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Beyond Borders and Biology: Lisa Myeong-Joo's *Self-Portrait of a Circle* (2016)

Soo-Min Shim

Performance allows me to feel something that I know in my body, that is for me. As ambiguous as that is at least I know it's real. Performance means reclaiming my body back after being adopted or being told different ways of being or what to do or fitting in with my adopted family or the society that I live in now.

—Lisa Myeong-Joo¹

The artist Lisa Myeong-Joo was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1988 and was subsequently adopted by a family in Sydney, Australia, in 1989.² She returned to South Korea in 2016 for a residency at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Korea, where she created her series *Self-Portrait of a Circle*. This essay analyzes Lisa Myeong-Joo's performative use of her own body to suggest a conscious unbelonging to place in three components of this series: a video work, a performance piece presented at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Korea in Changdong, and a series of five photographs taken in the streets around the residency site. In these three components of her series, Lisa Myeong-Joo embodies what the art historian Eun Jung Park, in her writing on Korean adoptee artists, has described as “risky subjectivity.”³ Park argues that the “sense of self and empowerment [found] in the past” is made risky for adoptees

whose past has been forcibly removed from them.⁴ With a sense of risky subjectivity they negotiate “normative pressures that are constitutive of a neoliberal subject, such as family, nation-state, religion, and sexual orientation.”⁵

Situating the art of Lisa Myeong-Joo in a history of South Korean–Australian politics and cultural relations, it is possible to see her series *Self-Portrait of a Circle* as an interrogation into the limits and imaginative potentials of the adoptee body in contesting the bodies of the nation-states of South Korea and Australia. I argue that Lisa Myeong-Joo consciously plays with ethno-nationalist conceptions of representation and appearance through “performative anonymity” and equivocation toward place. By interrogating the dominant biological and cultural essentialist paradigms of family and state, Lisa Myeong-Joo’s practice contributes to ongoing scholarship on the Korean diaspora.

The Indeterminacy of Belonging: Korean-Australian Adoption Histories and Subjectivities

During her residency at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Korea, Lisa Myeong-Joo ventured out into the streets of Changdong, a neighborhood in the northern part of Seoul, South Korea’s capital city. In Changdong, Lisa Myeong-Joo took a series of five photographs where she looped her arms around electricity poles, telephone poles, and trees (Fig. 1). In all the photographs, Lisa Myeong-Joo’s stance is the same; her arms are raised at eye level, with one palm turning outward, the other turning inward. Lisa Myeong-Joo’s pose is reminiscent of an embrace. Such an intimate gesture speaks to a desire to belong, to be integrated, and to be fully immersed in Seoul’s cityscape. At the same time, however, the loop is closed only by the lightest touch of two fingertips barely pressed against each other. The closure of the circle is somewhat tenuous and promises openness and porosity. In one photograph Lisa Myeong-Joo encircles her arms around the plastic PVC strips of a type of curtain door known as a “bal” in Korean. This bal demarcates a barrier and a boundary, but at the same time, it is not solid, static, or impenetrable.

In the performance component of *Self-Portrait of a Circle*, Lisa Myeong-Joo envelops her entire body in a large piece of hemp fabric stitched into a loop that falls over her back and shrouds her face (Fig. 2). Lisa Myeong-Joo pulls the fabric forward, stepping on the fabric as she makes her way through the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Changdong. The fabric is sambe, traditional Korean fabric that has been deemed a “national treasure.” This choice of fabric might indicate a nostalgic enfolding into tradition, as Lisa Myeong-Joo



Figure 1 Lisa Myeong-Joo, *Self-Portrait of a Circle*, 2016. Photo credit: Yeeun Nam. Courtesy of the artist.

literally wraps herself in a material closely tied to national identity. However, *sambe* is conventionally used for funerary mourning clothes or as a fabric to shroud the deceased. The transparency of the fabric allows light to pass through it so that Lisa Myeong-Joo's silhouette can be discerned only as a ghostly shadow through the *sambe*, evoking a sense of melancholy and loss. The cultural significance of *sambe* and its connotations of grief and severance, then, problematize the notion that a return to "homeland" is entirely fulfilling or gratifying. Lisa Myeong-Joo's physical movements are characterized by a precarious balance, as there must be enough fabric in front of the artist in order for her to safely step forward without tripping. In moving forward, Lisa Myeong-Joo must laboriously force the fabric forward as its coarse texture rubs against the back of her head. The effort required in the action transforms the simple act of walking into an arduous and demanding process.

Immediately, based on the performance's ambiguous signifiers, there is an ambivalence surrounding Lisa Myeong-Joo's belonging in and to the places of South Korea. Writing on the performance work of the Taiwanese American performance artist Tehching Hsieh, the art historian Adrian Heathfield claims that "we might think of the migrant's body as a body that challenges notions of national identity through its indeterminacy of belonging."⁶ This indeterminacy of belonging has been elsewhere described by Park as "risky subjectivity." Park writes that "Risky Subjectivity . . . refers to the constant construction and reconstruction of perpetual struggle that deliberately fails at a normative imperative."⁷ Through a conscious and deliberate "failure" artists convey a sense of "subjecthood-information" that resists "origin myths, nationality, and other trappings of identity formation."⁸ Lisa Myeong-Joo's *Self-Portrait of a Circle* similarly conveys this sense of risky subjectivity derived from an adoptee subjectivity, and in particular her experience as a Korean Australian adoptee.

Locating Lisa Myeong-Joo's practice in the long history of adoption between Korea and Australia provides context critical to understanding her

experiences as a Korean Australian adoptee. In 1969, the first Korean child was adopted into Australia, and in the subsequent decades Korean children were the most popular for intercountry adoption in Australia.⁹ Korean children represented 206 of the 297 children adopted into Australia between July 1975 and January 1986.¹⁰ While Korean adoption slowed around 1981 as South Korea attempted to curb its adoption policy due to widespread international criticism, South Korea has the world's longest-running intercountry adoption program. From 1953 to 2010 Korea sent out more than 170,000 South Korean children (about 18 percent of the 950,000 global adoptions).¹¹ Though there has been more than thirty years of South Korean intercountry adoption in Australia, the system and its repercussions on individuals remain significantly understudied. In her article "Monetary Flows and the Movements of Children," Kimberly McKee has analyzed the history of Korean adoption, arguing that governments, adoption agencies, various state policies and regulations work in tandem to create what she calls the transnational adoption industrial complex, a "multimillion dollar industry spanning the globe."¹² Adoptee bodies were commodified by the nation-state, turned into currency, and carried across oceans by the global currents of capital. It is pertinent that Lisa Myeong-Joo, as an adoptee artist, has turned to performance art, using her own body—once subjected to the violence of the "transnational adoption industrial complex"—as the vehicle of resistance.

Portraiture and Ethno-Nationalism: Appearance and Anonymity

Lisa Myeong-Joo's deliberate obfuscation of her own face demonstrates this resistance. In her photographs around Changdong, her face is covered by the pose of her raised arms. In her performance, Lisa Myeong-Joo's face is masked by the *sambe*, and her body when viewed from the front can be discerned only by the amorphous outline of her shadow as she progresses through the gallery corridor. In the video component of *Self-Portrait of a Circle*, we see a close-up of two hands trying to reach each other (Fig. 3). As they make contact, the camera pans right from the fingertips to the palm, the wrist, the forearm, to the neck of the subject. However, again the face is never shown, as emphasis is placed on the subject's body.

While "portraiture" conventionally depicts the face of the subject, capturing their likeness, in Lisa Myeong-Joo's *Self-Portrait of a Circle* there is a refusal of representation and easy identification. Park notes that photography specifically is a "technology of representation . . . that presupposes an ontological



Figure 2 Screenshots from Performance with hemp mobius, MMCA Changdong Residency Seoul, 2016. Video credit: Pablo Lobato. Courtesy of the artist.

imperative.”¹³ Citizenship and national belonging are often predicated on identification through photographic documentation, with official government documents such as passports requiring a clear photograph of the passport holder. Yet Lisa Myeong-Joo uses photography as a form of de-identification and obfuscation.

The art historian Amelia Jones observes that modernist discourses of photography continue to uphold the self-portrait image as the indisputable transmission of the “true” artistic subject to viewers.¹⁴ Refuting this claim, Jones writes on the use of exaggerated performativity in self-portrait photography as a way to convey that “we can never ‘know’ the subject behind or in the image.”¹⁵ Lisa Myeong-Joo similarly complicates the belief in the self-portrait image as a receptacle of stable identity formation, challenging the accepted equivalence of visibility in the self-portrait with truthfulness.¹⁶ By hiding her face, Lisa Myeong-Joo destabilizes the reliance on outward expression in processes of identity formation, echoing Jones in her assertion that the self-portrait photograph is an unstable technology that reflects the “tenuousness and incoherence” inherent to our experiences as “living, embodied subjects.”¹⁷ Through a performative *anonymity*, Lisa Myeong-Joo interrogates one of the key principles of representation: our facial and biological features that often problematically also become the basis for belonging. This sense of physical belonging is highly political when imbricated with legal matrices and definitions of nationality and citizenship. The political scientist Walker Connor writes that a shared sense of homogeneity and a myth of common descent creates the psychological essence of the nation, coining the term *ethno-nationalism* in 1973.¹⁸

Lisa Myeong-Joo may be specifically responding to Korea’s dominant ethno-nationalism that equates Koreanness with cultural, linguistic, and ethnic homogeneity based on a mythos of shared blood and a five-thousand-year-old history. We may see the invocation of this ethno-nationalism in the Overseas Korean Act, which was passed on December 3, 1999. The act was part of South

Korea's economic policy of *seggyehwa* (or globalization), which involved reaching out to the then 5.3 million Korean "co-ethnics,"" conceiving of them as members of "hanminjok," or "the [one] Korean people."¹⁹ This included adoptees, who were seen as compatriots with the same ethnic origins and blood (*hyoltong*). Jung-Sun Park and Paul Chang have argued that the law "entails the construction of a Korean identity based on 'primordial' ethnic ties and the belief in shared blood (*pitjul*) and heritage (*hyolt'ongjuui*). Thus, legal national identity is confounded with ethnic identity."²⁰ By virtue of her appearance existing in a racialized body, Lisa Myeong-Joo is visibly and legibly read as "Korean" in a putatively ethnically homogeneous country. Yet, as an adoptee she feels as though she were an outsider, raising questions of "self" and "other."

Here, Jones's notion of intersubjectivity, in which fixed notions of subject and object are collapsed in favor of an understanding of the body and self as "dramatically intercorporeal: as embodied as well as contingent," may be relevant.²¹ Writing on Korean American adoptee artists, Park takes Jones's theory and argues that intersubjective contingency is key to the art of adoptee artists.²² Through her performances moving through the streets of Changdong, Lisa Myeong-Joo reveals the "self as a performance in relation to others,"²³ as she is both connected to and restrained by national belonging and difference.

Beyond the Surface: Collapsing Boundaries and the Möbius Strip

It is this dialectic of belonging and not belonging that led Lisa Myeong-Joo to investigate the binary of inside and outside. In this investigation, Lisa Myeong-Joo began to use the Möbius strip as a metaphor for identity. The Möbius strip is a single-sided geometrical structure that is rendered into a three-dimensional figure eight through twisting and inverting to create an interface of outside and inside. The philosopher Elizabeth Grosz has built on the phenomenological theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, using the Möbius strip as a motif to develop a corporeal feminism where the relationship between the individual and the social, or body and the world, might be realized.²⁴ Grosz's conception of the body as a Möbius strip reconfigures the dualist Cartesian perception of the body as static, merely inert, and "shaped" by the external world around it. By arguing that the body is a Möbius strip, Grosz conceptualizes the body as a cultural and social product constructed through the interaction of the mind and the body. Lisa Myeong-Joo's stance reflects Grosz's and Merleau-Ponty's writings on perception and the body; the latter has written that "when I press my two hands together, it is not a matter

of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the role of ‘touching’ and being ‘touched.’”²⁵ By twisting one palm out and one in, Lisa Myeong-Joo’s arms become a Möbius strip. Collapsing the distinction between mind and body, subject and object, a multilayered understanding of the body emerges. Lisa Myeong-Joo’s fingertips, or the point of encounter where biophysical, psychological, emotional, and social aspects of embodied experience intersect, becomes the focal point of her photographic series. Similarly, in the video component of *Self-Portrait of a Circle*, her fingertips and the space in between them become the central focus of the composition. In the video, the fingertips approach one another very slowly, the hands quivering and trembling slightly in the effort to meet. The camera sweeps from the touching fingertips to the palm, wrist, forearm, neck, all the way around to the left side of the subject’s shoulder, down the forearm and wrist and then to the left hand, which has now been turned with the palm facing away from the viewer. The video continues to move around and around the loop as the palms alternate moving in and out, a visual activation of the Möbius strip imagery.

In the performance component of *Self-Portrait of a Circle*, the fabric sambe loop is actually a large Möbius strip. As a loop, the dirt and debris on the gallery floor is picked up by the fabric and eventually circles to the “inside,” rubbing over Lisa Myeong-Joo as she moves the fabric continuously over her body. Hence, Grosz’s ideas on the conflation of “inside” and “outside” are visualized by the movement of particles from the “outside” of the floor making their way “inside” to Lisa Myeong-Joo. The color of the sambe in Lisa Myeong-Joo’s performance is reminiscent of skin, which emphasizes the visualization of the mobius strip as a corporeal metaphor. The tension between the outside and inside is emphasized by Lisa Myeong-Joo’s slow, steady, hesitant steps, as she must ensure that the tension between the fabric and her steps is maintained to avoid falling. By occupying the liminal space between outside and inside, Lisa Myeong-Joo challenges the conception of the body as a “blank slate” purely defined by external forces. By doing so, she poses a reclamation of her own body by recognizing the role of the interior in its construction.

Performed for a predominantly Korean audience, the performance of *Self-Portrait of a Circle* resists “the hierarchy of the Korean nation . . . [which] dominates the ways in which overseas Koreans or diasporic subjects are represented in mainstream South Korean public and/or academic perspectives.”²⁶ Rather than adhering to these dominant perspectives of “finding nation outside the nation . . . [in which] the Korean nation is the subject of study rather than the migrants themselves,”²⁷ Lisa Myeong-Joo denaturalizes origin stories by showing a dialectic

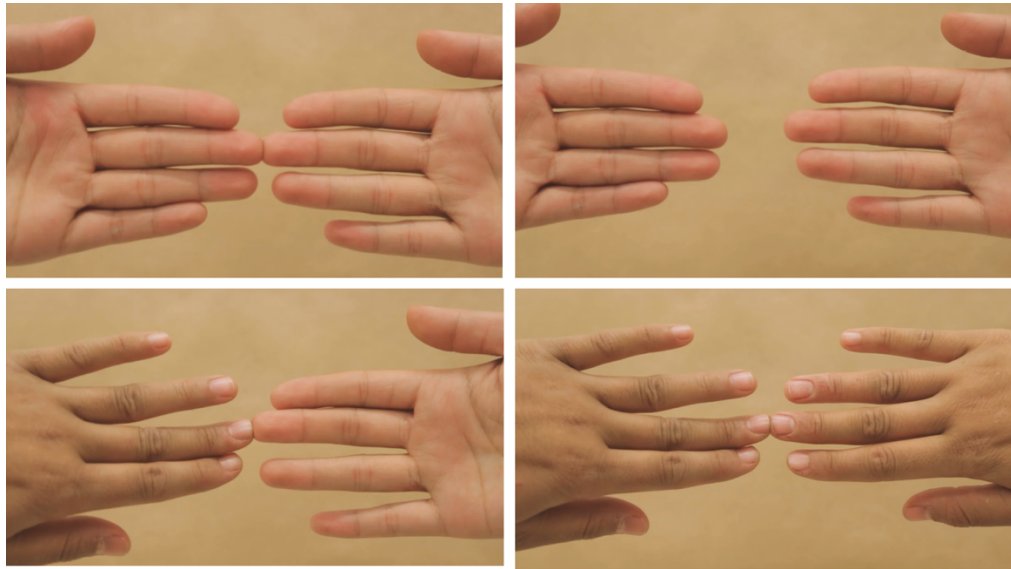


Figure 3 Screenshots from *Self-Portrait of a Circle*, 2016. *Single-channel video, duration 3'48"*, MMCA Changdong Residency Seoul, 2016. *Courtesy of the artist.*

of belonging and unbelonging. It is relevant, then, that this body of work was displayed at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Changdong in 2016 under the curatorial framework of “No Man’s Land,” referring to “a territory occupied by nobody” in the global context of migration.²⁸ The title of the exhibition may refer to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of deterritorialization, first theorized in *A Thousand Plateaus* as “the movement by which ‘one’ leaves the territory,”²⁹ severing social, cultural, or political practices from originary places. Arjun Appadurai argues that cultural identities and practices are part of this process of deterritorialization.³⁰ In Appadurai’s use, deterritorialization and the crossing of territorial boundaries may be understood as “travel,” “displacement,” and “overseas movement.”³¹ Appadurai argues that this transgressive crossing provides people with agency, or the power to shape their own worlds and therefore counter imperialism. Rather than claim allegiance to a nation and embody a romanticized, nostalgic view of the so-called Motherland, Lisa Myeong-Joo’s series may be seen as a practice in deterritorialization.

The (In)visible: Feeling Place from Feeling out of Place

In evoking Merleau-Ponty, Lisa Myeong-Joo privileges feeling over seeing. By replacing the eyes with her inverted palms, the artist subverts the disembodied theories of vision and experience and the ocularcentrism of landscape and place that have developed out of Cartesianism. In the performance element of the series,

Lisa Myeong-Joo's vision is obscured by fabric, so she must feel first with her feet that guide her. Furthermore, her bare feet center tactile experience rather than vision, as the Möbius loop itself may be seen as a proxy for human skin. In the video component of *Self-Portrait of a Circle* the continuous close-up shot of the subject's skin and body emphasizes a haptic engagement with place.

The philosopher Jacques Rancière has written that “politics revolves around what can be seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.”³² That is, the visible determines “Place” and our experience of place. Hence mainstream conceptions of community are often predicated on seeing and looking the same. Rather than “seeing” Seoul, however, Lisa Myeong-Joo seems to “feel” her way through the city, and through this “redistribution of the senses,” she makes visible what once was invisible, suggesting the possibility of alternative ways of sensing and acting. Her performative engagement with site repositions the landscape, in the words of W. J. T. Mitchell, “not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed.”³³

By reacting to the architectural constraints around her with ambivalence, Lisa Myeong-Joo eschews a nostalgic and romanticized idealization of the so-called Motherland. Rather than completely “embracing” origin narratives, *Self-Portrait of a Circle* leaves gaps to challenge Korea's state promotion of ethnic homogeneity (*tanil minjok*) and “pure-blood” relations (*sunsu hyoltong*), which are often conceived as static and fixed. Through strategic obfuscation and a sense of “risky subjectivity” Lisa Myeong-Joo interrogates biological and cultural essentialist paradigms of family and state. Instead, Lisa Myeong-Joo demonstrates a greater ontological understanding that identity is constituted by and manipulated through an endlessly reversible process of seeing and being seen.

* * *

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Notes

¹ Lisa Myeong-Joo, interview by author, Sydney, Australia, July 20, 2021.

² Lisa Myeong-Joo is Lisa Myeong-Joo Keighery's artist name. Her use of this artist name may be interpreted as a form of reclamation of identity, as Lisa Myeong-Joo connects with both her Korean heritage and Australian upbringing. Lisa, the name given upon adoption, and Myeong-Joo, her Korean name given at birth, hold equal importance in her chosen artist's name.

³ Eun Jung Park, "Risky Subjectivity: Select Works by Korean Adoptee Artists," in *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*, ed. Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

⁴ Ibid., 120.

⁵ Ibid., 121.

⁶ Adrian Heathfield and Tehching Hsieh, *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2015), 43.

⁷ Park, "Risky Subjectivity," 127.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Tobias Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture* (Seoul: Jimoondang, 2006), 264.

¹⁰ Patricia Fronek, "Intercountry Adoption in Australia: A Natural Evolution or Purposeful Action," in *Other People's Children: Adoption in Australia*, ed. Ceridwen Sparkes and Denise Cuthbert (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009), 41, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.013.1165>.

¹¹ Kyunghye Ma, "Korean Intercountry Adoption History: Culture, Practice, and Implications," *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 98, no. 3 (2017): 243, <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.2017.98.25>.

¹² Kimberly D. McKee, "Monetary Flows and the Movements of Children: The Transnational Adoption Industrial Complex," *Journal of Korean Studies* 21, no. 1 (2016): 137, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2016.0007>.

¹³ Park, "Risky Subjectivity," 126.

¹⁴ Amelia Jones, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27, no. 4 (2002): 951, <https://doi.org/10.1086/339641>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 950.

¹⁸ Walker Connor, "Eco- or Ethno-nationalism?," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 7, no. 3 (1984): 342, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1984.9993449>.

¹⁹ Eleana Kim, "Our Adoptee, Our Alien: Transnational Adoptees as Specters of Foreignness and Family in South Korea," *Anthropological Quarterly* 80, no. 2 (2007): 497–531, <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2007.0027>.

²⁰ Jung-Sun Park and Paul Y. Chang, “Contention in the Construction of a Global Korean Community: The Case of the Overseas Koreans Act,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 10, no. 1 (2005): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2005.0002>.

²¹ Amelia Jones, quoted in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 20, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12032>.

²² Park, “Risky Subjectivity,” 125.

²³ Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 38.

²⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003118381>.

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2011), 93, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203720714>.

²⁶ Hijoo Son, “Paradox of Diasporic Art from There: Antidote to Master Narrative of the Nation?,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 17, no. 1 (2012): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2012.0003>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “No Man’s Land” (국립현대미술관) National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, 2016, <https://www.mmca.go.kr/eng/exhibitions/exhibitionsDetail.do?menuId=102000000&exhId=201611110000510>.

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 508.

³⁰ It is important to note here the difference between cultural and ethnic identities. The present essay applies Appadurai’s understanding of culture as a porous, syncretic entity that has the capacity to transform as a socially transmittable practice, in contrast with ethnicity that is more often problematically defined by physical attributes and biological essentialism.

³¹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 38.

³² Jacques Rancière and Gabriel Rockhill, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 13, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822390930>.

³³ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1.