viewer must approach them. Because of the mirrored surface, the work interacts with the viewer in two specific ways. First, it repels the viewer from the image. While in the nineteenth century, viewers held small daguerreotypes in their palms, flicking it back and forth to see the image, in Danh's much larger images, the viewer must engage their entire body, craning their neck and shifting their bodily positions, manipulating light and shadow to reveal the image, and thus underscoring the necessity of the viewer's body as a part of the viewing of the work. Second, the mirrored surface reflects the viewer. In seeking the image ingrained in the object's surface, the viewer is also confronted with themself. While considering the daguerreotype as a singular art object recognizes its position in the larger contemporary art market, the daguerreotype's dual "repulse and reflect" characteristic incites a form of performance from the bodies that are looking at the work.

On one hand, viewers – regardless of race, gender, class, etc. – are all reflected in the objects. The images beckon, casting viewers back at themselves even as they place the viewer within the image. My argument here is two-fold: First, in placing the viewer within the landscape of Yosemite, Danh's daguerreotypes open up the landscape to faces and bodies like his own that otherwise might not have belonged. In that sense, they are an open invitation to anyone, thus repudiating the

racial barricades erected by centuries of Yosemite narrative and history. Second however, reflections are, by nature, fleeting. Their impermanence is a key characteristic. The ghostliness of reflections and the impossibility of faces *remaining* within the image, as it were, recognizes that these spaces have maintained their racial barricades and that the influence of images by Watkins, Bierstadt, and Adams continue. Danh's project does not negate these influences, nor does it rewrite history. Instead, it adds on, creating a palimpsest of histories while capturing ephemeral ever-changing apparitions of colored bodies and faces. In Danh's daguerreotype of Yosemite, the specter haunts the landscape, constantly looming just beyond the surface.

Dark Tourism: A Comparison of *Yosemite* and *The Eclipse of Angkor*

Indeed, as I described earlier, Watkins' and Adams' influence haunts like a specter over Danh's project. They haunt not just the artist himself, but also the viewer who is likely well-versed, and at the very least, familiar with the images that are popularly produced as college dorm room poster decorations or in popular books and documentaries. The haunting of these art objects, however, extends further. It is worth comparing this Yosemite project with Danh's earlier 2008 daguerreotype series, *In the Eclipse of Angkor*. In that series, Danh's photographs depict images taken in Cambodia, from the magnificence and details of Angkor Wat to the skulls and museums that exist to record and house the horrors of the Cambodian Genocide. Each of these photographed sites are arguably tourist attractions speaking to a larger practice of thanatourism. In his seminal essay, "Guided by the Dark: From

Thanatopsis to Thanatourism," A.V. Seaton defines thanatourism as tourism that gives form to a phenomenon in which "the publicly shocking and repugnant may be experienced as a source of private pleasure – and may achieve the status of a tourist attraction." [68] Danh's daguerreotypes of "tourist attractions" – whether considered "dark" or not – work in a way that not only places the viewer into these spaces, but also reflects the viewing, as it were, back at the viewer. In considering this reflection in light of dark tourism, Danh's daguerreotypes function as subtle indictments – judgments on the pleasure one may feel at viewing sights of pain and death. His photographs make no distinction between the images and reflect the various sites that might make up an average tourist's trip to Cambodia in which the awe-inspiring

Fig. 2.11 Binh Danh, Installation of *Skulls of Choeung* Ek, Eleanor D. Roosevelt Museum, 2009

[68] A.V. Seaton, "Guided by the Dark: From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2: 4, 234-244.

architecture of a twelfth-century Hindu temple has as much pull as the grotesque and distressing sites of Pol Pot's atrocities. Danh's daguerreotypes engaged in the same reflect and repulse effect on viewers which served to implicate the viewer's implicit participation in trauma tourism. (Fig. 2.11)

While his two projects are vastly different in subject matter, I argue here that they both point to tourism and the paths of tourists. Just as tourists go to Cambodia to see the remnants of historical events, they also go to the American West, "looking for places destroyed by shifting economies: Indian ruins, ghost towns, abandoned farms, deserted mines, and nineteenth-century spaces frozen in the governmentally managed wildernesses," as Lucy Lippard puts it.[69] Lippard recognizes in tourism an impulse that mimics that of art production and art looking. As she says, "Artists have always traveled and provided a lens through which the rest of us look around."[70] For Lippard, art and tourism both act as a "form of transformation" and both are – and here she quotes Albert Camus – "a grander and deeper process of learning which leads us back to ourselves."[71] Lippard and Camus point us straight to Danh's projects which ultimately lead us back to ourselves. In his daguerreotypes, it is us, the viewers, who are reflected, who are, ultimately, the subject of the images. In so doing, they question the impulse of looking – at landscapes, at people, at sites, at histories – and bring into consideration how different types of bodies fit within spaces

[69] Lucy Lippard, *Off the Beaten Track: tourism, art, and* place (New York: The New Press, 1999), 22.
[70] Ibid, 4.
[71] Ibid, 5.

that are immediately, by virtue of being elsewhere, "other," or conversely, rendering the body itself as "other," a paradox to which I will return to below.

My discussion of tourism as it related to Danh's *Yosemite* project leads to two main issues. The first returns to my earlier discussion on the ownership of landscapes, and how those landscapes and their reproductions – in circumscribing identities – structure not only the perception and understanding of the landscape itself, but *how* that landscape ought to be experienced. Berger, in his analysis of Watkin's *The Yosemite Valley from the Best General View*, notes that such photographs correlated with advice given in tourism guidebooks about what paths were recommended depending on how the tourist wanted to experience the landscape.[72] By replicating the same vistas, Danh echoes that guidance as to what images and scenes ought to be looked at and from which vantage points. But it is also worth noting that Danh's presentation of these images do not exist in a guidebook, but rather within a gallery space. In this sense, the manipulation of viewer's experience of the Yosemite landscape exists not only outside of the landscape itself, but always through the filter of Danh's artistic decisions – in both how his daguerreotypes are hung and in which order they are hung. The viewer's body, as it were, is dictated not by suggestions influenced by nation-building concerns, but rather by an artist whose own colored body is written out of the national identity.

This leads to the second issue evoked in my discussion of tourism. As mentioned above, while an interrogation of tourism considers how bodies belong in

[72] Berger, 45.

foreign and “other” spaces, it also conversely invokes its opposite, how bodies become foreign and “other” in particular spaces. This phenomenon is specific, of course, to immigration. For non-European immigrants, however, the privilege of safety that comes with tourism is translated into a burden of foreignness as daily life becomes a continual struggle to fit into foreign spaces because in immigration – particularly immigration to the United States - one’s body is always inscribed as foreign within a familiar space because that space – through narratives, histories, and yes, images – has already been coded as white. In his interview with Ly, Danh specifically brings up an early tintype that inspired his project:

> “A couple of years ago, I was visiting an antique photo trade show and found a wonderful tintype capturing three Chinese, perhaps in California, posing in front of a studio backdrop depicting a forest scene. This image made me wonder about how the Asian body fits into the natural landscape of North America. During the California gold rush, Chinese laborers build the railroads, and dug the mines, but a lot of these depictions are written out of history.”[73] (Fig. 2.12)

Fig. 2.12 Unknown Photographer, Three Chinese Men, c. 1880

[73] Ly, 4-5.

While the history of Chinese laborers might easily be forgotten, the presence of Chinese influence was not. As Therese Heyman says, "For a while it seemed that every photographer wanted to include Chinese props in his pictures. It seems obvious today that in picturing the "other" community, Caucasian photographers often misunderstood real cultural signs, fastening instead on superficial details of pigtails and angled roofs."[74] While to say that Caucasian photographers misunderstood real cultural signs may be a bit generous, disregarding stereotypes and latent racism toward Chinese immigrants, Heyman's point is valid in that the issue was not whether immigrants fit into the landscape, but rather *how* they fit and also how they were rendered – in this case as static objects and essentialized identities that literally decorated the white subject.

I am thus arguing that Danh's project is transgressive in that, by taking into his own hands, the means of dictating and deciding the path the viewer takes in their tour of his works within a gallery space, he is able to redirect narratives toward a more open and inclusive one that interrogates existing narratives. The artist states that he is "interested in how we as a nation of immigrants and refugees could 'reflect' on these daguerreotypes and see our faces in this landscape."[75] In tourism, the land is the other, but in immigration, the person is the other. And in that otherness, spaces like Yosemite, spaces that read as American, become inaccessible and barred. Danh's

[74] Theresa Heyman, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Crocker Art Museum and Laguna Art Museum, *Watkins to Westin: 101 Years of California Photography, 1849-1950* (Lanham: Roberts Rineham Publishers, 1992), 68.
[75] Ly, 5.

project allow those silent histories and forgotten bodies to be reflected in that landscape.

What is critical in understanding this project is how Danh's project does not rewrite history. Rather, it disrupts the white pictorial status quo by enabling viewers to see the apparitions of racialized bodies and faces, reminding that seemingly sublime, iconic, and empty landscapes are haunted by racial violence and exclusion. I have attempted, in this chapter, to emphasize repeatedly how his vistas and his images reflect and repeat those of Watkins and Adams, from the vantage points to the absence of people. My emphasis is intended to underscore the emptiness of Danh's images – they are not, in their own subject matters, significant, different, or unique. What they do, however, is create space. In that emptiness, they create space that is simultaneously haunted by those histories written as they have been for centuries since the Mariposa Battalion stormed the Yosemite Valley to gather up the rebellious Native tribes, by the images and photographs that came before, by the silent and deleted Chinese laborers whose labor made the West accessible, by the artist's own body, by the viewers whose faces are reflected and then removed almost instantly as they move on to the next object, reminding them of both their fleeting presence, and also their own positionality within the histories that are evoked by these images. And finally, they are haunted by the landscapes themselves. In the daguerreotype print, the landscapes seem to sit shimmering, uncertain of their own rootedness in the image. They disappear one moment and reappear the next, hinting at their presence even as that presence melts away in another light.

Nothing, ultimately, is certain in these photographs. Meaning has not been removed, but rather unmoored. There is no fixed authenticity, no clearly written historical narrative. Instead, they exist as suggestions of place, of identity, of land, of collisions between peoples and lands. Ultimately, they speak to and evoke the bodies that flit through time and through space to land upon and then depart from those lands. In brief, Vietnamese American artist Binh Danh's *Yosemite* is a project of transgression. Through it, he transgresses the unspoken racial rights to photograph this once exclusive white sight/site of iconic vistas, in effect revealing the haunting violence embedded in those spaces.

"I grew up looking at this expansive land. When you grow up looking at something so overwhelming visually … the heaviness of land … You're defined by place."

– Laurel Nakadate[76]

Chapter Three
Of Bikinis and Bodies:
Laurel Nakadate's Reclamation of the American West

Surrounded and dwarfed by the massive salon-style hanging of her large-scale tearful photographs in the galleries of MoMA PS1, Laurel Nakadate's 2009 project, *Lucky Tiger*, hung quietly adjacent to a large projection of one of Nakadate's video works. (Fig. 3.1). Among these videos and photographs of Nakadate's crying face and

Fig. 3.1 Installation view of *Laurel Nakadate: Only the Lonely* at MoMA PS1, January 23–August 15, 2011. Photo: Matthew Septimus

gyrating body dancing to Britney Spears' 1998 hit, *Baby One More Time,* in the strange homes of random frumpy middle-aged white men, *Lucky Tiger* was presented as a grid of twenty-four standard-sized 4"x6" snapshot photographs against a white brick wall, quiet and unassuming. Upon approaching the photographs, viewers heard

[76] Laurel Nakadate, personal interview, May 1, 2020.

a man's monotone voice drone on above the viewer. In each photograph, the artist is posed, crouching, bending, or kneeling like a pin-up model dressed in various combinations of skimpy bikinis, a cropped Superman T-shirt, and panties. The photographs are mostly shot against landscapes with a pick-up truck, a horse, or a dog. Unsettlingly, each photograph is also covered by dirty fingerprints. *Lucky Tiger* was produced in two phases: first, the performance of the artist road tripping around the American West and taking the photographs themselves, and second, the two performances in which the artist, in the first performance, gathered a group of strange white men to pass around her photographs, and in the second performance, met with a single white man who looked at her photographs while audibly describing what he was looking at.

In this chapter, I examine how Nakadate's body confounds the landscapes that feature as the backdrops to her photographs. In looking at how these places gesture to a generic idea of the American West, I consider the histories and myths these images evoke and how they disrupt a nostalgic American identity that is structured on a white and masculine narrative. How then does Nakadate's body fit into these landscapes? I argue that Nakadate's mixed-race female Asian body coupled with the pointed anonymity of the spaces and landscapes produces an awkward ambiguity of unknowing that the artist strategically uses to produce an uncomfortable re-imaging of American femininity. In seizing upon the strategic ambiguity (drawing, of course, from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "strategic essentialism") of body and land,

Nakadate thrusts her audience into feelings of awkward but political embarrassment that interrupts the visual construction of nationhood and national identity.[77]

An Ambiguous Body in Contentious Spaces

Nakadate's 10-year retrospective at MoMA PS1 in 2011 highlighted the vulnerable and awkward performance pieces that brought the artist's innovative and deeply unsettling works to the art world's attention culminating in an honor that few young artists enjoy: an early-career retrospective curated by Klaus Biesenbach at the contemporary branch of the Museum of Modern Art. The twenty-four photographs from *Lucky Tiger* that were installed during the MoMA PS1 exhibition are just a fraction of the more than 250 photographs that Nakadate made for the project that she handed to her gallerist's assistant to number at random.[78]

In each of these photographs, Nakadate clads herself in lacy panties, tiny bikinis, a cut-off Superman shirt, and often wearing a cowboy hat that mimics the classic Stetson but is more flirtatious than utilitarian. Her props are a blue pick-up truck, a collie-type dog, a horse, and a pair of cowboy boots. What Nakadate wears in these photographs is not random. The frilly panties are a signature of Nakadate's performances, a sexual and yet hyper-feminine costume element that while sexy, are

[77] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's strategic essentialism called for the oppressed groups to seize upon shared characteristics to form political coalitions that could enable them to confront dominant groups that sought to oppress them. In drawing from Spivak's term, I recognize the irony of replacing "essentialism" – which, by definition, is rooted in static and unmutable characteristics – with "ambiguity" – which, conversely, is defined as having a quality of having or being open to more than one interpretation. Yet, mixed race bodies precisely embody this contradiction and, in their racially and ethnically ambiguous body that eludes visual categorization, they have the potential to strategically counter dominant narratives and ideologies. In existing in this place of ambiguity, Nakadate strategically wields the discomfort that her body and its reading produces to reveal both the impossibility and the necessity of racial identity.
[78] Laurel Nakadate, personal interview, May 1, 2020.

notably not overtly so. (Fig. 3.2) Oftentimes pink or patterned, they are more girly and playful than sexual and lusty. Her cropped Superman T-Shirt pays homage to the

Fig. 3.2 Laurel Nakadate, *Lucky Tiger #29*, 2009

classic American superhero, the shy and mild-mannered Clark Kent, an American journalist who, ironically enough, is actually an alien from outer space. When transformed into his true self, Kent stays true to his American ideological convictions

Fig. 3.3 Laurel Nakadate, *Lucky Tiger #20*, 2009

and becomes an unstoppable force for equality and justice. (Fig. 3.3) Nakadate's Superman shirt is complimented by her signature panties. Posed against a pick-up truck, next to a collie, or in a parking lot, Nakadate's body takes on meaning from the objects around her – objects that gesture to the backdrop of Westerns and the all-

American identity that they evoke – even while her ambiguous racial and ethnic identity confounds definition.

It is easy in these photographs to overlook the landscapes in the photographs. The photos are small, and attention is demanded by Nakadate's provocatively posed

Fig. 3.4 Laurel Nakadate, *Lessons 1-10*, still from single-channel video, 2001

body. However, Nakadate's work has always explored notions of unbelonging in spaces and places. She puts herself into spaces in which she does not belong: In her earlier video work, she filmed herself engaging in play-acting with random strangers in their apartments, and in her 2005 *Trouble Ahead, Trouble Behind* performance, Nakadate took photographs of her panties being flung out the window of an Amtrak train during a 30-day melancholy train ride, like sexy love letters tossed to the passing American landscape. (Figs. 3.4 and 3.5) In fact, space and place is always an important component for the artist who grew up in the Midwest of the United States. Born in 1975 in Texas, Nakadate was raised in Iowa, a place that has deeply defined her life and how she defines herself, saying, "…I think it is important that I make

Fig. 3.5 Laurel Nakadate, Video Still from *Trouble Ahead, Trouble Behind*, 2006

work in the Midwest because it is the place where I grew up and started to figure out my identity and how I fit into the world."[79] The artist expanded on that in her discussion with me, "I grew up looking at this expansive land. When you grow up looking at something so overwhelming visually … the heaviness of land … You're defined by place."[80] The backdrops and landscapes of *Lucky Tiger* echo this overwhelming and expansive land that defined the artist's childhood. It is the space of her lived experience and represent her negotiation of her own place in the social fabric of the United States.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the American West is often painted and portrayed as an empty space – vast and glorious, to be sure – but emptied of possession, of people, and of history. Like Binh Danh, for Nakadate, the places and spaces of the West are marked by a whiteness set by a history of photography

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[79] Melissa Chiu, "Preface," *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now* (New Haven & London: Asia Society and Yale University Press, 2006), 28.
[80] Laurel Nakadate, personal interview, May 1, 2020.

dominated by Carlton Watkins and the like. For Nakadate, the West is also insistently masculine written by the same male photographers such as Ansel Adams who have been placed into the canon of Western photography. But it is also written through the lens of Dorothea Lange, the only notable and major female photographer of the West.[81] To take photographs of the West is for Nakadate, like for Danh, an active reclamation of the history of photography that they have inherited and which, in its shadow, they themselves take photographs.

Unlike Danh's *Yosemite* series which feature images that show the recognizable vistas and formations that immediately identify as Yosemite, Nakadate's photographs feature landscapes and backgrounds that are generic and non-specific. They recall American Western movies, a genre that featured dusty towns, gunslinging cowboys, and the raw land that captivated the imaginations of an American audience that was, and still is, in the process of writing the ever-sharpening myth of the genesis of America. The wide-open landscapes, the towns surrounded by craggy mountain ranges were less identifiable landmarks and more a general knowledge of the sublimity of the West as it exists through the hyperrealistic lens of Hollywood.[82]

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[81] Laurel Nakadate (artist) in discussion with the author, May 1, 2020. During my conversation with Nakadate, she pointed out that the Western landscape – in which she was taking the photographs of Lucky Tiger – was a landscape that was primarily written by white male photographers except for Dorothea Lange who she pointed to as the only major female artist to take canonical photographs of the West. Interestingly, it is worth noting that Lange is most famous for her WPA photographs – specifically her 1936 photograph, *Migrant Mother*. In many ways, Lange's photographs of the West are framed less by landscape and more by the people that found themselves on the land and dependent on it for their survival.

[82] Several film scholars and sociologists have found Westerns to be fodder for deep, intellectual discussion. Among them, William K. Everson and George N. Fenin are two of the most influential. F.E. Emery, a sociologist, has explored how these themes were often marketed to children. See: F.E. Emery, "Psychological Effects of the Western Film: A Study in Television Viewing," *Human Relations* 12, no. 3 (1959): 195-232. See also, Willima K. Everson, *A Pictorial History of the Western*

Through Hollywood, the West was imagined as spaces in which cowboys and Indians faced off in distinct battles that would be replicated by generations of kids. The West was sparsely filled with towns in which proper ladies needed saving and the local sheriff was glad to do so. They were formidable, frightening, unlawful spaces that lacked order and civility. The fights were always to protect the little law and order that had been shakily established, always at risk of invasion by the uncivilized.

Indeed, this type of danger (and potential sacrifice) was necessary to make the taking of the land a grand and noble endeavor. Such cinematic framings gestured to its audience as much as the simultaneously desirable and intimidating land. Only the brave, the curious, and the daring would embark on a journey to know the unknowable land. When Nakadate embarked on her journey to capture these photographs, she perhaps unintentionally echoed a critical component of American self-identity and imagination: road trips to explore the vast open land. From nineteenth-century East Coast pioneers looking for opportunities in the blank open canvas of the American West, to the returning veterans of World War II seeking a better life in suburbs built on previously undeveloped land - palatable, organized and carefully predictable – the space of Americanness has always been dependent on the accessibility and availability of land. Even the reactions against the plodding suburban life started in the 1950s that were made manifest in the wild and careening

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Film (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1969) and George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western: From Silents to the Seventies* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973).

Fig. 3.6 Ridley Scott, *Thelma and Louise*, Film Still, 1991

feminist escape of Thelma and Louise or the pages of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* were dependent upon the myth of endless roads, magnificent landscapes, gushing waterfalls and the jagged mountains and rocks that made Thelma and Louise's dramatic suicide possible.[83] The landscape of the American West has always held the allure of possibility coupled with the sublimity of the unknowable. Only against such dynamic landscapes can the unbridled, unstoppable masculine power of American freedom (from law, society, religious persecution, and from expectations) be unleashed. Even if the only outcome of such freedom is death, it is death cast against the sudden drop of the Grand Canyon, of death that is more about what it produces than what it ends. It is the ultimate of escape - glorified, magnified, and made as awesome as the space in which it unfolds. (Fig. 3.6)

[83] The body of American literature and American films that utilize or are dedicated to the theme of road trips in various forms is expansive. I note here two of the most prevalent and frequently cite, Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *On the Road* and the Ridley Scott's 1991 classic film, *Thelma and Louise* as two canonical and influential examples.

Nakadate's body offers a transgressive re-orientation of this imaginary landscape. Inserting herself into a space of dramatic chaos and exclusion that is centered ultimately on a mythological American ruggedness, Nakadate's hyper-sexualized body represents desire and pleasure. In her postures, Nakadate's body performs similarly to the bodies of pin-up girls on World War II bombers or the scantily-clad models whose bodies echo the curves of the racing automobiles upon which their bodies are draped. And yet, Nakadate's body has a definitively non-glossy characteristic; the snapshots look less like professional photographs and more like a young girl's juvenile attempt at taking sexy pictures. The women of American Western films are damsels-in-distress or prostitutes and invariably white. They are inheritors of the binaries that have structured perceptions of women from the founding of the nation. By awkwardly inserting her body into these landscapes, Nakadate counteracts the Western narrative, allowing its fetishization and desire for sexualized women, but with a tangibly more nuanced identity. Nakadate is neither the virgin nor the whore. She is no damsel-in-distress nor is she a shameless prostitute. She is neither white nor a minority. She does not need saving, neither the physical kind nor the soul kind. She doesn't need Superman; she is her own kind of Superman.

In this neither/nor positionality, Nakadate exhibits an unbelonging contradicted by desire. Nakadate's accoutrements and the wider landscape speak to a slightly different kind of America than Danh's *Yosemite*. Like Danh's, Nakadate's America is written through a lens of whiteness but it is also an America that perceives

Asian women as a binary stereotype: simultaneously hypersexual and docile. In the sound recording of the work, the man who is describing the photographs in the second performance says, in response to the photograph of the artist, kneeling splayed out in a blue bikini with a tiger emblazoned on the crotch of the bikini, "lucky tiger."

Fig. 3.7 Laurel Nakadate, *Lucky Tiger #101,* 2009

(Fig. 3.7) The man is referring to the tiger's luck in being plastered up against the crotch of the artist, a highly sexual observation of his own desire at odds with his monotone voice that makes the comment feel more like an objective statement. The artist seized upon the man's comment naming the entire project *Lucky Tiger*. What is interesting are the connotations that the statement takes on depending on the observer. When speaking with the artist, I brought up that, for me, the statement reminded me of the immature ramblings of boys who joke that Asian women were tigers in bed.[84] Luck, of course, also gestures to Asian cultural traditions such as during the Lunar

[84] Certainly the fetishization of Asian women and the stereotypes associated with the meek yet sexual Asian woman is not a laughing matter as it has deadly consequences as exemplified most recently by the shootings of primarily Asian women who worked at massage spas in Atlanta.

New Year when luck is read as a beneficent wish for well-being, health, and happiness. As such, for me, the title immediately evoked Asian stereotypes, an evocation that seemed to surprise Nakadate.

In his write-up on *Lucky Tiger* for The Saatchi Gallery, photography curator William A. Ewing states, “I’d always thought of ‘Lucky Tiger’ as a cheap Chinese aftershave lotion, its name promising its users success in the hunting of women.”[85] Ewing is, of course, referencing Lucky Tiger aftershave that is popular in barber shops. Interestingly, Lucky Tiger, the aftershave, is neither Chinese nor cheap. Priced comparatively to other aftershave creams, tonics and lotions, Lucky Tiger is a proudly American company that traces its histories to the 1920s in Kansas City, Missouri, where its creation is attributed to an amateur scientist who was “one heck of a barber!” named Benjamin Clarke who needed a quality tonic for the hair and scalp of his clients.[86] The logo for Lucky Tiger aftershave features a young

Fig. 3.8 Lucky Tiger Aftershave. Image from Lucky Tiger website.

[85] William A. Ewing,”Laurel Nakadate” Saatchi Gallery, last modified 2020, https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/laurel_nakadate.htm
[86] “About Lucky Tiger,” *LuckyTiger.com*, last modified 2020, https://www.getluckytiger.com/pages/about

Caucasian woman with cascading hair caressing the face of a tiger – the tiger functioning as a stand-in for the men whose faces are soothed and scented and thus made lucky in their romantic/sexual pursuits. (Fig. 3.8) Read another way, the stylized woman with her wavy hair and fine Grecian features is a stand-in for the ideal woman, a natural descendant of the Venuses of Milo, Urbino, and Botticelli. (Fig. 3.9)

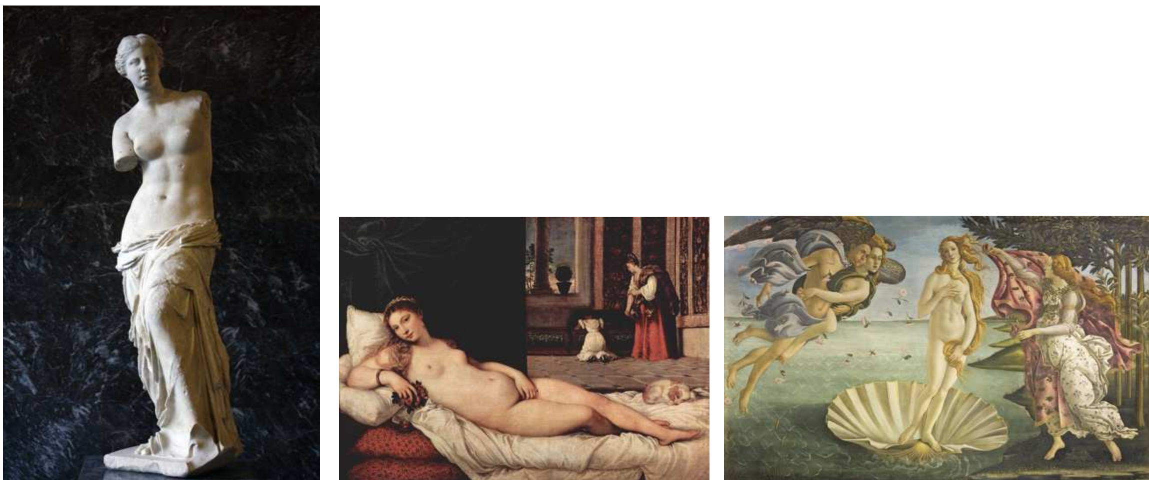

Fig. 3.9 Three examples of depictions of Venus from the history of Western art: 1) Artist Unknown, *Venus de Milo*, 130-100 BCE, 2) Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1534, and 3) Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1484-1486.

Ewing's mistake in referring to Lucky Tiger as a cheap Chinese aftershave, while likely made in innocence, is revealing of the connotations of Lucky Tiger, and of perceptions of Chineseness (or Asianness) as made manifest through the presumed quality of Made in China products. It positions Nakadate's project as inherently and inevitably Asian as opposed to belonging to the history of Western Art. Ewing's revelation of the Asianness implicit in Nakadate's project is an identifier that is oddly and perhaps subconsciously made through the artist's name rather than her appearance. As a mixed-race woman, Nakadate looks racially ambiguous, but with a

Japanese last name, the artist who professionally uses her real name is consistently and constantly marked.[87] It is also arguable that Nakadate's surprise at my initial reading of the meaning of "Lucky Tiger" is also indicative of her mixed-race appearance which can arguably pass as white and thus inhabits an adjacent but unique space in the racial fabric of the United States.

Interrupting A Nation Built on Colonization and Imperialism

The woman on the Lucky Tiger aftershave label is representative of an ideal white woman. The ideal white woman with a hint of demure sexuality is rampant within visual culture. Indeed, a nude or semi-nude body put into a landscape is not unusual. In her 1985 book, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*, Marina Warner considers how ideal civic virtues were, in Greek law, expressed in the feminine.[88] Female forms were rendered as universal, unspecific, and aspirational. Female forms, often in generic landscapes, were allegorical figures employed to represent the nation sometimes to inspire such as in this World War I poster meant to encourage the purchasing of Liberty Bonds for the war effort (Fig. 3.10) and other times as a vulnerable being whose virtue required defense such as in this 1899 editorial cartoon, *The Yellow Terror In All His Glory*, in which a helpless

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[87] The artist shared an anecdote with me about a time when a contractor was in her home to give a pricing estimate for a kitchen and bathroom remodel. She told me the story to illustrate her thoughts about the areas of Rhode Island outside of Providence (where she currently lives) which she found to be surprisingly conservative. The contractor was in the process of drawing up the estimate when he asked for her name. She wrote it down, and he said, "What kind of a name is Nakadate?" She responded, "Japanese." And in disbelief, he left her home. Soon after, she received a telephone call from his wife telling her that they had decided not to bid for the remodeling job. While this conversation did not specifically reference our discussion of her work, I found it telling that Nakadate's identity was, in this case, marked less by visual appearances and more by her name.

[88] Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001.

Fig. 3.10 World War I Poster

woman standing in as the United States is trampled upon by the murderous Chinese immigrant. (Fig. 3.11)

Fig. 3.11 "The Yellow Terror In All His Glory," 1899

While these women – whether empowered or helpless – were always white. On the contrary, a nude or semi-nude non-white body stands as an allegory for savagery and

that required conquering and civilizing. The gendered personification of land and nation gestures also to who is looking at (and claiming rights to) the land. As is made evident in Johannes Stradanus circa 1600 ink-drawing of Florentine Navigator Amerigo Vespuccii encountering the Americas, the encounter is predicated on a sexual encounter as America, in female form, reclines nude either beckoning toward or rising to meet a fully clothed and erect explorer.[89] (Fig. 3.12) As many scholars have pointed out, in this case, her nudity is indicative of her position as an "Indian" and thus savage as three other also nude individuals in the background roast a human

Fig. 3.12 Johannes Stradanus (Jan van der Straet), *The Discovery of America*, 1587-89

[89] Deep gratitude is owed to my advisor, Professor Boreth Ly, for bringing this compelling image to my attention.

leg.[90] Although the reclining female nude is a consistent trope in the history of Western art, in this case, this woman, not yet civilized, is representative of savagery.

America would change, of course. As it developed into a settler colony and eventually a nation-state, America's allegory transformed from a reclining, sexual, savage woman into an upright fully-clothed woman lighting the way onto the shores of a civilized nation. Officially, the statue's title is "The Statue of Liberty

Fig. 3.13 Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, *The Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World*, 1886

[90] Some scholars such as Margarita Zamora in her 1993 book, Reading Columbus, have identified the standing man as Christopher Columbus, however, others such as Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank have since identified the man as Amerigo Vespucci. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which owns an engraving of the image, has also identified the man as Amerigo Vespucci.

Enlightening the World." (Fig. 3.13) Equated to this is not merely an aspirational understanding of the United States as the land of freedom and opportunity, but also of knowledge, civic values, and enlightened perspectives.

The belief of America as a land of self-reliance and perseverance manifests in complex ways. Nakadate pointed to Dorothea Lange as significant to her as the only female photographer whose work has been canonized in relation to an American understanding of Western landscapes and the people who inhabit those spaces. Unlike Adams and Watkins, Lange's claim to fame is *Migrant Mother* – a photograph not of landscape and environment, but rather of humanity and poverty. (Fig. 3.14)

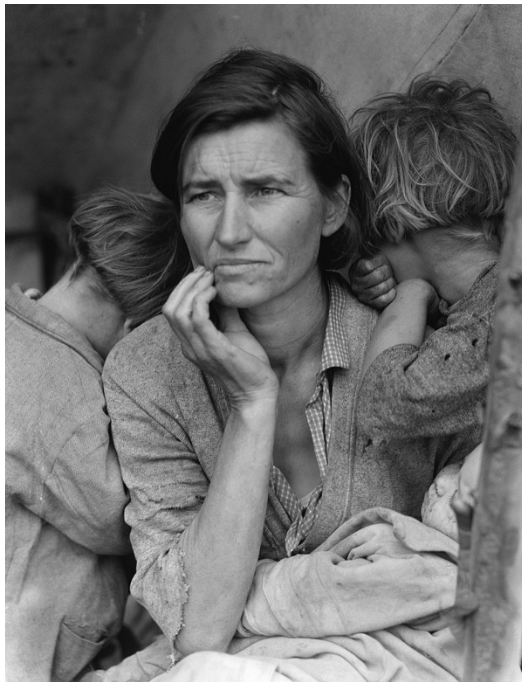

Fig. 3.14 Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936

Lange's Great Depression-era photographs are frequently referenced not so much to illustrate a mythologized notion of the Western landscape, but rather an expanded concept of Americanness. Still, the Migrant Mother functions also as an allegorical

figure. Although she is an actual woman who suffered under the hardships of the Great Depression, Lange's photograph and its subsequent fame is notable precisely because the woman is photographed in such a way as to highlight her perseverance. Surrounded by her hungry children, the woman's forehead crinkles in concern, but her eyes are resolute as they focus on an imagined place into the future where her life will be different if she can just work hard enough. The framing and composition suggest an allusion to the Virgin Mary, the ultimate of female representational figures: virginal and sacrificial. The sanctification of the Migrant Mother into the canon of American Art perhaps speaks more to the country's compelling and inescapable investment in its own ideologies than to the photographer herself.

Moreover, as a noted influence on Nakadate, Lange also offers another reading of the United States. As Linda Gordon, Lange's biographer, notes in her introduction,

> "Lange's America included Mormons, Jews, and evangelicals; farmers, sharecroppers, and migrant farmworkers; workers domestic and industrial, male and female; citizen and immigrants not only black and white but also Mexican, Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese, notably the 120,000 Japanese Americans locked in internment camps during World War II."[91]

Lange's position in the making of America's imagination of the West was significant precisely because her spaces are not unpopulated. Instead, they displayed those that were often erased from and continue to be deleted from American ideologies. Nakadate's evocation of Lange is perhaps most significant, in my view, because of

[91] Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (London & New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2009), xiv.

the 119 photographs that Lange, as an employee of the U.S. government, took of the Japanese American Internment that were impounded and censored until 2006. For Nakadate, as for many other descendants of the World War II internees, a major connection to this specific history exists primarily in the photographs, and prior to 2006, in the absence of these photographs. In this light, Nakadate's photographs against the landscape of the American West gestures silently to the lands that held her father's family, to the West that witnessed the immigration of her picture-bride Japanese grandmother on the shores of the Oregon coast, to her grandfather who served in the US army during World War II, but whose family was nevertheless cast as designated enemies of the country they called home. The landscapes also gesture to the ultimate betrayal embedded in the dusty camps that held her father and his family. Nakadate's relationship to photography is akin to her relationship to her own identity. In discussing how her grandmother was selected to come as a bride to the US through her photograph, Nakadate said simply and poignantly, "My family would not exist without photography."[92]

As such, Nakadate's racial relationship with the United States is undeniably bound to World War II and defined by the actions of the nation. As a mixed-race individual, Nakadate's being is arguably a direct product of settler colonialism in which mixed-race children are both an actual and a symbolic result. Strikingly, the bikini, Nakadate's outfit choice for the titular photograph, is significant in that its design was introduced in 1946 during a time when, as scholar Teresia K. Teaiwa

[92] Laurel Nakadate (artist) in discussion with the author, May 1, 2020.

notes in “bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans”, “The bikini… celebrated the Allied efforts in World War II… In the context of war, society has an ideological stake in the reification of female bodies when male bodies are being sacrificed heroically.”[93] Teaiwa draws attention to the irony of the bikinis’ naming in light of the US’s nuclear testing on the actual location called Bikini Atoll. The bikini thus offered an opportunity to reify the female body as sexualized and desired and as representation of the nation-state and its ideologies while also writing a narrative of erasure that posited the colonized Pacific Islands as spaces of travel and leisure even as the United States was actively conducting destructive nuclear experiments that would render the land unlivable. As Teaiwa states, “A bikini-clad woman visually embodies and denies both sexual and nuclear chaos.”[94] It was during World War II that the United States’ status as world power was cemented, and its actions and attitudes toward Japanese Americans mirrored the imperialistic attitude that would define American foreign policy after the war. Arguably, Nakadate’s bikini-clad mixed-race body embodies and denies America’s ethnic and gender chaos – cause by its own status as a settler colony and as an imperial power. It is a chaos that is defined by ambiguity and confusion, and Nakadate insists that the viewer looks upon the ambiguity and unbelonging of her body as an interruption to the nation-state’s ideological narratives.

[93] Teresia K. Teaiwa, “bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 6:1 (1994), 91.
[94] Teaiwa, 94.

Paraxodically Yours: The (In)Visible Body of Laurel Nakadate

Nakadate's body is almost always the center-of-attention. In her work, it is her medium, and her primary focus. Even in her works that do not image her body such as in her later series *Star Portraits,* in which she photographed previously unknown relatives that she discovered through a DNA-testing kit, and *The Kingdom,* in which she hired strangers to photoshop images of her deceased mother holding her newborn infant son, Nakadate's work remains insistently on her body and the connections that it makes. (Figs. 3.15 and 3.16)

Fig. 3.15 Laurel Nakadate, *Tyler, Texas #1*, 2013

Fig. 3.16 Laurel Nakadate, *The Kingdom #2*, 2018

In her earlier work, Nakadate's work exhibited her body provocatively, insistently encountering a masculine gaze and making that gaze uncomfortably visible to the viewer. In *Lucky Tiger*, however, the men are rendered invisible. In much of her past work, they are a part of the visible aspects of her projects. In this series, however, the men are reduced to the fingerprints which mar the surface of the pictures. As discussed above, the installation not only displayed the photographs with the fingerprints, but also featured the voice recording of a man describing his observations playing above the viewer's head.

These two aspects are representative of two separate performances.[95] In the first, a group of white men found on Craigslist.org were handed "a large stack of snapshots of [herself] in various pin-up positions" and were asked to "pass the photos around in a circle while discussing them."[96] The artist recalls that she said something along the lines of "Describe my body," although she is unsure of the exact wording of her instructions to the men.[97] The men, whose fingertips had been inked in fingerprinting ink, then passed the photographs among themselves while the artist observed in the room. The second performance involved only one man and occurred in the man's home. In this performance, the artist asked the man to also "describe what he saw in the photographs as he sorted through them."[98] This is the man who

[95] Wall Text, *Laurel Nakadate: Lonely No More*, MoMA P.S.1, Long Island City, New York.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Laurel Nakadate (artist) in discussion with the author, May 1, 2020.
[98] Wall Text, *Laurel Nakadate: Lonely No More*, MoMA P.S.1, Long Island City, New York.

remarked "lucky tiger" when looking at *Lucky Tiger #151* (Fig. 3.7), and it is his voice that plays on a loop in the gallery above the viewer.

The way that Nakadate sourced the men in the two performances is common practice for the artist. As a young artist working on her MFA at Yale in New Haven, Connecticut, Nakadate was approached by a middle-aged man in a Home Depot parking lot – an experience not unusual for the artist who, like many other young women, find themselves objects of men's aspirational pick-up lines. For Nakadate, however, the Home Depot parking lot in New Haven became a space of potential. In an interview with *White Hot Magazine*, Nakadate said, "I actually really liked the Home Depot parking lot. I remember going once and meeting a lot of strangers there…I just remember that Home Depot parking lot being really amazing. I just loved the idea that there were so many parking spots and there was always plenty of room. It was just great."[99] Nakadate's enthusiasm for the parking lot is doubly interesting because it was in this very parking lot that one of Nakadate's origin stories took place. As she recounts to *White Hot's* Sam Mirlesse, "this guy gave me his number and said, "Give me a call, let's hang out, and if my mom picks up the phone just tell her you met me at the Home Depot."'[100]

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[99] Sam Mirlesse, "Interview with Laurel Nakadate," *Noah Becker's White Hot Magazine of Contemporary Art*, February 2011, https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/2011-interview-with-laurel-nakadate/2212
[100] Ibid.

This origin story has been repeated to numerous interviewers as the beginning of a series of projects and, at its root, leaves the viewer deeply uncomfortable. How, after all, does an attractive young woman simply invite herself to a single man's house – especially one who has already attempted to pick her up and thus laid bare his desire for her, perform oddly, deeply suggestive (made more so because of the innocence), and sexual activities such as dancing to pop music, having parties, and role playing faux-dramatic scenes, and not get hurt? (Fig. 3.17 and Fig. 3.18) How do these

Fig. 3.17 Laurel Nakdate, *Oops!*, still from three-channel installation, 2000

Fig. 3.18 Laurel Nakadate, *Exorcism in January*, C-Print, 2009

situations of vulnerability not, in even one instance, turn into an actual physically dangerous encounter for the artist? And then conversely, if these situations are not dangerous, then it is these men who are worthy of pity, who are sad and lonely, and it is Nakadate who is the mean one, the pretty young bully in the schoolyard who taunts these men, taking advantage of their loneliness and pathos to make art that would ultimately profit her. As art critic Ken Johnson questions in his review of Nakadate's retrospective at MoMA PS1: "Is she exploiting, teasing and ridiculing these poor, seemingly harmless fellows out of some misguided feminist rage? Is she putting herself in danger? Is she perverted or crazy?"[101] The volleying reactions that viewers have to Nakadate's projects point to the dynamics of power that are always present in human interaction. Such reactions declare and assume that there must always be a winner and a loser, an aggressor and a victim, that an imbalance of power must always be present. What this kind of perspective misses however, and what *Lucky Tiger* presents to us, is not so much that Nakadate is toying with these strange men, but that their presumed desire for her is always already there. It does not matter if Nakadate found the men on Craigslist or ran into them in a parking lot, their gaze and her body exist in perpetual entanglement.

As Laura Mulvey explains in her analysis of Freud's theory of scopophilia, it "continues to exist as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object."[102] For Mulvey, the woman exists as image and, "in a world ordered by

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[101] Ken Johnson, "A Burgeoning Film Career Built on Random Encounters," *The New York Times*, February 25, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/25/arts/design/25nakadate.html

[102] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *Screen 16: 3 (1975), 9.*

sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly."[103] The male gaze is not merely sexual and erotic as Mulvey posits, but also organizing and controlling. It is the male gaze in the guise of New World explorers and the Founding Fathers that constructed a nation built into a "world ordered by sexual imbalance," and defined by the imaging of women as malleable representations of various binaries from the virgin (Mary) and the sinner (Eve) to the nation (Liberty) and its opposite, the savage. As an Asian American woman, Nakadate confronts a nation to whom belonging belonged to white, male citizens. Her body – neither immigrant nor citizen – is confounding to the landscape around her. By placing her sexualized body into these landscapes, Nakadate not only confronts the "male gaze" that styles the passive female figure. She offers herself as a new complicated and undefined allegory for the nation. Her ambiguous body stakes its place within American mythology and refuses the myth of American purity. In the same way that the fingerprints exist only on the surface of the photograph, itself already an illusion, Nakadate invites you to touch her body knowing full well that you can't *touch* her body.

In anticipating and meeting the male gaze, Nakadate builds barriers that prevent access to her body both by the men and the viewer. In encouraging the passing around of the photographs, Nakadate anticipates the desired activity, but by inking their fingerprints, Nakadate catches them, as it were, in their act of looking.

[103] Mulvey, 11.

She captures the evidence. In this way, she counters their gaze structuring not only how they gaze but making visible their looking. Furthermore, as their fingerprints cover the photographs, she creates another barrier. Instead of a cinematic screen on which the female body is styled and posed for male consumption, the screen created by the fingerprints prevent a full and complete view of Nakadate's images. The fingerprints that might hint at the sexualization of her body conversely offer a barrier for the artist from the viewer's gaze thus also interrupting the viewer's access to the American landscape that her body occupies and claims.

In sum, I strove in this chapter to consider the relationship between Nakadate, her body, the landscape, and the West's history through photography. I have moreover sought to consider how Nakadate's provocative posturing is a reaction to the provocative postures of allegorical women who represent lands. From the grasping of the gaze back from the men who claim her body as theirs to putting her body into spaces in which she does not fit comfortably, Nakadate's body stakes a claim not only upon the land but upon the mythologies and identities that the land represents. Her body is ambiguous in the land around her that is laid over with histories that it refuses to acknowledge. Her body presents an opportunity to confront the difficult histories of the United States, and to make visible its homogenous racial monotony and hidden desires. In her body's attractive yet confusing ambiguity, Nakadate strategically accesses the spaces where she would otherwise not be welcomed. In so doing, she disrupts the norms and forms of American landscape, and in effect, captures the American West on her terms.

Chapter Four
A Stereotype of One's Own:
Comedic Connecting in Ali Wong and Hasan Minhaj's Stand-Up

In the latter half of the 2010s, a plethora of mainstream Hollywood movies and television shows emerged that featured either Asian leads or primarily Asian casts. Among several movies and shows and a number of stand-up comedy specials starring Asian Americans, Ali Wong's 2016 and 2018 Netflix specials, *Baby Cobra*

Fig. 4.10 Promotional images for Ali Wong's *Baby Cobra* (2016), Hasan Minhaj's *Homecoming King* (2017), and Ali Wong's *Hard Knock Wife* (2018)

and *Hard Knock Wife* and Hasan Minhaj's 2017 Netflix special, *Homecoming King* offer an opportunity to consider how comedy can be deployed as an incisive tool to address and re-consider prevalent stereotypes within the Asian American community. (Fig. 4.1)

Wong and Minhaj are vastly different comedians. Wong's comedy emerges from late-night, underground comedy clubs and engages traditional and recognizable comedic tropes to carry a joke. She relies on punchlines, using her personal experiences to seemingly deliver jokes simply for a laugh. Minhaj, already well known as a correspondent on Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, performs on a stage

complete with a backdrop of ever-changing projections in a set that is both deeply familial and personal and deeply political. More obviously didactic, Minhaj's set carefully weaves a narrative between his own upbringing and the current racial situation in the United States. Both comedians, however, structure a careful narrative over the course of their hour-long sets. This narrative is bolstered by visual props. For Ali Wong, it is her body, her clothing, and her bodily movements. For Minhaj, his body, clothing, and choreographed movements are enhanced by visual drawings, photographs, and texts.

Despite their differences, I bring these comedians together in this chapter partly because they represent two different "types" of Asian Americans but mostly because both comedians recognize the role of stereotypes in their individual identity construction. In their respective specials, Wong and Minhaj explore varying common stereotypes associated with Asian American bodies, not as an essential entity, but as applicable to their respective and specific "type" of Asian as visualized through their own bodies on stage. In using jokes and humor dependent on a shared stereotypical identity but which refuse self-exoticization, Wong and Minhaj's sets explore how their lived experiences and the stereotypes assumed about them are deeply interwoven in their identities, and in turn, their audiences' identities. Using Homi Bhabha's understanding of stereotypes as requiring reiteration and repetition, I argue that Ali Wong and Hasan Minhaj's stand-up specials reiterate and repeat their attendant stereotypes without resorting to cartoonish caricatures. In so doing, they draw on points of stereotypical connection that I call, "internal stereotypes" in which

stereotypes exist as a communal characteristic and source of connection (and thus humor) rather than a homogenization within that particular community.[104] By doing so, they do not counteract, disrupt, or destroy stereotypes, but rather relocate them outside the center of whiteness. Wong and Minhaj's reiteration of stereotypes offer their Asian American audiences the opportunity to be *seen.*[105] Stereotypes function as a conduit to a connection to a particular intended audience, refusing a collapse of the audiences' identities into the caricature of the stereotypes.

Hasan Minhaj: Just the Kid of an Immigrant

Hasan Minhaj's stand-up comedy special, *Homecoming King*, is autobiographical. Minhaj's decision to film the Netflix special in his hometown of Davis, California, is significant. Minhaj frequently references his childhood in Davis as well as his education at the University of California, Davis, both in this special and in his subsequent weekly political comedy show on Netflix, *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj*. Woven into the title of his special "Homecoming King," the idea of "home" begins his skit. When Minhaj bounds onto the stage yelling, "Davis! What's Up?!

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[104] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question… Homi K Bhabha Reconsiders the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse" in *Screen* 2, no. 6 (1983):18-36. On page 18, Bhabha defines stereotype as "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place,' already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated..." Bhabha locates stereotype as residing in a "process of ambivalence" which "ensures its repeatability." For stereotype to exist and to succeed, it must be constantly and consistently reiterated and repeated.

[105] Hal Foster, Vision and Visuality, x. Drawing on Hal Foster's understanding of vision and visuality as a process and interplay that determines "how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein," I italicize the word "seen" to differentiate it from a physical form of seeing (vision) and root it in a particular psyche of seeing in which it is rooted in an internal connection between parties who share an understanding. Thus, the audience is, as it were, seen by someone whose experience is similar as opposed to being seen by someone who imposes external interpretations onto them. The first is defined by connection and understanding, the second by potential misunderstanding.

I'm home!," the audience filled mostly with Davis residents whoops in recognition and delight.[106] This introduction lays the stage for the narrative that he is about to tell about his family. Minhaj's story is one that begins in Davis, California, although - like any good story - it folds time and moves backwards before his birth to India, where his parents met and where his mother lived for the first eight years of his life, away from her family. By establishing Davis as his home, Minhaj subtly begins to carve out his own identity. Minhaj is fully aware of what he looks like. His brown skin, big baby eyes, and trademark hairstyle mark him clearly as a South Asian man. But Minhaj is quick to bring up that he is also Muslim. He is obsessed with basketball and shoes. Minhaj understands that his appearance writes a homeland for him that is India, and his introduction intercepts that assumption to tie his home specifically to Davis, California. Yet there is no disavowal of India - in fact, the globe that introduces the special and that revolves around his set clearly states his various homes: Davis, California; Alighar, India; and New York City, where the

[106] Christopher Storer, dir., *Hasan Minhaj: Homecoming King*, Art and Industry Productions, 2017, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80134781?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C0e8953425f088b720e38485dc486193f5ea30991%3Ab178e0e09ba4b93192904da85ab6a9ae26d33d69%2C0e8953425f088b720e38485dc486193f5ea30991%3Ab178e0e09ba4b93192904da85ab6a9ae26d33d69%2Cunknown%2C: 0:30.

Fig.4.11 *Hasan Minhaj, Homecoming King*, 2017

comedian now lives. (Fig. 4.2) By diversifying his “home,” as it were, Minhaj shifts the assumption of “homeland,” tied intimately and forcibly to Asian American identities, into a separate conversation.

Minhaj continues on to say, “Popping out of your mom is like real estate: location, location, location. If you’re brown, and you pop out here, you made it!” Minhaj’s punchline underscores two major stereotypes particular to Asian immigrants. The first is the idea of anchor babies often cited by conservatives to argue against immigration. Anchor babies is a derogatory term attributed to children born in the United States of non-citizen parents. Considered to be a nefarious method to skip the immigration line, as it were, anchor babies offer citizenship to a child who can later sponsor their own parent. Anchor babies, while used in anti-immigration arguments across the board, are often particularly associated with Asian immigrants. In many ways, anchor babies are the reverse side of the model minority stereotype. As educated Asians were encouraged to attend school in the United States after 1965, many - international undergraduate and graduate students at universities -

simultaneously settled down and had children while also accruing the degrees and education that fed into the model minority stereotype. Both stereotypes render Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners, accepted for labor but never as citizens.

Moreover, Minhaj's joke also brings forth the consistent and frequent association of Asian American bodies with a homeland that is outside of the boundaries of the United States, cementing the perpetual foreigner stereotype. Yet, as Minhaj's joke makes evident, the idea and understanding of home, so ingrained and indelible in who Asian Americans are and how they are perceived, is a matter almost entirely arbitrary. Entirely out of the hands of the child born in the United States, citizenship and belonging is written not so much by actual citizenship and birthplace, but rather by the circumstances surrounding one's visual appearance. As discussed in previous chapters, the concept of homeland and diaspora has haunted the critical work of Asian American scholars whose research frequently unearths a longing for an imagined homeland. As Salman Rushdie writes, in his book, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*,

> "It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind."[107]

[107] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands in Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991,* New York: Penguin Books, 1992: 10.

Rushdie situates the "homeland" as existing in the imagination. For him, this is for the self - the displaced, the migrant. Arguably, however, this so-called "homeland" exists also in the imagination of the looker. The perpetual foreigner stereotype is not perpetuated by those who do not consider themselves foreigners, but rather by nativists who view "homelands" as static places that produce intruders into their land. For Hasan Minhaj, however, the crisis of homeland is not his. He recognizes the crisis and dislocates it from himself - and from his Asian American audience. It exists, but its irrelevance is literally laughable.

Minhaj's negotiation of "home" as something simultaneously indelible from his identity and yet imaginary underscores the next hour of his special in which he draws the audience through a seemingly predictable child-of-an-immigrant life filled with the stereotypical expectations: a strict immigrant father, model minority Ivy League expectations, and generational divides. Throughout the first half of the special, Minhaj's stories are predictable and almost seem to adhere to a white audience's expectations of a comedic special that confronts race. However, just as Minhaj's idea of "home" is ambivalent, so too are the stereotypes of his stories.

One of the main underlying narratives that is drawn throughout Minhaj's set is the concept of shame among immigrants. Minhaj draws the stereotype throughout the show. First, he introduces it in telling the story of his engagement to his now-wife, a Hindu woman, a controversial move for a Muslim man. As his father is about to ring the door to her home to meet her parents, he pauses and says what Minhaj claims is

Fig. 4.12 Hasan Minhaj, *Homecoming King,* 2017

the "one sentence that is the killer of every brown kid's dream. 'Hasan, I don't think we should do this...Log Kya Kahenge… what would people think?" As the audience groans in recognition, the phrase is projected onto the stage behind Minhaj, boldly written in Hindi (and underneath it, the phonetic transliteration makes it comprehensible to an American audience).[108] (Fig. 4.3) By placing this narrative and the offending sentence first within his childhood as the child of an immigrant then within the context of a Hindu/Muslim union, Minhaj frames the shame and its role in

[108] Storer, 21:36

the stereotype of immigrant parents within his own community. In so doing, he removes it from the white gaze by placing it within a point of conflict that lies outside of whiteness. As he continues in the story, Minhaj will first locate the conflict within his own Indian American community that discusses racism all the time, but rarely locates racism within their own community.[109]

Later, as he conveys a story about going to prom with a white girl, the mother - whom he has known, dined with, answered the door. Minhaj sees another boy putting a corsage on his date's hand and the mother says,

> "Oh my god, honey, did Bethany not tell you? Aw sweetie, we love you, we think you're great, we love that you come over and study. But you know, tonight's one of those nights where, you know, we have a lot of family back home in Nebraska, and we're going to be taking a lot of photos tonight so we don't think it'd be a good fit."[110]

Minhaj continues,

> "The sad part was that I felt bad for being there. That was the embarrassing thing. Like who was I to ruin their picture perfect celebration? Naw, you've seen movies. We're not in them like that. How many times have you seen that on screen? And it's not like they're a bunch of toothless yokels, yelling 'sand n*gger' from the back of their truck. I could let that roll off my back. I'd eaten off their plates; I'd kissed their daughter. I didn't know people could be bigoted even as they're smiling at you. It's hard to understand when you see people saying they love you but they're afraid of you at the same time. I didn't know what that meant until the following Monday. During first period, she finds me in front of my locker. She's like, 'Hey listen, Everyone's been asking why we didn't go. Please don't say anything. My parents are good people. It's a generational thing. Please don't say anything."[111]

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[109] Storer, 22:34.
[110] Storer, 43:04.
[111] Storer, 43:45.

Minhaj draws two parallels between his own culture and the "traditional" white culture of the girl: generational divide and shame. By doing so, he relocates generational divide from being particular and unique to immigrant communities to all communities. I would, however, caution against the temptation to see this as Minhaj making a claim that all communities are the same. Rather, Minhaj is creating an argument for a more complex negotiation of parent/child relationships, racism, and generational perspectives, not a more reductive one. As illustrated in the example of shame, the respective "people" whose opinions his father and her mother care so deeply about are different. For the mother, of course, the "people" is not only her own family but more widely her social circle - an immediate world that is dictated by norms and expectations. Similarly, for Minhaj's father, the imaginary "others" is also his immediate circle - the aunties and uncles that make up their social and familial world. Both worlds - brown and white - exist within themselves. What this accomplishes is that it brings a particular nuance and interiority to both worlds that emphasizes the humanity of, not just one culture, but both. It removes the static fixity of stereotypical assumptions as lying solely in the identity of immigrants. While it would again be easy to reduce the comparison of Minhaj's father to his non-prom date's mother as equating them, Minhaj does not bring his father to the level of the white mother. Instead, he creates an image of his father full of nuance, shortcomings and strengths, fear and bravery. In so doing, he also relocates racism - as a complicated inter-human crisis - outside of only the realm of whiteness.

Like this particular example, much of Minhaj's stand-up is addressed to a brown audience. Minhaj speaks quickly, moving seamlessly through both Hindi/Urdu and English, and from the reaction of the audience, it is clear that his largely South Asian audience is with him every step of the way. In connecting with his brown

Fig. 4.13 Screengrab from Netflix, "But First, Tan ft. Hasan Minhaj – Patriot Act," YouTube Video, 2:21.

audience in a way that is, at certain points, confusing and chaotic to a non-brown person, Minhaj refuses to cater to a presumed audience for ratings or relevance. This de-centering of whiteness is a point of radicality particularly in the world of entertainment. A short addendum added onto Netflix's YouTube channel on October 25, 2018, is exemplary of a non-white-centered exchange between two American celebrities - neither of whom are white. Tan France, the fashion expert on Netflix's hit makeover series, *Queer Eye*, dresses Hasan Minhaj in anticipation of the launch of Minhaj's political series, *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj*. (Fig. 4.4) The ensuing conversation is entirely centered on the two brown men. That France is from the United Kingdom and Minhaj is from the United States is almost irrelevant. They jab at their presumed white audience for being easily confused at Indian names. Both

stars' names have been changed (Hasan Minhaj's pronunciation has been changed, Tan France's has been shortened) to be easier for an American audience. Minhaj pokes fun at France for not knowing what a 'f*ckboy' is, precisely because he knows that they both sport the characteristics of a 'brown f*ckboy' - chiseled facial hair and a tall, slicked-back, pompadour hairstyle. These are what might be called "internal stereotypes" - or points of shared understanding and characteristic among people of the same ethnic or racial background. They talk about their respective responsibilities representing brown people to a mainstream audience. But then, toward the end of the brief clip, Tan says, "Indians are going to freak! We have an Indian and a Pakistani together! Where do you see that?!"[112] Almost exactly one year later, on October 28, 2019, Tan France and Hasan Minhaj met up via Skype for another interaction. Near the end of the clip, France asks Minhaj, rhetorically, "Isn't it so lovely the response

Fig. 4.14 Netflix is A Joke, "Tan France Reviews Hasan's Outfits | Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj," YouTube Video, 13:45, October 28, 2019

[112] Netflix, "But First, Tan ft. Hasan Minhaj – Patriot Act," YouTube Video, 9:54, Oct. 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFhRONeopbQ: 9:28.

from the South Asian community after that video? … Isn't it sad also to think that they were so deprived of South Asian interaction that this was such a highlight for them?[113] (Fig. 4.5) Perhaps what is even more radical lies at the end of the exchange in which Tan France says, "it was so good to speak to you! I'll speak to you soon, InShallah."[114] (Fig. 4.6) Minhaj responds in kind. Though one identifies as Pakistani (Tan France) and the other identifies as Indian (Hasan Minhaj), and though that

Fig. 4.15 Netflix is A Joke, "Tan France Reviews Hasan's Outfits | Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj," YouTube Video, 13:45, October 28, 2019

difference was noted in their earlier YouTube exchange, their similarity in this case - as two South Asian individuals who identified as Muslim was made evident. In the post 9-11 era in the United States, even two decades after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, anti-Muslim sentiment continues to permeate. In a

[113] Netflix is A Joke, "Tan France Reviews Hasan's Outfits | Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj," YouTube Video, 13:45, October 28, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtPTh4eKkes: 11:58.
[114] Netflix is A Joke, "Tan France Reviews Hasan's Outfits | Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj," YouTube Video, 13:45, October 28, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtPTh4eKkes: 13:12.

brief 30-second moment of a short YouTube video, France and Minhaj bade a radical farewell to each other that normalized a shared religious identity that has become a contentious one within the United States. Simultaneously, however, they also recognized and acknowledged the traumatic and fraught divisions between their respective communities harkening back to the Partition of India in 1947 which divided the soon-to-be former British India into two independent dominions. Revealing the multiple ideological structures beneath their complex relationality, Minhaj and France exhibit both their mutual commonalities and respective differences.

Minhaj, both in his stand-up and in his career, is deeply political. Embedded in his work is a claim to an Americanness that does not intrude or counteract his Indianness. For Minhaj, the two exist in tandem. Minhaj's special begins with his claim of Davis as his homeland. Approximately halfway through the special, Minhaj discusses the impact of post 9/11 racism on his family. As his father commands him to hide that he is a Muslim and not talk about politics, Minhaj gestures to his face and rubs his skin, sarcastically saying, "All right, Dad, I'll just hide it, cool. This just rubs off."[115] Minhaj continues on to detail a racist incident in which his family was attacked in the aftermath of 9/11. While his father quietly and bravely cleans up the broken glass, Minhaj is stunned at his father's quiet acceptance of racism as a price that the immigrant must pay to be in the United States. Minhaj, on the other hand, says, "But for me, I was born here. So I actually have the audacity of equality. I'm

[115] Storer, 26:20.

like, naw, I'm in Honors Gov! I have it right here. Life, Liberty, Pursuit of Happiness… All men are created equal. It says it right here, I'm equal!"

While Minhaj details the racist event and his own reaction, the stage's background is lit up with images of the American flag, further enhancing his claim to

Fig. 4.16 Hasan Minhaj, *Homecoming King,* 2017

Americanness. (Fig. 4.7) Minhaj's use of the screen in his performance serves not only to illustrate his stories, but like slide presentations in art history classes, the images present a story in themselves. For Minhaj, who has always used projections in his various shows, the images offer an opportunity to surround his marked body on stage with images that offer layers of meaning to his body. Illustrated by the special's art director, Sam Spratt, whose style Minhaj describes as "kind of like new American Rockwell, where he'll take these Rockwell Americana images and put protagonists of color in them…"[116] Like Rockwell whose illustrations of an idealized quotidian

[116] Hershel Pandya, "Hasan Minhaj's 'Homecoming King' is an American Story, Whether You Get the References or Not," New York Magazine, May 23, 2017, htttps://www.vulture.com/2017/05/hasan-

Fig. 4.17 Hasan Minhaj, *Homecoming King*,
2017

American way of life has come to represent a particular nostalgic sense of Americana, Spratt's images utilize similar aesthetics to challenge that same nostalgia that overlooks the erasure of people of color in American history. For Spratt and Minhaj's collaboration, Minhaj's desire to "pay homage to [his family's] roots in India" led to "strong yellows and oranges, and a few visual elements from things like Bollywood posters."[117] These images, like the drawing of Minhaj's father and Minhaj as a young boy shopping in a typical American-seeming grocery store reveal, upon closer inspection, a Bollywood poster on the right side, and Indian ingredients on the shelves, all tinged in a warm orange-yellow wash. (Fig. 4.8) Similarly, the image of the American flag is tinged with the same orange-yellow color. Instead of merely adamantly proclaiming Minhaj's family's right to Americanness, the images

minhajs-homecoming-king-is-an-american-story-whether-you-get-the-references-or-not.html, accessed March 18, 2021.
[117] Ibid.

and backdrop suggest a bleeding of cultures and identities and ethnicities that refuse an either/or identity. The viewing of Minhaj's comedy is always a process. His presentation of stories and images always present as if affirming stereotypes – in the case of these images, of an Indian man's desire to be American (and the ultimate desirability of Americanness) or of his insistence on his own Americanness, but upon closer inspection, these images do not so much express a desire, but rather a state of being or of living in which Minhaj's identity and lived experience is a bleeding of multiple cultures and experiences and homes into one another.

Ali Wong: The Pregnant Hoarder

For Ali Wong, the only visual on her stage is her own marked body. Wong, influenced by her comedic inspirations such as Dave Chapelle and Chris Rock, stands

Fig. 4.9 Ali Wong, *Hard Knock Wife*, 2018

Fig. 4.10 Ali Wong, *Baby Cobra*, 2016

on a blank stage with the classic stool, a bottle of water, and a microphone.[118] (Fig. 4.9 and 4.10)

Wong has no trouble taking up visual space on her stage. Her body is striking, not just in its pregnancy, but in the loudly patterned body-con dresses - black and white stripes in her first special and leopard print in her second. The dresses accentuate and emphasize her pregnant belly. Wong's long black hair and big red glasses round out her outfit. The only subtle part of Wong's outfits are her flat shoes, wisely worn in the third trimester of her pregnancy. Wong's directing of her audience's attention to her body is no accident as the majority of her content is centered on her body, its processes, and its sexuality. Moreover, Wong's body is also the locus of her racialized identity - an identity which Wong takes as assumed. Her first special, *Baby Cobra*, begins with an interrogation of age. For Wong, who turned 33 the year of the special, her pregnant body offers an opportunity to describe her sexual escapades in her younger years. Wong struts across the stage and gestures frequently to her body. She refrains from mentioning anything having to do with race until she brings up what she calls her hoarding problem almost five minutes into the set. Her hoarding problem is, she hopes, the center of all her problems. She attributes her hoarding problem to her mother, because her mom "is from a third world country, and she taught me that you can never throw away anything, because you never know when a dictator is gonna overtake the country and snatch all of your

[118] Jason Zinoman, "The Strategic Mind of Ali Wong," The New York Times, May 3, 2018, accessed Feb. 24, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/arts/television/ali-wong-netflix-hard-knock-wife.html.

wealth! So you better hold onto that retainer from the third grade 'cause it might come in handy as a shovel when you're busy shoving gold up your butt and running away from the communists."[119] Wong's joke gestures to the generational divide similar to Minhaj's relationship to his father. Her relationship to her mother recalls iconic texts such as Amy Tan's novel, *The Joy Luck Club* or Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir, *The Woman Warrior*. Both books are referenced in Lisa Lowe's ovarian essay, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity and Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Difference," in which Lowe puts forth the inherent problem in understanding culture or ethnic identity as something that is only passed down from generation to generation (and thus particularly fraught when considered in the context of two generations that come-of-age in two different nation-states and their attendant cultures). Instead, Lowe underscores the complex web through which ethnic identity might be developed and contextualized, arguing for a "'horizontal' relationship" in which "the making of… culture - how ethnicity is imagined, practiced, continued - is worked out as much between ourselves and our communities as it is transmitted from one generation to another."[120]

For Wong, the issue is not a particular passing down of an ethnic culture from mother to daughter. Instead, Wong's joke is embedded in her mother's status as a

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[119] Karas, Jay, dir., *Ali Wong: Baby Cobra*, May 5, 2016, Comedy Dynamics and New Wave Entertainment, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80101493?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C0604c70c52f41a9145a5ce26c2057cc9baa13bb3%3A007f44df1bc99335b6569c8d58089a181470878f%2C0604c70c52f41a9145a5ce26c2057cc9baa13bb3%3A007f44df1bc99335b6569c8d58089a181470878f%2C%2C

[120] Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, and Multiplicity: Asian American Differences," *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1996: 25-26.

refugee. As such, her hoarding problem which she hopes might be the center of all her problems, is rooted in this traumatic past. Of course, Wong's jokes, like Minhaj's are also aimed in conversation - through shared internal stereotypes - with fellow Asian Americans. Asian Americans know, internally, that immigrant parents tend to gather and hold onto things and objects - signifiers not just of trauma which stripped away everything they had or of immigrant lives that began with nothing, but also of memories that are otherwise lost or unreachable. From this first introduction of her racial identity, Wong's set morphs into a subtle but incisive reclaiming of the colonized narrative.

Even in discussing her financial situation, she says that she wants to get to the point where she can "comfortably afford sliced mango. Know what I'm talking about? I'm talking about that Whole Foods mango. That $10-a-box Whole Foods mango that was sliced by white people. That's the kind of income bracket I'm striving for."[121] On the surface the exorbitant prices of Whole Foods is largely understood by her whole audience, but for an Asian American audience, sliced fruit is representative of labor done by people of color for the consumption of white men. For Wong, this is the ultimate triumph - she, a woman of color, consuming the labor of a white man. Certainly, the relationships between Asian women and white men are fraught and directly addressed by Wong. She knows that she appears as a strong-willed, confident woman on stage, but as she states, women who look like her usually date white men. Wong's 2018 set begins with, "I heard a rumor that all of the Asians

[121] Jay Karas, dir., *Ali Wong: Baby Cobra:* 36.94

in this city...have congregated in this theater tonight. Thank you for coming with your white boyfriends."[122] But her husband, she emphasizes, is Asian. More specifically, however, the stereotype of Asian women dating white men is, for Wong, a platform upon which to explore a larger and more complex history of colonization that, as discussed above, directly impacts Wong's lived experience. Her acute awareness of the history and narrative of colonization is from both her own life, and her existence in her female Asian body.

As a small Asian woman, Wong's stand-up frequently turns the narrative around to position herself as the colonizer. One of the most hilariously memorable moments in Wong's 2016 set was when she, mimicking herself receiving oral sex, put forth the image of crushing the head of her sexual partner. In reference to this imagined sexual partner being white, Wong shrieked out, "colonize the colonizer!"[123] Although Wong's set doesn't overtly dwell on colonization, it functions as subtext to many of Wong's jokes. When she tells her (female) audience to go home and surprise their men with a little anal play, she tells them what to expect. She lets the audience know that "you'll get a lot of resistance from the man at first." Then Wong turns around, and miming a man protecting his anus, Wong's voice becomes high-pitched and takes on a hint of an accent. She acts out, "No, please, No, really, I don't

[122] Jay Karas, dir., *Ali Wong: Hard Knock Wife*, May 13, 2018, Comedy Dynamics, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186940?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C1%2C0604c70c52f41a9145a5ce26c2057cc9baa13bb3%3A007f44df1bc99335b6569c8d58089a181470878f%2C0604c70c52f41a9145a5ce26c2057cc9baa13bb3%3A007f44df1bc99335b6569c8d58089a181470878f%2C%2C: 01:09.
[123] Jay Karas, dir., *Ali Wong: Baby Cobra*: 11:20.

--, no! I don't! I don't! No!"[124] (Fig. 4.11) Her accented voice, the frenzied shrieks,

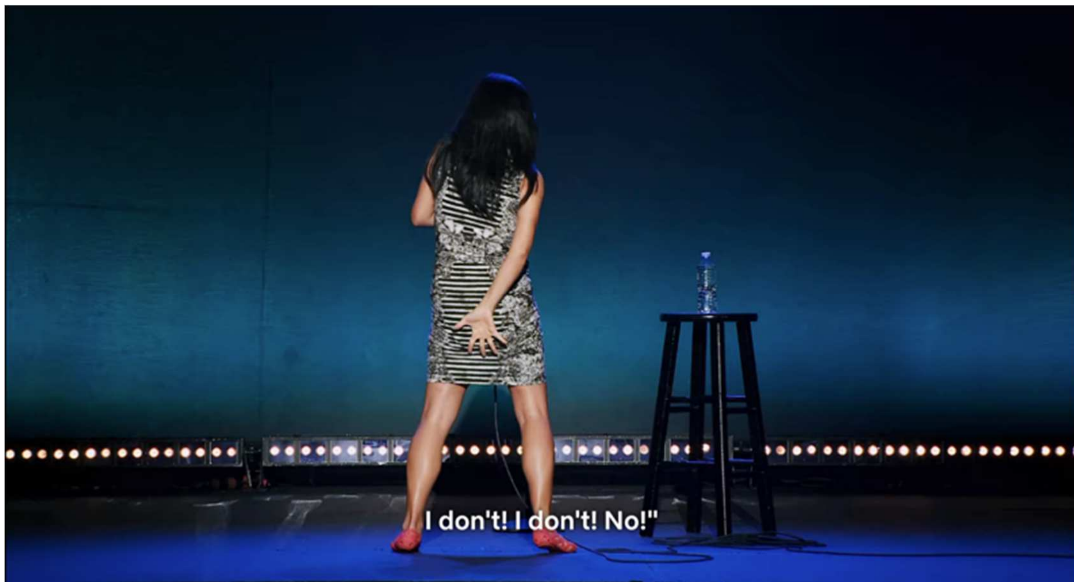

Fig. 4.11 Ali Wong, *Baby Cobra*, 2016

Fig. 4.12 Scene from Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*, 1987

and the shaking and shivering of her body is reminiscent of otherwise silent, docile, or promiscuous Vietnamese side characters in the movies that defined American recollections of the Vietnam War such as *Full Metal Jacket*, in which a Vietnamese woman approached the protagonists in Full Metal Jacket saying "Me so horny!" over

[124] Jay Karas, dir., *Ali Wong: Baby Cobra*: 33:04.

and over again.[125] (Fig. 4.12) The representation of Vietnamese women as hypersexual or as demure and in need of salvation reflects simultaneously the feminization of the land of Vietnam, which needed the salvation that the United States had to offer and thus rationalized American foreign policy, and the dehumanization of the women themselves thereby rationalizing white men's objectification and desire for Asian women. Wong, in her embodiment of a white man as the shrieking, accented Asian woman, speaks as the colonizer about to invade - in this case - the white man's body despite his objections. Most significantly, the invasion brings her pleasure precisely because of the objection. Her desire to bring pleasure to him despite himself signals the justification of American invasions into foreign lands.

I would like to suggest here that Wong's performative negotiation of her body and its sexuality offers an opportunity to consider her comedy through the lens of 1960s performance art in which women such as Carolee Schneeman, Marina Abramovic, and Yoko Ono cited and utilized their own bodies as primary source material and object of inquiry. Carolee Schneeman, for instance, during a performance, pulled a scroll out of her vagina, reading a conversation from Schneeman's film, *Kitch's Last Meal,* a project she began in 1973. The conversation presents the artist "[setting] intuition and bodily processes, traditionally associated

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[125] Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*, Stanley Kubrick Productions with Natant Productions, June 26, 1987.

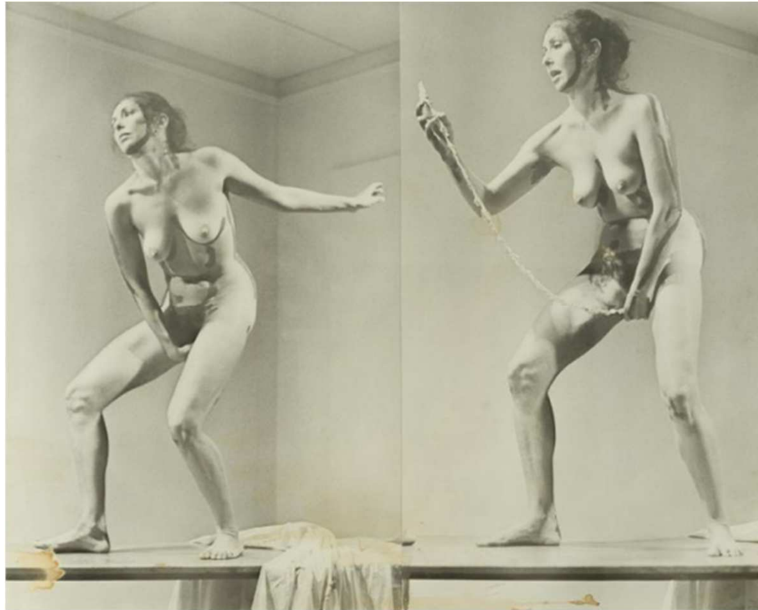

Fig. 4.13 Carolee Schneeman, *Interior Scroll*, 1975

with 'woman', against traditionally 'male' notions of order and rationality."[126] (Fig. 4.13) In Schneeman's performance, the female body - and its most taboo feature - the vagina - or what Schneeman called the "vulvic space," is centered. This space represents not only the female body, but the inscribed notions of femininity that has been imposed upon it. Like Schneeman's re-orientation of what is considered masculine or feminine, Ali Wong's stand-up is a reorientation also of what has been imposed upon her body - racialized narratives. Like these artists, Wong also centers her body as the site of anxiety, expression, and, ultimately, resolution.

[126] Elizabeth Manchester, *Carolee Schneeman: Interior Scroll*, 1975, Tate, November 2003, accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-interior-scroll-p13282

Unlike Schneeman and many of her contemporaries, Wong is not a white woman. Instead, her body is marked not only by gender, but also by race - the two

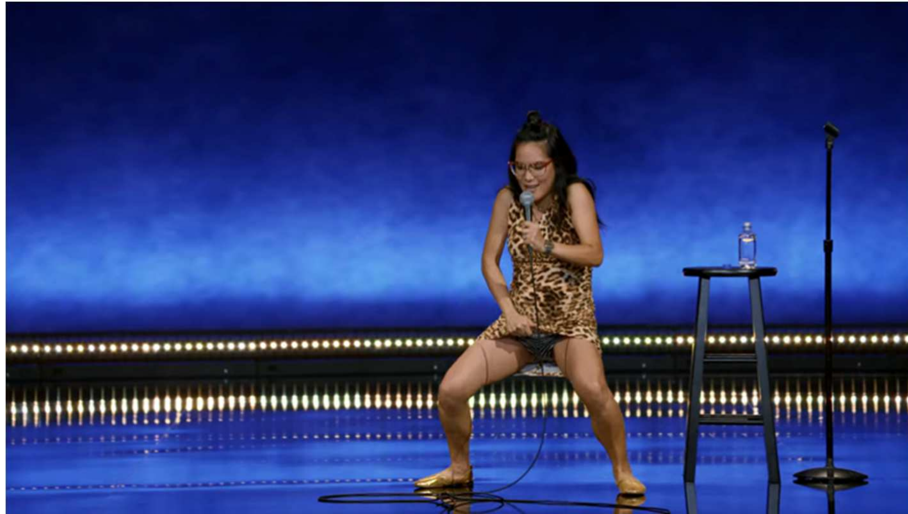

Fig. 4.14 Ali Wong, *Hard Knock Wife*, 2018

which, intersectionally, cannot be separated.[127] Returning once again to Frantz Fanon's corporeal malediction, Wong's body exists in a state of being marked by an ethnic identity and its attendant stereotypes. As such, Wong's project is an ambivalent project - her body exists always in a state of conflict and crisis. As Bhabha's stereotype is dependent on reiteration and repetition, it is also defined by ambivalence - a state of conflict that exists somewhere between the body's markers and its surrounding context. Like Schneeman, Wong's body refuses to be a site of shame. Like Schneeman and Yoko Ono discussed below, Wong stands on a minimal stage that allows all attention to focus on her body. She spreads her legs flashing her

[127] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Stanford Law Review 34, No. 7 (July 1991), 1241-1299. I am, of course, referring to Kimberle Crenshaw's theorization of intersectionality which, among other things, reveals the implicit whiteness that has structured feminist thought and cultural production.

underwear to the audience, miming the vaginal discharge that she comfortably enjoyed in her youth. (Fig. 4.14) She openly discusses her sexual encounters with not one, but two homeless men. Even as she, unashamedly, tells the story to a cringing and laughing audience, Wong exhibits no shame.

Fig. 4.15 Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1965

Her work, in this way, counteracts not merely the tropes of femininity that structured Schneeman's performance, but also raced narratives of Asian women as being meek, obedient, and demure. Yoko Ono's 1965 *Cut Piece* performed this narrative. (Fig. 4.15) As Ono sits silently on a stage with the invitation to the audience to cut her clothing off, the audience claps as various people - noticeably almost all white - walk onto the stage to cut her clothes off. As Ono's sweater begins to slip from her shoulders and her chemise is exposed, a man walks up to her, kneeling before her to cut her shirt just enough so that the fabric falls around her shoulder. Then another man hikes up his pants so he can crouch down saying to the audience, "this is very delicate, it might take some time" with a smirk. He crouches next to Ono, snipping down the center of her chemise, moving carefully around her to

slip the chemise off, fully exposing her bra. Ono's apprehension and discomfort is visible. She looks down, gesturing as if to stop him, but ultimately stops herself from interrupting her own performance. Voices from the audience laugh and a woman's voice can be heard saying, "... getting carried away."[128] Ono's silence and stillness seems to imbue her audience with confidence, but it is arguable that, in seeing her Asian body, the audience felt already that they had a right to it. Simultaneously, Ono's visible silence also locates her discomfort onto that of her audience. In a feminist era that didn't necessarily make much room for women of color, Ono's project made visible the violation of her body. Certainly in the era of 1965, Asian faces were broadcast daily into American living rooms through the first televised war, the American War in Vietnam. Already, Americans were negotiating a complicated relationship to Asian faces both on screen and at home. Wong's embodiment of a white man shrieking with an accented voice in protest of anal penetration is exemplary of Wong's knowledge of how her body, like Ono's, presents to her audience. Unlike Ono, Wong's celebration and shameless description of her sexual prowess in her younger years and her current bemoaning of her changing and aging sexuality, is not only an adamant reversal of the assumptions associated with stereotypes of bodies like hers but also an act of normalization.

Ultimately, however, both of Wong's sets are performed while she is noticeably pregnant. Pregnancy suggests fertility and procreation even as it suggests

[128] Vabethany, Yoko Ono-Cut Piece (1965), YouTube Video, Feb. 28, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lYJ3dPwa2tI: 6:56

the removal of virginity. Pregnancy is, in itself, a time of ambivalence, in which a woman exists in-between and outside the virgin/whore binary. Certainly in Western art and Western narratives, the virgin/whore binary is often cited as a reductive model against which all women are positioned - a binary first identified by Sigmund Freud - and actively negotiated within feminist art, but for Asian Americans, the binary of virgin/whore is coupled with the conniving Dragon Lady or demure China doll.[129] As such, Asian American women are fetishized always beyond their femininity, always marked by their racialized body. Ali Wong's outfit selections, body-con dresses tightly wrapped around her very pregnant body, saucy eyeglasses, and her performative motions which emphasize, alternately, her sexuality and her pregnancy, combine into a complicated compilation of the dragon lady, the demure China doll, the virgin, and the whore. She is a pregnant woman, in the process of procreating as women are supposed to do, but bounding around and squatting on the stage, as women most certainly are not supposed to do all while presenting herself in a skin-tight dress and flashing her panties at the audience. The ambivalence of her identity and her body is center to the performance. Even in the "Trap His Ass" narrative woven throughout her 2016 set, Wong sets up a narrative in which she meets her future husband only to learn that he is enrolled at Harvard Business School. Armed with the knowledge of his earning potential, she sets out to "trap his ass."[130] Of

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[129] W.M. Bernstein, *A Basic Theory of Neuropsychoanalysis*, New York: Routledge, 2011: 106. In his book, Bernstein introduces and explains Freud's understanding of men's psychological development that saw woman as either saintly Madonnas or as Prostitutes. Thus, for Freud, men were incapable of loving that which they desired and desiring that which they loved.
[130] Jay Karas, dir., *Ali Wong: Baby Cobra:* 8:56

course, the punchline, the last joke of the hour-long set, is that Wong, with her television money, paid off his 70,000 dollars of student loan debt thereby demonstrating that her dragon lady tactic not only did not pay off in the end, but effectively rendered her the breadwinner. In this scenario, she is both dragon lady and demure China doll, but so is her husband who both "tricked" her into paying off his student debt and is simultaneously emasculated by needing to be cared for. In *Hard Knock Wife*, Wong continues the husband joke detailing how his family made her sign a prenup before their wedding, not realizing that she would be the one making the money thereby blocking him from accessing her wealth in the event of a separation.

The Long History of Race and Humor

Race and humor have a complicated relationship in the history of the United States. The use of humor to explore complicated and sensitive racial issues is not new. Political cartoons and commentaries have historically relied on the use of visual stereotypes to deliver a successful punchline. In fact, the history of American crises can arguably be traced throughout the history of political cartoons and commentaries. More relevantly, the visual immediacy of political cartoons can offer a particularly potent vehicle through which American race relations is explored. The significance of Hasan Minhaj and Ali Wong's bodies on stage cannot be underestimated. The history of visual depictions about Asian Americans has historically and alternately portrayed Asian Americans as either evil and mischievous or as submissive and docile. Unsurprisingly notable imagery of Asian Americans tend to arise in moments

of national crisis and follow both domestic and foreign policies inside the United States. During the nineteenth century when railroad building demanded cheap labor, Chinese men were welcomed to come to the United States to fill those particular roles. As the number of Chinese increased, anxieties over immigration also increased. When the transcontinental railroad was completed, Chinese laborers began seeking other employment opportunities stoking fears in Americans that their jobs would be taken from them to be given to Chinese laborers who seemed more willing to work for lower wages in poorer conditions. Founded by Joseph Puck, Puck Magazine, the first successful political humor magazine to be published in the United States, featured many anti-Chinese lithographs including the cartoon, “A Picture for Employers. Why They Can Live on 40 Cents a Day, and They Can’t.” The lithograph

Fig. 4.16 Joseph Puck, “A Picture of Employers. Why They Can Live on 40 Cents a Day, and They Can’t,” *Puck Magazine*, 1878

by the Puck, himself an immigrant, was published in 1878 and depicts, on the left side, a crowded room of Chinese men sporting queues, squatting on the floor and lazily packed onto bunk beds. (Fig. 4.16) The men are eating rats and presumably smoking opium. By contrast, the right register depicts a white American family as the father arrives home from work to a wife, children, and a thriving homelife. The comparison positions the Chinese as dirty, animalistic, and degraded. The implication is that the Chinese men work to only survive, while the man on the right works to produce a Christian family for the good of the Nation. Published four years before the passing of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the cartoon utilizes a subtle and dark humor that illustrates larger racial anxieties while also putting forth a political opinion.

Such cartoons illustrated and represented the varying political anxieties of particular times and the attendant opinions. During World War II, Theodor Seuss Geisel, also known as Dr. Seuss, employed as an editorial cartoonist by the New York newspaper, *PM*, produced many cartoons in support of the United States' war effort. The cartoons regularly depicted Japanese war enemies with round-snubbed noses, slanted eyed, grinning, and smug. The depiction of Japanese Americans lined up along America's West Coast in "Waiting for the Signal from Home" suggests, of course, that Japanese Americans are not home already, but rather constantly longing for (and taking instructions from) a now-enemy homeland. (Fig. 4.17) Such depictions of their fellow Americans as perpetually foreign offered an opportunity for

a laugh of recognition - the artists of these cartoons were able to quickly reach a sympathetic audience who could read these racist depictions with familiarity.

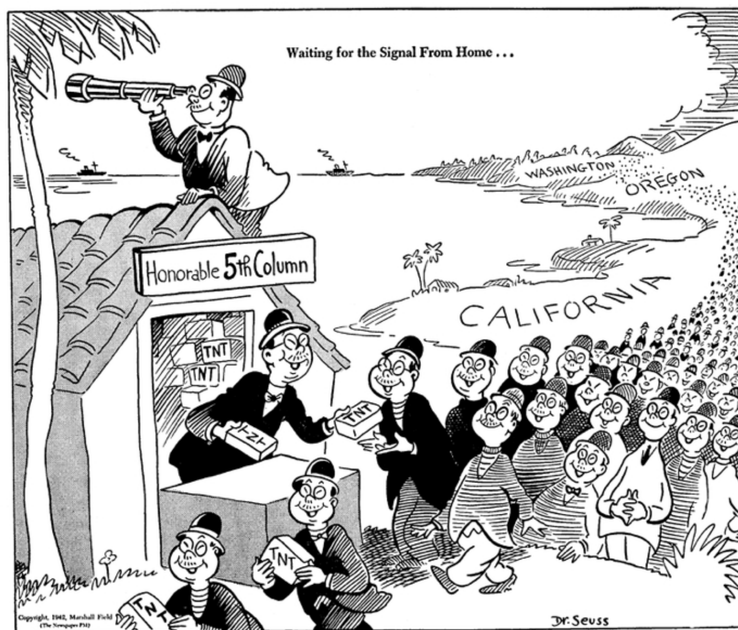

Fig. 4.17 Theodor Seuss Geisel, “Waiting for the Signal from Home…,” *PM*, 1942

Finding Humor in Being the Model Minority

Of course, by the 1980s, two decades after the passage of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act, which opened up immigration to more and more Asian, a portion of Asian Americans - specifically East Asian Americans - were held up as model minorities,

Fig. 4.18 *Time Magazine*, “The Asian-American Whiz Kids,” August 31, 1987

most notably on the cover the August 31, 1987 issue of Time Magazine. (Fig. 4.18) The cover, while not meant to be comedic, was nevertheless a reduction of a group of people into a particular identity. Model minorities were the children whose grades surpassed their classmates, whose parents were allowed to immigrate due to their own high achievement statuses, and whose characteristics were nerdy and anti-social. Used amid America's heightening racial tensions, Asian Americans were held up as the exemplary minority group against which, specifically, Black people could not compare. This seemingly positive stereotype was and is, in fact, less about Asian Americans and more about a white majority's increasing anxiety in a post-civil rights era.

Arguably, this corpus of images has structured the stereotype of Asian American appearance. Reduced to, alternately, queues, slanted eyes, pug noses, yellow skin, or nerdy glasses and a bowl haircut, Asian Americans - across the board - have been marked by their bodily characteristics that render them mean, devious and foreign or calm, submissive, and docile. Minhaj's address of the model minority stereotype directly addressed the area in which the stereotype most visibly affects the South Asian community: The Scripps National Spelling Bee. Minhaj's evocation of the spelling bee centers on the relationships between immigrant parents and their children. In talking about brown kids being slapped, Minhaj says, "And that's what makes us tough and resilient. It's why we become cardiologists and win spelling bees. Slapping is important. It elevates your game. Have you ever seen an Indian kid win the spelling bee? Incredible! Ice water in the veins. Kobe. That kid won't choke on

Fig. 4.118 Hasan Minhaj, *Homecoming King*, 2017

camera. He's been slapped on camera! Of course he can spell, 'knaidel'!" At this point, Minhaj puts up a video of the young boy about to win the national spelling bee. "Look at that face. Nothing. Nothing! He's 12 years old. Nothing! This kid just won $30,000 cash! Nothing! And people ask. 'Where does that come from?' Look at this kid's parents." In Minhaj's video show, the camera pans to the child's parents whose stoic faces barely betray any sense of pride. Above the parents, Minhaj has typed, 'CONDITIONAL LOVE" in yellow letters. As the audience's laughter reaches a high point, Minhaj points their attention to the little brother of the boy. "Look at his brother. His brother is like, I'm f*cked. I'm f*cked. The bar is way too high." (Fig. 4.19) The barely one minute bit is funny to his entire audience - the white people recognizing a stereotype, and the brown people who recognize that the stereotype has both truth and relevance to their own lived experiences. Minhaj, however, is not one to let a stereotype sit. He says, "I know what happens when I talk about this stuff. People are always like, 'ah, you got tiger parents! Your parents don't love you!' I think our parents love us. We have great fathers. I just think our fathers didn't

download all the great dad software. There are just a few apps missing."[131] At this point, Minhaj sounds defensive, but as he continues to explain how his father denied him a bike for his birthday, Minhaj is, unbeknownst to his audience, setting up for a follow-up narrative in which his father bought the exact same bike for his little sister's birthday. The story, while still rife with Minhaj's childhood disappointment, expands into a complicated story of parental love, guilt, and sibling affection and rivalry. Stereotype, for Minhaj, always holds truth and relevance, but in telling them through the lens of lived experience, he fills them with nuance.

Inheriting a Complicated Past, Grasping a Potential Future

Asian American comedians, though few and far between, have almost always grappled with stereotypes and their outsized role in Asian American lives. Although Minhaj and Wong are preceded by few successful Asian American comics, some such as Kristina Wong, Margaret Cho, and Russell Peters have become mainstream. Ali Wong's crassness finds precedence in Kristina Wong's outright denial of a presumed model minority expectation of discipline and civil obedience. Instead, Wong's humorous interventions in "'respectable' community events in 2001" positions her work in relation to, not only white expectations of Asian American communities, but those communities' own reiteration and reinforcing of those expectations.[132] (Fig. 4.20) Like Kristina Wong, fellow comedian Margaret Cho

[131] Storer: 7:26-8:43.

[132] Laura Kina and Jan Bernabe, "For the Love of Unicorns: Queering Contemporary Asian American Art" in *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017, 6.

Fig. 4.20 Kristina Wong performing as Fannie Wong, 2001

became a household name with the launch of her 1994 *All-American Girl* on ABC, the first mainstream show about an Asian American family. (Fig. 4.21) Despite Cho's adjustments to various critiques of her for being too Asian or not Asian enough, the ultimate canceling of the show seemed to prove that Asian Americanness was still an identity too fraught and niche to be presented to a (white) American

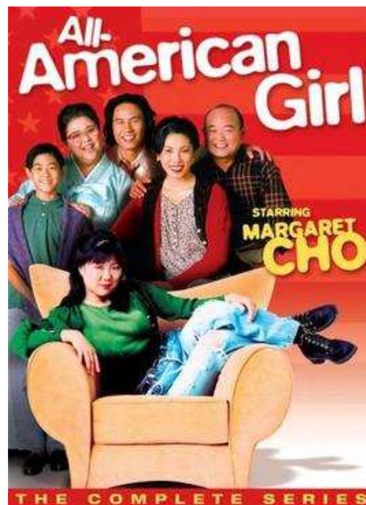

Fig. 4.21 Cover for the Home Edition of Margaret Cho's *All-American Girl*, 1994.

audience. Cho and Wong, in their respective work, flaunted expectations of themselves as Asian women. As for many pioneers, their audience was not always receptive. It is important to note that Cho and Wong paved the way for comedians such as Hasan Minhaj and Ali Wong. It is also important note that Hasan Minhaj and Ali Wong's meteoric rise also took place on Netflix, an innovative type of media company that has, in recent years, garnered a reputation for creating stars and then also continuing to support them. Among them are Minhaj and Tan France. For Wong and Minhaj, their successful stand-up comedy specials were followed with, for Wong, a full-length romantic comedy, and for Minhaj, a cutting political talk show that put him on the map of political comedians along with his former boss, Jon Stewart, and his fellow *Tonight Show* alums such as John Oliver, Samantha Bee, and Stephen Colbert. In some ways, both Wong and Minhaj benefited from Netflix giving them a freedom not seen since HBO and Comedy Central pushed boundaries policed by mainstream television channels. Netflix has proven to be the "new cable" and as such, has allowed for a cutting-edge racial dialogue that - while perhaps impossible for certain media executives - has proven to be extraordinarily popular. Netflix's enormous influence in entertainment has opened the doors for more diverse shows, movies, and actors. Yet it is arguable also that because of its championing of diversity, Netflix is merely keeping up with its consumer base. Nevertheless, Wong and Minhaj's rise coincides with the simultaneous rise of actors such as Lana Condor, a relatable romantic lead in a three-part series called *To All the Boys I Ever Loved*, based on a young adult series by Korean American author, Jenny Han, and Maitreyi

Ramakrishnan, the lead for a comedy series, *Never Have I Ever*, created by fellow Indian American Mindy Kaling. (Fig. 4.22 and 4.23) Both feature young Asian

Fig. 4.22 Netflix's Scene from *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* starring Lana Condor, a Vietnamese American actress who plays Lara Jean Covey, a half white/half Korean high school

Fig. 4.23 Scene from Netflix's *Never Have I Ever* starring Indian American actor, Maitreyi Ramakrishnan playing Devi Vishwakumar, a sophomore in high school who falls for a fellow classmate, Paxton Hall-Yoshida, played by Darren Barnet, a half Japanese/half white actor.

American women who live their lives in suburban America - classic coming-of-age narratives that seamlessly and inextricably weave multiple identities into single characters. Wong and Minhaj's specials, while groundbreaking, do not exist in a

vacuum. Their respective context is different than the ones faced by Cho and Wong. Hollywood is surely, albeit quite slowly, opening up to representation due to a diversifying consumer base. In seeing their audience diversify, Minhaj and Wong found the opportunity to speak directly to specific audiences.

Another successful stand-up comic, Russell Peters, catapulted to fame after his 2004 special on the Canadian TV show *Comedy Now!*. As clips of the show went viral on YouTube, fans were drawn to Peters' notable skill at mimicking accents, particularly of various ethnic Asian groups. As scholar Faiza Hirji posits in her analysis of Russell Peter's comedy, "What does it mean when large crowds - including Whites, who are not spared in Peters' critiques - gather to laugh boisterously at a routine that draw upon and validates processes of racialization?"[133] Hirji's analysis of Peters' comedy reveals the troubling and fraught relationship between stereotypes and its necessary use in comedy about race. Hirji quotes journalist Ray Lillis who claims that "Comedy isn't meant to educate anybody, it tells you what you already know. The spark of comedy is a spark of recognition."[134] While Lillis's assessment of Peters certainly removes the risk of racialization on which the success of Peters' comedy depends - and is rather reductive of the power of a joke, it's worth noting that the "spark of recognition" is precisely where Hirji's concerns take place. Stereotype is always - as Bhabha insists - dependent on repetition and

[133] Faiza Hirji, McMaster University "Somebody Going to Get Hurt Real Bad": The Race-based Comedy of Russell Peters, Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol. 34, Issue 4 (567-586), 568
[134] Ray Lillis, "Funny Brown Guys: Comedy and Race in New Zealand, *Metro Magazine*, *154* (Oct. 2007), 80-82.

reiteration - and thus, familiarity. For Wong and Minhaj, the spark of recognition is converted from the nexus of a joke into a conduit through which they reach a specific segment of their fanbase. When Wong explains that she is half-Vietnamese and half-Chinese and her husband is half-Japanese and half-Filipino and thus, they are both "half-fancy Asian and half-jungle Asian," her stereotypical assessment strikes at the heart of the complexities of a singular ethnic identity such as Asian American that is insufficient in exploring the cultural, economic, and visual differences embedded within Asian Americanness. Her joke is aimed, not at white people who will laugh and will think they understand, but at fellow Asian Americans who *know*.

In her book, *Minor Feelings*, poet Cathy Park Hong, explores the Black comic Richard Pryor's complicated humor in an exploration of her own racial and writing journey. She details the shift in Pryor's career in which he began, in the tradition of Bill Cosby, telling clean and acceptable jokes that appealed to a white audience. At one point, while performing in Vegas, Prior suddenly looked out as his audience, "leaned into the mike and said, 'What the f*ck am I doing here?' He walked offstage."[135] For Hong, the significance of this moment is a shift, not necessarily in one's own talents, but instead, in one's object(ive). Who was Pryor performing for? And who did he ultimately perform for? The shift occurred when Pryor stopped performing for a majority white audience and instead performed for a Black audience - one that could and would recognize cultural signs and insinuations. I argue that

[135] Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings; An Asian American Reckoning*, New York: One World, 2020, 40.

Wong and Minhaj, despite their meteoric rise and their massive cultural success (and their undeniable appeal to a white audience), are ultimately speaking to an Asian American audience through which they connect – intimately, racially, and culturally – through an internal language of stereotypes.

Chapter Five
Alongside Race:
The Specter of Christine Sun Kim's Marked Body

The first four chapters of this dissertation covered five Asian American artists who not only negotiate racial identity in their work but are also widely discussed in Asian American discourses because, I contend, their works engage with issues that are covered comprehensively in Asian American scholarship: migration, belonging, stereotypes, and, most significantly, the marked body. In many ways, it was the close looking and careful analysis of their work that led to the overarching themes of this dissertation project. I end this dissertation with a final chapter on Christine Sun Kim, a contemporary, Berlin-based, Asian American, Deaf artist whose work does not lend itself seamlessly into conversations and discourses regarding race. Most of Christine Sun Kim's work focuses on Deafness as both a defining experience of the artist's own life and the critical root of much of her activism in which Kim's work raises awareness and points to the inequities that affect deaf lives. Admittedly, an examination of an artist who does not seem to prioritize her racial identity in her work may seem counterintuitive to this larger dissertation project on Asian American racial identity formation and negotiation. If, however, I am arguing that Asian American identity is best understood refracted in difference, what can an artist like Kim offer to a consideration of Asian Americanness marked not only by difference in comparison to other Asian Americans, but in comparison to the larger world of hearing people? How does her triple difference as a Deaf Asian American woman not so much prioritize one aspect of her identity over the other, but rather offer an opportunity to

think about identity as intersectional? Further, does, and if so, where and how does racial identity emerge as a salient aspect of the artist's lived experiences and her work?

My interest in Kim emerges from observations that despite the centrality of Deafness in her work, Kim's racial identity as an Asian American woman frequently haunts her work. Without doubt, Kim's work is profound and complex, but for the purposes of this chapter and this dissertation project, I look to examine the various ways that race emerges in Kim's work. I focus my discussion on works primarily from her latest series of drawings, *Trauma, LOL*, made during the COVID-19 pandemic – a moment in which Kim's reckoning with her racial identity was brought to the forefront. My attempt is not to excavate the "Asian Americanness" out of the artist or to plunge her into an identity box that curtails expansive understandings of her work. Rather, I am interested in considering how race and racial identity is always implicated and inescapable, but not always centered. How might an artist like Kim offer a way to think about the future of Asian American art scholarship – and indeed, art scholarship in general – in which race is considered alongside and intertwined with other factors? How might temporality – the place and context of particular moments in time – cause race to take on greater import? In expounding on legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, I consider how Kim's work, focused though it might be on one aspect of her identity, nevertheless reveal the processes of intersectionality in which identities merge in and out of context and time.

In so doing, I argue for a nuanced scholarship on race that opens toward other identities instead of pre-emptively closing on them.

Trauma, LOL, is both the name of a particular drawing as well as an exhibition of a series of drawings showed at François Ghebaly Gallery in Los Angeles, California, from December 12, 2020, to January 23, 2021. The exhibition was timely, exhibited at a moment in which the new year brought potential hope to a world broken by a pandemic that continues to ravage the world. The drawings in the exhibition were produced during the lockdown imposed by many countries in attempts to quell the spread of the contagion. The drawings are large-scale rendered in charcoal on paper and utilized familiar aspects of Kim's work from musical notations, signing hands, charts, and Venn diagrams. The exhibition could be viewed entirely through the lens of disability and Deafness and is a natural successor to Kim's larger body of work. In fact, in a review of the exhibition in Hyperallergic, Asian American artist, art historian, and curator, Caroline Ellen Liou, does not mention Kim's race or negotiation of race in her works at all. This certainly may manifest as a victorious example in which an Asian American artist was able to entirely transcend the binds of racial identity and thus free her work from a framework that "subjugates or constrains the work, burdening it with a ready-made set of interpretations already embedded in the collective imagination," as art historian and curator Susette Min posits.[136] I certainly cannot argue that the burdens of race-

[136] Susette Min, Unnamable: The Ends of Asian American Art, New York: New York University Press, 2018, 27. It is important to note that Min is speaking in the context of exhibitions that are framed around racial identity rather than general scholarship or art criticism. That being said, the

based interpretations as placed upon art, artists, and bodies are not present or overwhelming. Indeed, this entire dissertation project has considered artists who negotiate the weight of racially-based stereotypes and ideological structures that impact, affect, and structure their lived experiences. However, precisely because of its inescapability, I argue that freeing an artist of his or her racial burden may form its own prison that constrains interpretation.

Just prior to the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, Christine Sun Kim found herself on one of her most visible stages yet. As the invited performer to sign the National Anthem and America the Beautiful in American Sign Language at Superbowl 54, Kim was granted a space in the spectacle that is American football with a potential audience of millions who likely have little interest or much knowledge in contemporary art. (Fig. 5.1) Perhaps unknown to many of the football

Fig. 5.1 Christine Sun Kim performing the National Anthem at Super Bowl 54

fans, Kim recognized the magnitude of the audience she suddenly had both in the

concern that interpretation of an artist's work is constrained by a heavy or exclusive focus on race is a relevant in scholarship, criticism, as well as exhibitions which is focus of Min's argument.

stadium and on television. Dressed in Opening Ceremony, a clothing brand founded and designed by Asian American designers Carol Lim and Humberto Leon, the artist's characteristic elegance while signing was on full display to a particularly American audience tuning in to a particularly American sport. The significance of the performance was not lost on Kim. Recognizing that she was the first Asian American Deaf woman to sign the National Anthem at one of the largest televised events, Kim said that "the moment reminded her of 'All American Girl,' a TV show she used to watch as a teenager that featured Asian American actor Margaret Cho."[137] As Kim discusses with Lucy Martirosyan in an interview for The World, a public radio station, "To see a family on TV that looked exactly like my family… gave me so much comfort with my own identity…And I'm hoping that I was able to do that, too, for the Asian Deaf community."[138] Although the televised performance was ultimately cut off by the Fox Sports cameras who panned away to other sights of interest in the stadium, Kim's hope for her Super Bowl performance underscores her Deaf activist *and* her racial identity. For Kim, the Superbowl was an opportunity to create a performance that allowed her to reach, simultaneously, a hearing audience who might not be able to read her hands but could read her body, a Deaf audience that might feel inclusion and significance from her place on the football field, *and also*, an Asian American audience who for a rare moment, on the most important field in the

[137] Lucy Martirosyan, Artist Christine Sun Kim on 'deaf rage,' the Super Bowl and the power of sound, *The World*, 13 February 2020, https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-02-13/artist-christine-sun-kim-deaf-rage-super-bowl-and-power-sound
[138] Ibid.

most important sport in the United States – a field that rarely if ever showcased Asian Americans – might see another Asian American body that looked like theirs.

Kim is Deaf and Asian American, and arguably belongs to two separate if sometimes overlapping imagined communities: the Deaf community and the Asian American community. The overlap between the two recalls the concept of intersectionality as raised by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw.[139] Crenshaw's proposed her theory in a law paper published in 1989 in response to a number of legal cases in which the courts heard lawsuits in which the plaintiffs claimed discrimination not on the basis of sex *or* race, but both.[140] The courts found that considering discrimination on the basis of sex *and* race (and thereby potentially creating a new protected group) was ultimately unworkable. In her article, Crenshaw argued that ignoring one discrimination to center another ultimately disregarded the unique challenges of being both/and rather than either/or. With the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the subsequent Women's March in 2017, the term "intersectional," in many ways broke away from Crenshaw, the law, and her focus on protected groups and Black women specifically. The term expanded and

[139] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London and New York: Verso, 1983. Benedict Anderson must be noted here. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson points out the significance of standardizing language as critical to the establishment of a nation-state whose members developed a shared identity or an imagined community. By extension, both the Deaf community (specific also to nation-states as sign languages diverge usually along national lines) and the Asian American community (also specific to nations and languages) could both be considered imagined communities.

[140] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Vol. 989, Iss. 1, Article 8.

attained cultural significance to consider the complicated multi-layered challenges that come of being a person defined by many identities.

Recognizing the legal history of the term and thus the limitations of my chapter in drawing the connection to art and lived experience, I look specifically to Crenshaw's emphasis on the unique challenges that are faced by those who are both/and. Soon after the Super Bowl performance, Kim, as millions of others around the world, found herself in lockdown. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, it appeared to homogenize humanity – every person was at risk regardless of race, gender, class, nationality, or creed. Unfortunately but expectedly, that utopian perspective quickly faded as "essential" workers found themselves unable to work from home thus putting themselves at risk for the service of others and as COVID disproportionately impacted communities of color. Moreover, the social effects of the pandemic disproportionately hit Asians in the West as the pandemic's emergence from China stirred up anti-Asian sentiments as desperation and frustration led to the convenient scapegoating of Asian-looking people in the West. For Kim, the pandemic and the ensuing masks presented a new challenge for the artist who relied heavily on sight to read communication signs. With masks becoming a necessity, Kim "lost access to a vital communication resource."[141] Furthermore, as she declared to ArtNet, "[I] started to feel that people were staying away from me because I am Asian… Suddenly, I started to not feel as safe. If you don't feel safe in a place you call home,

[141] Kate Brown, "'I Want to Be Able to Maintain My Clear Voice': Artist Christine Sun Kim on Translating her 2020 Into Trenchant New Drawings, *artnet.com*, 15 December 2020, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/christine-sun-kim-profile-1931118.

that's traumatic."[142] The "home" that Kim references is likely Berlin, where she lives and could not travel from. Kim's other home, Southern California, was no less protected from widespread anti-Asian hate. To be "othered" in one's own home(s) is certainly not an unfamiliar feeling for Asian Americans, but the escalation of violence coupled with the anonymity that the masks created presented a doubly isolating experience for Kim who lost access to facial expressions, a necessary form of communication for the artist, and who also found that anonymity pronounced by the fear that accompanied the state of simply being and looking Asian.

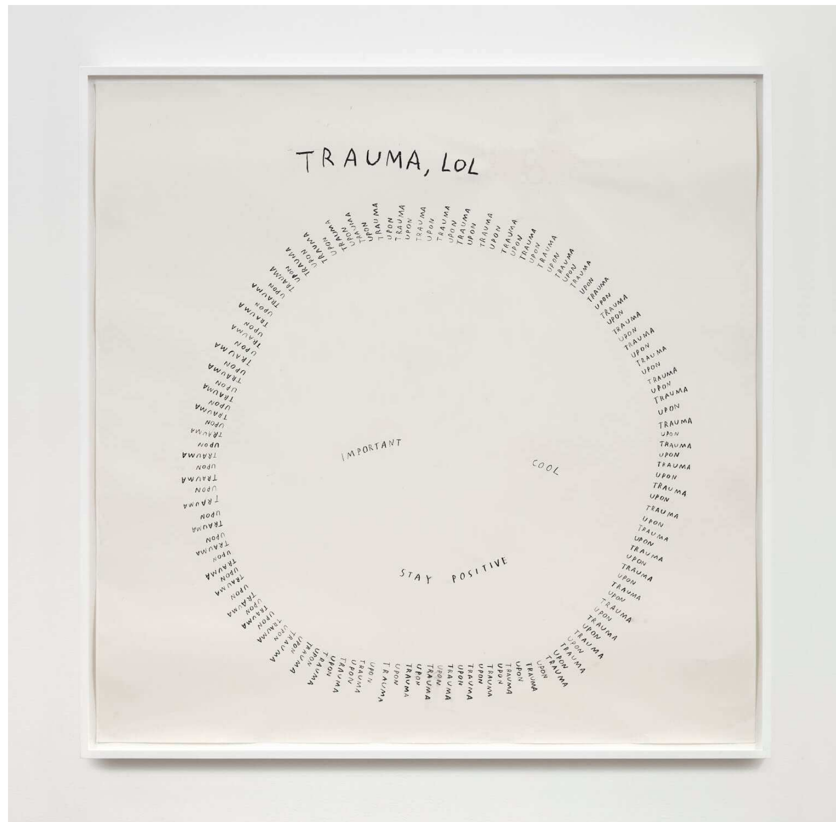

Fig. 5.2 Christine Sun Kim, *Trauma, LOL*, 2020

[142] Ibid.

As Kim describes, the body of work in *Trauma, LOL*, emerged from this intersectional compilation of isolating experiences. Kim remarked about the early ideas that guided the show, "… as an Asian person in Berlin, I faced quite a bit of negativity because of where COVID originated. So I was thinking about all this trauma that was building up, and trauma that I've faced over the course of my life. I'm a woman, I'm a Deaf woman, I'm Asian, all this trauma on top of trauma. It just really started to unravel. And that's how it began." The titular drawing in the exhibition, also titled, *Trauma, LOL*, reflects the inundation of pain and difficulty associated with her various noted identities: gender, race, and disability. (Fig. 5.2) In the drawing, "trauma" and "upon" are layered one on top of another in a continual circle with no ending and no beginning. The circular nature of trauma being repeatedly layered upon trauma speaks to the inescapability of the sufferer who, presumably is stuck in the center surrounded by all of this trauma while trying to "stay positive" or focus on what is "important" or act "cool" as the artist writes into the center of the circle. The circle with the words written inside ultimately makes a sad-looking smiley face. The "years and years of built-up trauma" suggests an incessant inundation of difficulty that builds on top of itself.[143] The example that the artist gives is a deaf child who is denied access to sign language who then is denied access to education, is exposed to language deprivation, which then ultimately affects every aspect of that child's present and future life. Thus, the trauma that the artist

[143] Christine Sun Kim, "Walkthrough of 'Trauma LOL' with Christine Sun Kim, interview Gan Uyeda with ASL interpretation by Francince Stern, *François Ghebaly Gallery*, 15 January 2021, http://ghebaly.com/work/christine-sun-kim-walkthrough-of-trauma-lol/

speaks of is not only the layered traumas of namable disadvantaged identities such as being a woman or being Asian or being Deaf, but also the traumas that are then begotten which then reinforce the others. When Crenshaw argued for the "unique challenges" of being Black *and* female, her argument centered on the impossibility of isolating one identity from the other. Instead, the multiplicity of identities in a single body is always informing itself, a volleying process that merges in and out of time and context.

That this body of work emerged from the era of the COVID-19 pandemic is significant. The temporality implied by the comma separating "Trauma" and "LOL" in the title of the work was intentional. Kim sees the comma as representing "a separation, a response over time. LOL as a response very much comes as a reaction to being shell shocked from this trauma. Trauma happens, and what do you do? You can address a small trauma, you can deal with it. But trauma upon trauma upon trauma? That starts to become LOL."[144] LOL, of course, is the short-hand abbreviation for "laughing out loud." It can be used literally, to inform a message receiver that the sender is actually laughing out loud at something that is hilarious, but more often than not, for technology-focused generations, it is an awkward response to something that might be uncomfortable in conversation. For Kim, it is the belated and awkward

[144] It is important to consider Christine Sun Kim's use of the word "trauma.". The "small traumas" that she invokes are usually more akin to the medical definition of trauma to the physical body – a car accident or a broken bone, for instance. The traumas that are extended temporally and build upon each other is perhaps more reminiscent of melancholia which, in this particular instance, recalls Anne Anlin Cheng's notion of racial melancholia to respond to "the material and imaginative realities of racial dynamics." A similar notion could be drawn toward living with a disability. Anne Anlin Cheng, The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, xi.

response to conditions of living that have no clear solutions. It is the response to an exhausting life spent in activism with no immediate solutions. LOL is the short-term coping mechanism to the absurdity of "barriers…that are truly systematic and very much beyond the realm of an individual person. So you laugh."[145] The LOL is belated and it speaks to the nature of lived experiences in which solutions are not always present and certainly not in the hands of individuals, but it also speaks to how traumas and their attendant effects often arise during moments of crisis. Thus, while my discussion throughout this chapter seeks to reveal the intersectionality of Kim's lived experience, it is at vitally important to recognize the continued centrality of Deafness in her work. Race does not overcome Deafness, as it were, in importance. It exists alongside and arises only at particular moments. It is critical to recognize that Kim's revelation of race emerged at a particular juncture in time during which Asian Americans were rendered hypervisible by the scapegoating for the pandemic. That her Asian American identity took a backseat in her work in the past is reflective not of the level of importance attached to it, but rather to different circumstances. However, in light of not only the COVID-19 pandemic, the scapegoating of Asian Americans, but also the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests against brutality, race in the United States and how people's lives are indelibly affected by the racial structures of the U.S. has taken on paramount importance.

[145] Christine Sun Kim, "Walkthrough of 'Trauma LOL' with Christine Sun Kim, interview Gan Uyeda with ASL interpretation by Francince Stern, *François Ghebaly Gallery*, 15 January 2021, http://ghebaly.com/work/christine-sun-kim-walkthrough-of-trauma-lol/

As an activist, it is unsurprising that Kim's awareness of her own racial identity as well as her own responsibility in representing her race such as during her Super Bowl performance. Football, especially, has had a conflicted relationship with race. When Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the National Anthem to protest racial inequity and police brutality, football became the litmus test for America and its own relationship to the racial structures it had created. Deeply intertwined with the politicization of race, Kaepernick's action was viewed and decried by conservatives as anti-American, another layer of ostracization for Black Americans. In this way, Kim's acknowledgement and negotiation of race expands beyond her own racial identity toward her place within the larger discourse of race in the United States. Kim was fully cognizant of the politics of her body being on the football field, saying that she "accepted the invitation with some hesitation… I knew that some musical artists had refused opportunities to perform at the game last year in support of Colin Kaepernick. I wondered whether I should do the same."[146] It wasn't merely an issue of a Black man protesting police brutality, it was the Americanness that is implicated in football, a uniquely American sport. Kim's role in signing the National Anthem held a particularly patriotic tinge, one that she performed "as a child of immigrants, a grandchild of refugees, a Deaf woman of color, an artist and a mother".[147] This is how Kim began her op-ed for the New York Times in response to

[146] Christine Sun Kim, "I Performed at the Super Bowl. You Might Have Missed Me," The New York Times, 3 February 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/03/opinion/national-anthem-sign-language.html
[147] Ibid.

her performance. Prefacing her essay with her identities served to establish her intersectionality while also, and at the same time, establishing her Americanness.

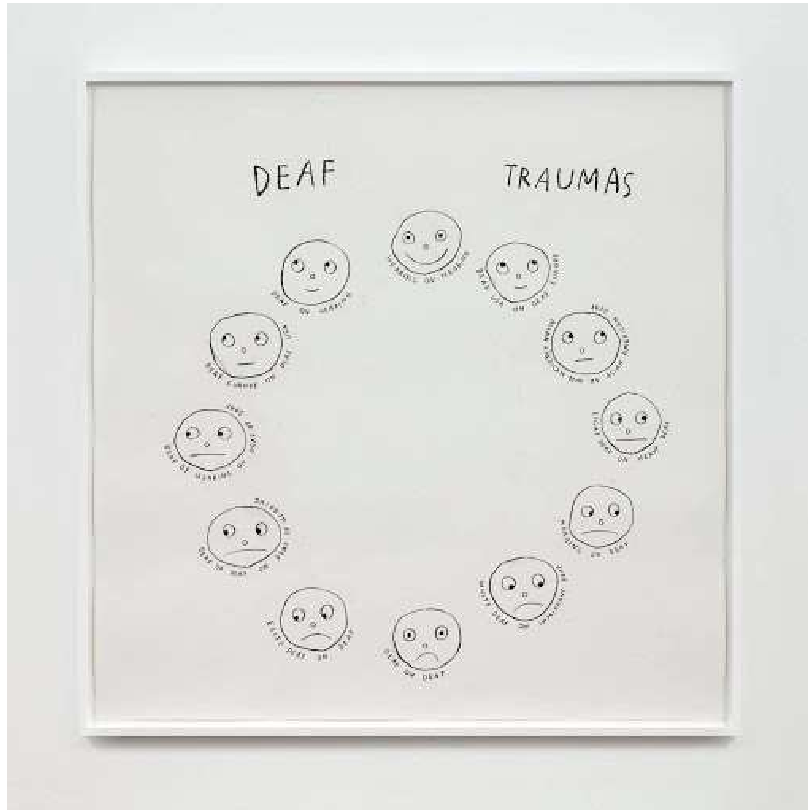

Fig. 5.3 Christine Sun Kim, *Deaf Traumas*, 2020

The particular historical moment that was the year 2020 found the United States not in a singular moment of crisis, but in many overlapping crises. Arguably, it is in moments of crisis that identities arise as carrying salience to a person's interaction with the world around them. In her drawing *Deaf Traumas* created in 2020, Kim drew a circle of faces that shifted in emotion from smiling to frowns to straight lined-mouths of ambivalence. (Fig. 5.3) Reminiscent of emojis, each hand-drawn face seemed alternatively happy, confused, dismayed, uncertain, and upset. The mood is evolutionary, and the circle of faces could be read like a clock. The

closer to 12:00, the happier the mood. For each face, a particular type of trauma is detailed, but what is most significant is that Kim specifically states who is inflicting the trauma on whom, emphasizing the relationality of not just trauma but also emotion. The happiest face occurs when hearing people inflict trauma on hearing people suggesting that kind of trauma to be the easiest to bear. The most unhappy face is when deaf people inflict on deaf people. The traumas are frequently wielded and borne by the same group of people. Represented in these relationalities are binaries that evoke class, race, and national identity – each of the relational traumas have relevance to Kim from "Asian American Deaf on Asian American Deaf" and "White Deaf on Immigrant Deaf to Elite Deaf on Deaf." While trauma whether inflicted or borne is not the exclusive belonging of any one group, the traumas visualized by these faces are specifically Kim's traumas.

One of the faces exhibit side-eyed emotion for trauma related to "deaf of hearing on deaf of deaf." Kim was born in 1980 to hearing parents in Southern California. The term "deaf of hearing" refers to children who are born to and/or raised by hearing people. The term "deaf of deaf" refers to children who are born to and/or raised by deaf people. For children raised with deaf adults, the acclimation of sign language is as natural and seamless as hearing children may acclimate to the verbal languages of their respective homes. Both Kim and her sister have been profoundly deaf since birth. To communicate with their daughters, her parents learned American Sign Language. This act, although seemingly unsurprising, was a radical act of kinship and love when you consider, as Kim has stated, that "more than

90 percent of deaf and hard-of-hearing babies are born to hearing parents, and few of them can meaningfully sign together."[148] This quote was pulled from Kim's page in a special issue of Pop Up Magazine in collaboration with the artist non-profit For Freedoms, an answer to the prompt "Who taught you to love?"[149] (Fig. 5.4)

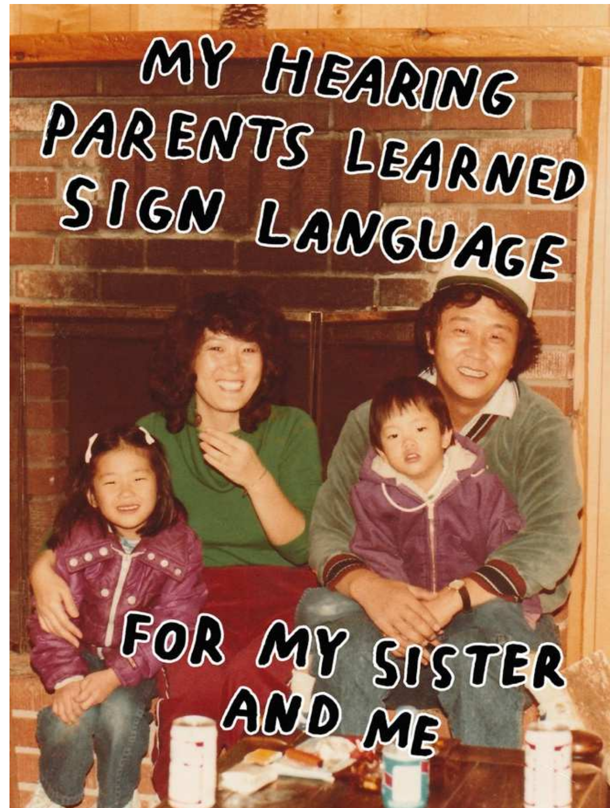

Fig. 5.4 Christine Sun Kim, *Who Taught You To Love*?, PopUp Magazine in collaboration with For Freedoms, June 2021

I draw attention to this particular trauma relation because of the invocation of her parents. Kim's work is simultaneously always autobiographical in that it negotiates her anger and activism within the Deaf community, but also rarely autobiographical in that little information is available regarding her own familial

[148] Hank Willis Thomas, Brit Bennett, Christine Sun Kim, Tommy Orange, and More, "Who Taught You To Love?," *Pop-Up Magazine* in collaboration with For Freedoms, 19 June 2021.
[149] Ibid.

history. Only recently have glimpses of her family and her past been included in her work. The above-discussed contribution to Pop Up Magazine featured a full-page reproduction of an old family photograph of Kim, her sister, and her parents. Kim's work is almost always notational and seemingly objective– it is composed of graphs and symbols, but through the use of her recognizable signature handwriting, her work also carries a personal mark. Rarely, however, does it give an intimate glimpse at the artist herself. This photograph suggests a potential for easing into a space of intimacy with the viewer. The photograph projects a relaxed family, posed against a fireplace for a snapshot photograph that belongs in a family album. The season could be Christmas, certainly the fireplace offers that suggestion, and the family is dressed warmly in coats and sweaters. What strikes me, however, is how extraordinarily ordinary the image is, and how the photograph suggests a close-knit, happy family. In the image, her mother laughs comfortably, whose hand is caught mid-motion. Her father smiles as he holds his daughter in his lap. There is no sign of a tiger mom or a distanced father.

I want to posit this ordinariness as something that is fairly radical for an Asian American artist. So much of the narrative surrounding Asian Americanness involves generational divides as exemplified, in just one example, Amy Tan's iconic novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. Even Hasan Minhaj and Ali Wong's stand-up specials refer frequently back to their relationships with their father and mother, respectively. Asian Americans are constantly negotiating their immigrant parents and the difficulties they have inherited from their parents' challenges. Yet, in this particular

work, Kim's signature handwriting frames her nuclear family with the sentence, "My hearing parents learned sign language for my sister and me." The emphasis creates a stark contrast to the more common Asian American child narrative of generational difference. The photograph projects an image of an ordinary family, and the expected inter-generational conflicts within Asian American families seems to be absent in the photograph. Here, the parents taught their children to love by learning a foreign language that their children needed. Despite Kim's focus on the multi-layered traumas of her life, in her relationship with her parents – an area rife with literary and cultural examples of intergenerational disconnect – Kim seems to react instead with gratitude and love.

In her 2019 drawing, *Why My Hearing Parents Sign*, Kim allocates a significant portion of her pie chart humorously to the reason that her parents are "FOB AND NO ONE ^AT HOME TO PRACTICE SPEAKING ENGLISH WITH."

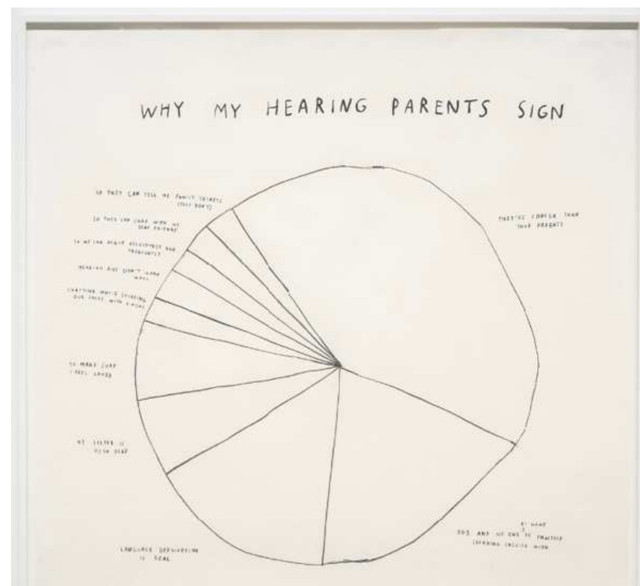

Fig. 5.5 Christine Sun Kim, *Why My Hearing Parents Sign*, 2019

(Fig. 5.5) FOB, in this case, stands for "fresh off the boat," a common trope sometimes used to denigrate recent immigrants (it was originally a derogatory term coined to refer to Southeast Asian refugees who escaped by boat) and sometimes used by younger members of Asian communities to lovingly mock their own older community members such as their parents. Like the internal stereotypes of Hasan Minhaj and Ali Wong, Kim's use of the phrase points to her ease and comfort within Asian American spaces. While the statement is clearly meant to be funny, it also demonstrates Kim's recognition of her parents double displacement from their own language, Korean. As immigrants, her parents learned American Sign Language in addition to English in order to survive in the United States. The drawing also demonstrates the deep appreciation of Kim toward her parents and her awareness of how unique they were in learning American Sign Language. Her other reasons on the pie chart humorously include "They're cooler than your parents" and, in recognition of her own Koreanness, "Chatting while stuffing our faces with kimchi."

In evoking kimchi and her parents' immigrant status, Kim raises again the specter of her race as part and parcel of herself and her lived experience. It, by no means, centers race or her culture nor isolates it from her other concerns. Throughout this chapter, I have sought to understand Christine Sun Kim's relationship to her racial identity and its importance to her work and her intersectionality. I have also attempted to be careful of giving it more weight than her work and her own words allocate to it. It is nevertheless ever present. I have considered the relevance not only of her own racial identity but more broadly, her place as an Asian woman in the

politics of race, especially in the United States. To consider Christine Sun Kim's work in the context of a dissertation on Asian American art does not represent an attempt to place her into an identarian position from which all her work must be framed. Instead, I suggest that through an understanding of intersectionality as inextricability, of lived experiences as messy, convoluted, and intertwining layers of identities, Kim's work can be considered through a multiplicity of lenses that neither centers nor dismisses race. Ultimately, a cosmopolitan artist like Kim cannot escape either her "corporeal malediction."

Conclusion
Living In Paradox:
Asian Americans Together-In-Difference

The first and last chapters of this dissertation on Allan deSouza and Christine Sun Kim, respectively, considered two artists who can be and are often considered to be cosmopolitan artists who fit comfortably within a multiplicity of categories and frameworks. In the two chapters, I sought to consider how both artists, despite their cosmopolitan status, are nevertheless held within nation-state identities just as both are unable to escape the "corporeal malediction" of their respective marked bodies. As I discussed in Chapter 1, cosmopolitan belonging is oftentimes predicated on national belonging and its attendant privileges. As Christine Sun Kim has pointed out, "What I've discovered living abroad… is that I'm quite spoiled."[150] Though Kim is speaking of her access to American Sign Language in other countries, language is but one privilege Americans tend to enjoy while out in the world.

I conclude this dissertation with a discussion of the privileges of Americanness outside of the borders of the nation-state because it offers a form of potential for the future of Asian American art scholarship. Within Asian American communities and families are microcosms of transnationalisms and cosmopolitanisms in which Asian Americans flow seamlessly in and out of whether they are "cosmopolitan artists" like deSouza and Kim or simply "American artists" such as Laurel Nakadate and Binh Danh. These qualifiers of their identity are relevant but

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[150] Laura Zornosa, "Christine Sun Kim's vision rewarded with fellowship for disabled artists," *Los Angeles Times,* 14 October 2020, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-10-14/sound-artist-christine-sun-kim-joins-the-inaugural-disability-futures-fellows-class.

rarely complete, and this incompleteness foments a consideration of these artists as multi-valent and complex instead of a constant insistence on their Americanness.

Thus, while all of the artists in this dissertation have negotiated their place within the racial ideological structures of the United States, none of them necessarily fight for acceptance and belonging as American in their work. Instead, their work negotiates the more complicated subject of *how* one lives within those structures. I return to Ien Ang's question, "How, in short, can we live together-in-difference?"[151] Ang puts forth a hypothetical question that recognizes the differences that cause friction between and within communities, but the question also opens up the potential of thinking about Asian Americanness not only as an insistence on one's belonging to a nation-state, an insistence on the "what" of identity, but also and more significantly as the "how" of identity. What avenues might open up if and when Asian Americanness is thought of as prismatic lived experiences rather than as a singular stagnant racial identity? Without denying the relevance and importance of national belonging and identity, I sought in this dissertation to examine various facets of Asian American lived experiences, to reveal the mutability of stereotypes, to consider the potential in the chameleonic Asian American body, and finally to argue for identities that are as defined by difference as they are by shared experiences. What the artists considered in this dissertation reveal is that Asian Americans will always inhabit an in-betweenness that volleys between a multiplicity of identities and communities. As such, I return to the paradox of Asian Americanness. Rooted in this paradox is the

[151] Ang, 193.

opportunity to ask not whether Asian Americans are Asian or American, but rather to consider how an insistence on an Asian American identity refracted in difference allows us to live “together-in-difference.”

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