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Picturing the Asian Diaspora in North America: A Study of Liu Hung, Jin-me Yoon and Nikki S. Lee

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the changing identity of Asian North American women in the past thirty years through the analysis of the work of three Asian North American female artists, Liu Hung (b.1948), Jin-me Yoon (b.1960), and Nikki S. Lee (b.1970). It argues that Asian North American female identity has evolved in three stages: firstly, it shows a close connection with a diasporic "imagined community" bound by one's cultural origin; secondly, it is rooted in a settled diasporic community, meanwhile remains tied to the original homeland as an imaginary political space for unification; lastly, the new transnational Asian female identity rejects classification based on race and gender and embraces an identity rooted in globalization.

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Introduction

This research first initiated from some general thoughts and observations on globalization, migration, and questions of cultural identity. It also emerged out of my own transnational experience as a migrant moving from "the East" to "the West." I moved from China to Canada at the age of twenty, an age when I did not have a fully developed sense of identity. Today when I recall that period of confusion and frustration, I realize that I was living in a bicultural situation and that my identity had been through an enormous amount of cultural and social clashes. The experiences of dealing with language difficulties, being judged based on stereotypes which may have been negative, and struggling to be the same as everyone else had been part of me while I was trying to make Canada my new home. On the other hand, maintaining my heritage and a strong tie to China and taking more pride in my Chineseness than I would have in China was also an important part of my identity.

This journey has had a profound psychological effect on me. I have moved from being an outsider to Canadian culture to being more of an insider, but still somehow I remain at a distance because as a foreign-born person of Chinese origin, I can never be fully integrated. I have also become something of an outsider to new cultures and ideologies that emerged in China while I was away, but still emotionally maintain a strong connection through families and friends to China. Feelings that I have of being an insider and outsider to both cultures simultaneously, and being able to switch roles back and forth are what I find fascinating about this experience.

Despite the confusions and transformations I encountered within me, I find my own transnational experience to be distinct from the earlier experiences of immigration discussed in historical texts. I have opportunities to speak the language and maintain a connection to Chinese

customs and culture through interactions with a large population of Chinese immigrants in Canada and with my families and friends in China. On another social level, I also have the option to submerge myself in this new culture and new social life through interactions in school and workplaces with native-born Canadians. In many instances, I have replaced the feelings of displacement and longing for my homeland with the desire to experience new cultures. However, at times I feel a strong sense of loss, not knowing who I really am, and not being able to switch my roles quickly and fluidly enough.

In addition to these psychological fluctuations within myself, how Canadian society has treated me as an outsider has also affected my sense of identity. On various levels of social life, such as work and personal relationships, I have encountered discrimination, misunderstanding, and disrespect as a Chinese woman. I feel underprivileged, powerless, discriminated against and not welcomed here. This personal journey and observing others with similar experiences triggered my interest in studying identity formation and its relation to the social and cultural context of transnational migrations.

In this era of globalization, transnational movement has become the norm. Social and political structures defined by nation states have been challenged. Identities can no longer be determined by conventional perceptions of fixed geographical location, consistent cultural and social history, and monolithic racial ethnicity. The idea of the "imagined community"[1] bound by nation-states, which had been a stable source for one's social identity, is no longer relevant. Arjun Appadurai suggests it is a time to think ourselves beyond the nation, beyond citizenship,

1 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2002).

and beyond the fixities of time and space.[2] Without doubt, it is a time to re-examine how a traditional sense of identities has been shaken as these are affected by global cultural clashes. In the particular instance of North America, where diverse racial groups from around the world have made a home for themselves in the "new land" emptied by early European settlers, Asian North American women have negotiated their positions in relation to Euro-American hegemonic discourses.

To formulate a comprehensive understanding of the identity of Asian North American women in this particular context, I have consulted theories of post-colonialism, feminism, cultural studies, as well as anthropological studies on travel and migration, and Asian North American history and art history to inform my analysis. Key thinkers that have helped me structure my argument are: Edward Said on Orientalism, Stuart Hall on diaspora identity, James Clifford on migration, Benedict Anderson on community and nationalism, Homi Bhabha on nationalism and globalization, Judith Butler on feminism and performativity, scholars in the field of Asian North American Studies such as Elaine Kim, Geoffrey Kain, and Eleanor Ty, and writers who contribute to the critique of multiculturalism and globalization.

Among these theories, the discussion of diaspora identity serves as an umbrella concept that encompasses my analysis. Since the early 1990s, the attempt to theorize diaspora experiences combines discussions of migration, nationalism, transnationalism, and post-colonialism. These theories view diaspora as a political phenomenon that involves a constructed transnational community that uses its ancestral home as a source of a shared sense of identity to

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2 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 158-166.

position itself against the power of Anglo-American dominance. Although these theories do not address Asian North American diasporic experiences specifically, they are useful in the analysis of the political and social construction of Asian North American communities and identities that emerge in the diasporic community.

Following diasporic identity theories and studies of Asian North Americans, this thesis will focus on the experiences of Asian North American women who were born in Asia and emigrated to North America as instances of the development of diasporic identity. This thesis chooses to study the evolution of the identity of the diasporic group of women who had direct experiences of both the cultures of their homelands in Asia and those of their newly adopted homes in North America, which I define as an "Asian North American female diasporic identity." The use of the terms, "diaspora," "transnationalism," and "Asian North American" will be further explored in the next chapter where I review the history of Asian North American studies.

To answer my questions on Asian North American female diasporic identity, first initiated from personal experiences and empirical observations and further developed through theoretical analysis, I have chosen to study the work of three Asian North American female artists who have had similar transnational experiences to mine. These three artists are: Chinese American painter Liu Hung (b. 1948), Korean Canadian photographer and video artist Jin-me Yoon (b. 1960), and Korean-born, New York City-based artist and filmmaker Nikki S. Lee (b. 1970). These three emigrated from two Asian countries to two North American countries at different points in their lives; therefore, their work reflects different experiences of Asian immigrant women in North America and represents three instances of the construction of identity that encompasses two nations.

Despite their shared experiences of migration, another reason for me to group these artists together in this thesis is their common subject matter and similar techniques: First, all three use portraits of Asian women as their subjects, representing a broad range of women's roles from imperial courtesans, communist heroines, and contemporary working mothers to playful exotic dancers. Some of these are re-creations based on historical photographs, while others are photographic or video self-portraits. These images explore both perceptions of past identities of Asian women and the changes in these identities while adapting to their new homes in North America. Secondly, although painting is Liu's primary medium, and Yoon and Lee both use photography and video, their work shares an interest in juxtaposing typical Asian female figures with representations of social environments. In doing so, the work examines the interaction of Asian North American women with the white-male-dominant social environment.

By choosing these three artists, I have also set out the parameters of my analysis. Thus, this thesis will concentrate on the changes in socio-political circumstance in China, South Korea, the United States, and Canada in the last three decades, as these are the geographic areas and time periods that are necessary to the understanding of the work of these artists. Through analyzing their work as visual documentation of their stories and expression of their feelings as well as the socio-political context they are working within, this thesis will give some insights into the experience of Asian North American women and the emergence of their diasporic identity.

Thesis Statement

Before I present the main argument of this thesis, it is worth mentioning that since all three artists are still actively producing artworks today with distinct perspectives and focuses, the

issues they address in their work are entwined strands and should not be understood separately or chronologically. This is to say that the issues Liu addressed in her work in the 1980s might still exist today, although they are not addressed in Lee's work. However, considering the feasibility of the project, what I have done here is to simplify and summarize the body of their work into three manageable stages. However, the organization of the chapters does not suggest absolute generational changes or progressions. As their geographic locations, cultural origins, ages, personal experiences are different, these three artists are three individual cases. Nevertheless, by putting them together, my goal is to present a relatively complete picture depicting various issues Asian North American women face. A thirty year period is also a reasonable length of time for observation and evaluation of changes and evolution in both society and identity. Therefore, my arguments will be based on comparing and contrasting the backgrounds, methodologies and issues explored by these artists within the socio-political contexts of North America and Asia during the last thirty years.

Building on Stuart Hall's theory of diasporic identity,[3] this thesis argues that the Asian North American female diasporic identity is in a process of continuous adjustment, constantly repositioning its relations to Asia, North America and the Eurocentric dominance. I draw on theories of diasporic identity and Asian North American studies to argue that Asian North American women have moved from the position where they attempt to construct a diasporic community that maintains a nostalgic connection to the homeland and resists the forces of racism, patriarchy and neo-colonialism, to a position where they no longer struggle to belong to any

3 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse & Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (Harvester Whaeatsheaf, 1993), 393-402.

community fixed by geographic locality, nationality, race or even gender. The diasporic identity has evolved from reconciling what James Clifford describes as "an opposition between rootedness and displacement"[4] to embracing hybridity and performativity.

By examining the changes from Liu Hung to Jin-me Yoon, and to Nikki S. Lee over the past thirty years, I argue that the Asian North American female diasporic identity has evolved in three stages: firstly, diasporic identity is closely tied to the existence of a diasporic "imagined community" bound by Asian cultural heritage; as a result, it articulates both nostalgic and critical views towards the homeland; secondly, the Asian North American identity rooted in a settled diasporic community constantly battles against exclusion and discrimination under the white dominant ideology; subsequently, the original homeland becomes an imaginary political space to articulate one's rejection to assimilation; lastly, with increased mobility and greater movements of populations, the new transnational female identity rejects classification based on race and gender and embraces migratory aesthetics rooted in globalization; instead of any particular diasporic community.

I will also argue that the three stages outlined above suggest a shift from the twentieth century's Eurocentric global cultural structure rooted in the nation-state to a more fluid and multidimensional cultural exchange among diverse parties that James Clifford describes as "trans-regional worldliness."[5] Today, the development of diasporic communities has become a

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4 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 254.

5 Clifford, *Routes*, 298.

mobilizing force that rejects various forms of social and political oppression that used to dominate within national borders.

Chapter Synopses

In chapter 1, I will survey the history of Asian North Americans from the late eighteenth century to today. I will focus particularly on the radical period of social movements in the 1960s and 70s, the experiences of women and the lack of representation of Asian North American women in both academic and historical sources. I will also trace the history of the coinage of the term Asian North American and its relation to the development of the academic field of Asian North American Studies and discuss theories of diaspora and transnationalism. The main theses presented previously are treated in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, through a combined analysis of visual objects and social history.

In Chapter 2, I will first survey the history of modern China since the Communist Party came to power. Then I will analyze Liu's works, such as *Women of Color* (1991), *Relic* series (2005), and *The Prodigal Daughters* (2008) in three sections in relation to three broader issues: the predicament of diaspora intensified by the contrasting ideologies of China and the United States; the critique of gender hierarchy in China and the United States; and lastly, a nostalgic reflection on positive gender roles in Maoist China. I will argue that Liu's identity positions itself closely to her original home in China and against the white dominance in the United States. Drawing on William Safran's theory that diasporas wish for an eventual return to the homeland, I argue that Liu's work expresses nostalgic and ambivalent emotions towards the homeland as it had provided her sources of both oppression and rootedness.

Chapter 3 begins with a brief introduction to Canadian modern history since the end of World War II. Unlike Chapter 2, which explores Liu's complicated relationship to her homeland, this chapter considers Yoon's work in relation to the Canadian context as a way of understanding multiculturalism and the construction of Canadian national identity. Firstly, I will examine how Yoon critiques the ideologies upheld by Canadian cultural institutions and puts forward a hybrid identity. Secondly, I will argue that in work such as *The Dreaming Collective Knows No History* (2005), Yoon constructs South Korea as a political space for transnational construction of diasporic identity. Lastly, I will discuss how Yoon critiques gender hierarchy and the burden it creates on working mothers through such work as *Intersections* (1996-2002).

Chapter 4 explores the recent photographic and video work of Nikki S. Lee, a Korean artist who now lives in New York City, including *Projects* (1997-2002), *Parts* (2002-2005) and *A.K.A. Nikki S. Lee* (2006). This chapter will present three major arguments derived from Lee's work: that a transnational, fluid identity rejects classification based on racial and gender hierarchy and displays a migratory fluidity that embraces multiple cultural origins.

Chapter 1: Historical and Theoretical Overview

Asian North American Immigration History

Over the past four decades, North America has seen a major increase in the number of immigrants of Asian origin. According to a study on Asian population in the United States and Canada, "Europe was still the major source in the early post-World War II period, but in more recent years, largely as a result of major changes in immigration law, there has been a shift to Asia as the major source in both the United States and Canada."[6] As the number of people of Asian ancestry in North America continues to grow, attitudes towards Asian minorities have also changed drastically in the United States and Canada. However, the new experience today is still overshadowed by the struggle and tragedy of previous generations of Asian immigrants. I think it is important to contextualize the work of Liu Hung, Jin-me Yoon and Nikki S. Lee in the history of Asian North American immigration for the following reasons: firstly, their understanding of the history of Asian immigration and the burden they carry from their original homelands is an important component of their work; secondly, although the artists deal with contemporary issues around Asian immigrants, their work re-examines and provides new insights into the writing and understanding of Asian North American history.

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6 "In Canada, from 1961-1970, 69.1 percent of immigrants were from Europe, and 11.8 percent were from Asia. During the 1981-1990 period, however, only 24.8 percent were from Europe and 47.7 percent from Asia. This pattern has continued through the nineties (1991-1996) with 20 percent of immigrants coming from Europe and 57 percent from Asia. Similar patterns occurred in the U.S. During the period from 1961-1970, 37.3 percent of immigrants originated in Europe while 13.4 percent came from Asia. During the years of 1981-1990, only 9.6 percent were from Europe and 38.4 percent from Asia, and from 1991-1996, 16 percent came from Europe and 34 percent from Asia."
See "Asians in the U.S. and Canada: Patterns and Issues Related to Recent Regional and Metropolitan Settlements," *Center for Urban Studies*, April 2000, http://www.cus.wayne.edu/content/publications/AsiansinUSCan.pdf.

The earliest wave of Asian immigration started in the nineteenth century, when individuals from East Asian countries, primarily from Guangdong Province in China and the Philippines, began moving to North America as labourers first in response to the Gold Rush in California and later as workers needed for the construction of the railroads in the United States and Canada.[7] By the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, after the completion of the railway constructions, both American and Canadian governments passed laws to sharply restrict Asian immigration in response to what they perceived as a dangerously growing Asian population. In United States, the *Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1882 prevented almost all Chinese already in the United States, and even their American-born children from becoming U.S. citizens. In Canada, the *Chinese Immigration Act* of 1885 first placed a head tax of fifty dollars on all Chinese immigrants coming to Canada. The amended *China Immigration Act* of 1924 banned almost all forms of Chinese immigration to Canada.[8] During the Second World War, Japanese Americans and Canadians were considered a threat to national security and sent to internment camps. Chinese immigrants continued to suffer institutional discrimination and poor economic and social status. Cold War mentality and the Communist Party of China's rule created both new stereotypes and fears of Chinese immigrants. The Korean population in North America was small; however, during the decades after World War II, many Koreans emigrated to avoid the harsh living conditions as a result of the Korean War.

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7 Kenneth M. Holland, "A History of Chinese Immigration in the United States and Canada." *American Review of Canadian Studies* 37, no. 2 (June 2007): 150-160.

8 Ibid., 150-160.

The most important turning point in the history of Asian North Americans was the amendment of immigration policies in the United States and Canada in the 1960s. With the passing of the *Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments* of 1965 in the United States,[9] and the introduction of the Points System[10] in Canada, the restriction to immigration based on national quotas was finally removed.[11] A larger number of individuals from China, Japan, South Korea and other Asian countries immigrated to North America to avoid political conflicts in their home countries and for economic betterment. In Chapters 2 and 3, I will discuss these issues in China and South Korea in more detail with respect to each artist.

Emergence of Asian North American Studies

In the 1970s, as the number of people of Asian descent living in North America rapidly grew, an Asian American radical grassroots movement emerged inspired by the Civil Rights,

9 "This act replaced exclusionary immigration rules of the Chinese Exclusion Act and its successors, such as the 1924 Immigration Act, which effectively excluded "undesirable" immigrants, including Asians. The 1965 rules set across-the-board immigration quotas for each country." See "Three Decades of Mass Immigration: The Legacy of the 1965 Immigration Act," *Centre for Immigration Studies*, September 1995, *http://www.cis.org/articles/1995/back395.html*.

10 "In 1967, Canada introduced a Points System that gave preference to immigrants who, among other things: knew English or French; were not too old/too young to take regular jobs; had arranged employment in Canada; had a relative or family member in Canada; had proper education and training; and were immigrating to a region of high employment. Immigrants were assigned points on a scale of 0 to 10 (or 15) based on the qualities listed directly above. If they reached a certain level of points in total, they were allowed into the country." See "*Immigration Acts* (1866 - 2001)," http://www.canadiana.org/citm/specifique/immigration_e.html#1967.

11 "There were no quotas or restrictions placed on the number of people who could immigrate, so long as successful immigrants passed the Points System test. Canada began to receive more immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East and Asia. The vast majority of these immigrants settled in Canada's urban centers like Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver". See "*Immigration Acts* (1866 - 2001)," http://www.canadiana.org/citm/specifique/immigration_e.html#1967.

Black Power and anti-Vietnam War movements.[12] Students and activists gathered to demand equal rights after decades of exclusion and discrimination.[13] Their efforts and the establishment of ethnic studies programs, especially Black Studies programs, laid the foundation for the emergence of the field of Asian American studies at colleges across the United States. Asian American scholars and literary critics along with authors, artists, and political activists continued to raise critical attention to the problems Asian Americans faced as a group.

The movement in the United States inspired Asian Canadians in Vancouver and Toronto, where there were large populations of people of Asian descent. In 1972, Ron Tanaka, an Asian American activist who was teaching in the English Department at the University of British Columbia, published an article stressing the lack of an Asian Canadian discourse in visual art and literature. He particularly encouraged Asian Canadians to refuse to be assimilated by the dominant culture and to forge their own cultural discourse that concerned their own communities.[14] Although the history of Asian immigration to Canada has been well documented, a rigorous field of Asian Canadian studies was never established in academia.[15] No Canadian universities offer Asian Canadian studies programs to this day. Asian Canadian scholars have

12 Glenn Omatsu, "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s," in *Asian American Studies: A Reader*, edited by Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Min Song (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 165.

13 Asian Americans at University of California, Los Angeles launched groups such as Asian American Political Alliance and Orientals Concerned. A group of Japanese American UCLA students also formed the leftist publication Gidra in 1969. Meanwhile, on the East Coast, branches of AAPA formed at Yale and Columbia, and Midwestern Asian student groups formed at the University of Illinois, Oberlin College and University of Michigan. See Diane C. Fujino, "Who Studies the Asian American Movement?: A Historiographical Analysis," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 11, no 2 (June 2008): 127-169.

14 Xiaoping Li, *Voices Rising: Asian Canadian Cultural Activism* (Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2007), 19.

15 Christopher Lee, "The Lateness of Asian Canadian Studies," *Amerasia Journal* 33, no. 2 (2007), 1-18.

been working with Asian American scholars in establishing the critical field, particularly in literature and literary criticism.

A large body of critical writing on Asian North American literature has been published since the 1970s.[16] In the past decade, scholarship on Asian North American literature and film has outlined the dominant narrative within this body of literature. Eleanor Ty suggests these works focus on a critique of mainstream's construction of a stereotypical and fixed perception of Asian North American identity.[17] Her study shows "how selected novelists, auto/biographers, and filmmakers empower themselves and represent their various identities within the ideological, imaginative, and discursive space given to them by the dominant order."[18] In the introduction to a collection of essays on novels written by Asian immigrants, Geoffrey Kain argues that the authors examine the adjusted sense of self that follows relocation to a white-dominant society and the new interaction of self and environment.[19] The experiences of Asian North Americans are captured in these novels, films and autobiographical writings. Research and critical writings in Asian North American studies have summarized the dominant narrative found in Asian North American literary and film productions, which includes an expression of their unique identity and a critique of mainstream representations. I will borrow these themes in my discussion of Liu Hung, Jin-me Yoon, and Nikki S. Lee. Although Asian North American artists have been

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16 See examples such as:
David Hsin-fu Wand, ed. *Asian American Heritage: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry* (New York: Pocket Books, 1974);
Frank Chin, et al, eds. *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1974);
Elaine H Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982).

17 Eleanor Ty, *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives* (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 3-7.

18 Ibid., 12.

19 Geoffrey Kain, ed. *Ideas of Home: Literature of Asian Migration* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997), 20.

actively producing work and expressing ideas as important as those of writers, the lack of a systematic documentation of Asian North American art limits the development of a critical analysis of Asian North American art. Therefore, the critique of mainstream representation found in Asian North American literature will serve as the theoretical framework of my analysis of these artists.

Asian North American Art History

Early Asian immigrants experienced extreme hardship in North America. Whites in North America probably never viewed these cheap and uneducated labourers as producers of culture and art. Nevertheless, the history of appreciating Asian art and its splendid beauty and craftsmanship was not new to audiences outside Asia. As early as the seventeenth century the import of art from the Far East swelled considerably in Europe, and at the time "every lady of fashion had to have her oriental jars and screens and hangings."[20] A style called "chinoiserie," which was extremely popular in eighteenth-century Europe, inherited elements from Chinese porcelains and paintings, Japanese lacquers and Indian printed cottons.[21]

In the United States, Asian artists from more affluent backgrounds introduced Asian art and cultural traditions to the American art world. Artists of Asian origin have produced a great amount of work in North America since the 1900s. In his recently published comprehensive survey of Asian American art history, Gordon Chang points out that Asian American art history

20 A. Hyatt Mayor, "Chinoserie," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 36, no. 5 (May, 1941), 112.
21 Ibid., 112.

was neglected by scholars in the past.[22] In fact, Chinese and Japanese artists started exhibiting widely in the United States in the 1920s, especially on the West Coast.[23] Many of these Asian American artists were highly acclaimed and commercially successful, but their works, biographies and exhibition histories have never been systematically recorded. As a result, their contribution to the Euro-American dominated historiography of modern art has not been recognized.

Chang's survey of Asian American art history includes more than 200 artists of Asian origin from 1850 to 1965. Recently, a large number of multi-artist studies and exhibition catalogues have been published.[24] Single artist studies are also emerging.[25] In the mid-twentieth century, female artists of Asian origin such as Anna Wu Weakland (b. 1924), Jade Snow Wong (1922 – 2006), and Tseng Yuho (b. 1925) all had solo exhibitions in major art galleries and museums in the United States.[26] These artists all had training in or knowledge of art forms that are associated with Asian traditions, and their work served the role of introducing Asian culture and traditional art practices to the outside world. According to Chang's introduction to their biographies, these Asian female artists working in the United States in the early twentieth century were usually from wealthy families that encouraged them to pursue a career in arts.[27]

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

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 449, 504, 437.

27 Ibid.

They practiced calligraphy, ink painting, watercolours and ceramics. To a certain extent, their works showed no difference from the work of Asian male artists of the time.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Asian American artists such as Nam June Paik (1932 – 2006) and Yoko Ono (b. 1933) became well known names through their association with the Fluxus movement. Artists such as Leo Amino (1911 – 1989), who is best known as an Abstract Expressionist sculptor, and Mako Idenmitsu (b. 1940), a San Francisco based feminist artist active in the 1970s, worked within the scope of Western philosophical and artistic traditions.[28] However, these artists have rarely been discussed in association with their race and identity.

While previous generations practiced largely within the scope of Asian traditions or Western artistic modes, artists emerging in the 1980s and 1990s such as Tseng Kwong Chi (1950 – 1990), Flo Oy Wong (b. 1938), Zhang Hong Tu (b. 1943), Paul Wong (b. 1954) and Richard Fung (b. 1954), inspired both by artists' interests in exploring issues of identity and by the awareness of Asian North American experiences addressed in literature and other academic fields, started to explore what constitutes Asian North American art and what represents a unique Asian North American experience. They focus on identity issues, directly reflecting their own or their families' transnational experiences and explore issues regarding their complicated identities relating to their roots to Asia and their resistance to the white dominance in North America. These works not only represent the unique experience of people of Asian origin living in North America, but have also broadened the definition of Western art and added new dimensions to the mainstream, which had been neglecting works by other cultures.

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28 Kara Kelley Hallmark, *Encyclopedia of Asian American Artists: Artists of the American Mosaic* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 4-6, 81-84.

Lack of Representation of Women

Although the field of Asian North American studies was established in the 1970s, writings that focus particularly on women are still scarce. Huping Ling argues in her study of the history of Chinese American women that, "although some rose to prominence in America, Chinese women have been virtually ignored by historians."[29] In the early twentieth century, Asian American women's immigration was perceived as secondary to men's immigration because most of them immigrated to the country as "prostitutes, merchant's wives, or picture brides."[30] After World War II, Asian women continued to arrive in the United States as low wage labourers, live-in caregivers, mail-order brides, war brides and adoptees. Even for Asian women who immigrated to North America independently, such as Liu Hung, their lives away from their homeland are still burdened by the traditional female gender roles imposed on them during their upbringings in their countries of origin.

Today, Asian women are still portrayed in North American popular culture as cultural fantasy and exotic female erotica. An article published in August 2009 on *marieclaire.com* questioned the phenomena, which the author called "Asian women as the new trophy wives."[31] From celebrities to tycoons, more and more powerful white men have chosen to marry young, beautiful, and most importantly, subordinate Asian wives. These stereotypes are widely accepted

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29 Huping Ling, "Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A Review of Sources about Chinese American Women," *The History Teacher* 26, no. 4 (August 1993): 460.

30 Linda Trinh Vo, and Marian Sciachitano, "Introduction: Moving Beyond 'Exotics, Whores, and Nimble Fingers': Asian American Women in a New Era of Globalization and Resistance," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 21, no. 1/2 (2000): 2.

31 Ying Chu, "The New Trophy Wives: Asian Women," *Marie CLaire*. http://www.marieclaire.com/sex-love/advice/tips/asian-trophy-wife.

and rarely challenged. As a common thread, the work of the three artists I discuss in my thesis challenges the stereotypical roles of an Asian woman, and discusses their relations to the dominance of white patriarchy and North American society's perceptions of Asian women.

In the 1980s, literary scholars started to consider women's experiences as an important part of the history of Asian Americans. Linda Trinh Vo and Marian Sciachitano outline the important contribution of these scholars, pointing to the landmark publication of *Asian Women* in 1971 by a group of Asian American women who met at U.C. Berkeley as the starting point for the introduction of Asian American feminist discourses.[32] Inspired by literary and scholarly productions that addressed the diversity of experiences of Asian American women, female artists of Asian origin started to represent their own experiences and to question their traditional roles. Many of these works are autobiographical. Through these, we can delve into the world of these artists and their sisters. Liu Hung, Jin-me Yoon and Nikki S. Lee produce their work based on the theoretical foundation laid by these scholarly studies. Furthermore, their work is calling for research that combines visual analysis and the theorization of experiences of Asian North American women.

Before I start the discussion of each individual artist within the parameters of Asian North American women studies, I will first problematize the use of the term "Asian North American" and explore the foundation of diaspora theories.

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32 Vo and Sciachitano summarizes a collection of literature on Asian American women including: Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarit Daonnelly eds., *Forbidden St- itch: An Asia American Women's Anthology* (Corvallis Ore: Calyx, 1989); Sylvia Watanabe, and Carol Bruchac eds., *Home to Stay: Asian American Women Fiction* (Greenfield Center, N .Y.: Greenfield Review Press, 1990); Sharon Lim-Hing ed., *The Very Inside: An Anthology of Writings by Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbians and Bisexual Women* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1994).

The Term "Asian North American"

While people of Asian origin have lived in North America since the late nineteenth century, the use of the term "Asian American" only emerged during the 1960s activist movements[33] in the United States, and was reinforced as the field of Asian American studies developed. The term "Asian North American" began to be employed recently in a similar fashion to the way that "Asian American" has been used. In Ty and Goellnicht's work on pan-Asian North American identity, they justify the term "Asian North American" as forming a coalition among people of Asian descent of different cultural origins living in the United States and Canada, who share similar experiences of dislocation and marginalization.[34] In addition to their common connection to Asia, the coinage of the term Asian North American acts as a means to promote a unified idea of "Asian-ness", which functions as what Gayatri Spivak describes as a temporarily established "essentialist position."[35] The way Spivak uses the term "strategic essentialism" allows me to contextualize the work of these artists and discuss how their work expresses, on the one hand, a "strategic essentialist" position for Asian North American women, and on the other hand, a critique of the essentialist idea that demolishes the diversity within the group.

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33 Higa discusses the term "Asian American," which emerged with the namesake movements in the late 1960s and 1970s such as the one using the name "African American." The name also represented a new pan-Asian sensibility that jettisoned the then-common appellation "Oriental." See Karin Higa, "What Is an Asian American Women Artist?" in *Art, Women, California 1950-2000: Parallels and Intersections*, edited by Dianna B. Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002), 82.

34 Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht, eds. *Asian North American Identities Beyond the Hyphen* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004),1-13.

35 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (New York, London: Routledge, 1996).

Geographically speaking, the term “Asian North American” consists of people of Asian descent living in the United States and Canada whose ethnic roots are in China, Japan, Korea, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, etc. Culturally, their origins set them apart from the dominant Euro-American traditions, and this commonality becomes the basis for a sense of community. In the essay “Subaltern Studies,” Spivak argues for "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest,"[36] by which she means to facilitate social union and a common political interest which focuses on obtaining equal rights for minority groups in Euro-American dominant North American societies. This view has also served a temporary and imaginary position of unification shared by many scholars in the field of Asian North American studies.

While the term has been widely used in Asian North American studies, I will argue that although it is a political strategy that attempts to construct a unified position, it is problematic because there is danger that it will reduce the plurality of identities into a oneness and create new stereotypes. If used unstrategically, the term itself is insufficient for defining the diversity and complexity within the group of Asian North Americans. The vast differences in geographic location, cultural origin, social status, migration experience are not adequately and explicitly addressed in the term “Asian North American identity.” The field of Asian North American studies recognizes the limitation of the use of the term. Scholars, writers and artists work under the umbrella term, but they still address the unique experiences of diverse Asian cultures, because the term itself does not embody meanings of any particular Asian culture. For example,

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36 Ibid., 214.

Chinese Canadian artist Paul Wong creates his work based on his experiences of China and Canada; however, he positions his work as part of the Asian North American community and its unified identity. Despite the problems discussed previously, I will use Asian North American as an umbrella term representing a "strategically essentialist" Asian North American position; however, the discussion of each individual case is placed against a distinct background of diverse cultures and societies in Asia and North America.

I have grouped these three artists, whose backgrounds are distinct but all have connections to Asia and North America, to address the common experiences of Asian immigrants, but the discussion of each artist will be focused on their unique identity as Chinese American, Korean Canadian, and Korean American in respect to contexts of China, Korea, the United States and Canada. Their experiences in and connection to both their original homelands and their new homes in North America are equally significant to their work and allows me to explore the transnational aspect of Asian North American female identity. Because of this particular focus, I will make diaspora theories the foundation of my analysis of the artists' work and lives.

Diaspora Theories

The modern concept of diaspora refers to what Fiona Adamson describes as "a collective banishment or trauma suffered by an ethnic, religious or national group that leads to its

geographic dispersal."[37] Yet, in a broader sense, she also states that "diasporas are conceived as transnational ethnic groups defined by a common identity and attachment to a real or imagined homeland, which can emerge from a wide range of other forms of migration processes, such as labour migration."[38] This broader sense of diaspora forms a background for the work of the artists I have chosen to discuss in this thesis. Their work attempts to draw a complete picture of the contemporary Asian North American woman's life. Both Liu and Yoon reflect on their traumatic experiences of exile, while their work also addresses broader issues of diaspora, such as employment, economic globalization, family values and cultural heritage.

Among diaspora theories that have emerged in the past thirty years, Stuart Hall's discussion of the three main cultural forces that shape diasporic identity will be the theoretical foundation for my analysis of the work of the artists. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall argues that identities are the ways "we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past."[39] Writing about Caribbean diasporic identity, Hall argues that it is positioned in relation to three presences: the African presence as the source of the "imagined community," which is an identity bounded by the shared history and traditions of African nations; the European presence as the source of dominance and power, which started spreading during the colonial period; and the "new world" presence which Hall explains as the "empty land" of North

37 Fiona B. Adamson, "Constructing the Diaspora: Diaspora Identity Politics and Transnational Social Movements," (Unpublished paper prepared for the 49th Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, CA, March 26-29, 2008), 5.
38 Ibid., 10.
39 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse & Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (Harvester Whaeatsheaf, 1993), 394.

America where strangers from every other part of the globe collide.[40] The "new world" continues to silence and suppress non-whites, and as a result non-white North Americans have incorporated resistance to white dominance as part of their diasporic identity. I interpret Hall's understanding of the black identity in the postcolonial sense as a struggle between continuity and difference. Continuity can be defined in Benedict Anderson's concept as a shared sameness, the imagined community of nation and continuous history. Difference is the key to the diasporic identity because the diasporic group does not share sameness with the majority in the new location in which they have chosen to settle, and meanwhile their connection to the original community and history is weakened. Although Asian nations and the Caribbean do not share the same experience of European colonialization, Asian North Americans as a diaspora also face the three presences (Asian presence, European presence, and North American presence) Hall outlines, which shape Asian North American identity in a similar fashion. In this thesis, I will explore how Asian North American female diasporic identity evolves in relation to these three presences, namely how each artist negotiates her relation to the home country, to Eurocentric ideology, and to her community in North America.

Hall's notion of the three presences forms the background for my discussion. To further refine my arguments in the respective chapters, I will use the following theories to explain Hall's three presences and analyze each artist respectively. Firstly, I interpret William Safran's theory that diasporic communities remain a strong connection to the homeland and long for an eventual return home as the dominance of the Asian presence. I will use the theory in relation to Liu's

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40 Ibid.

nostalgic vision of Chinese culture. Secondly, I will use Fiona Adamson's and Paul Gilroy's theories of transnational community building to analyze Yoon's stories of the Korean Canadian community. I interpret the concept of transnational community discussed by these two authors as negotiation and communication between the Asian and the European presences. Lastly, I will combine Homi Bhabha's concept of performativity and postmodern feminist theories to understand Lee's globalized identity. I treat these theories and Lee's work as an interpretation of Hall's discussion of the North American presence, where cultural exchanges take place with increasing frequency. The first two stages characterize the strategic essentialist position, where the group's commonality in cultural origin, experience and shared oppressive forces is emphasized, while the last stage demonstrates a critique of the strategic essentialist position that accepts fluidity and non-fixity within the group.

Chapter 2: Chinese Origin as A Source of Identity for Liu Hung

Chinese American painter Liu Hung's work is a brilliant exhibit of stories of ordinary women. Despite that they were invisible in history, Liu brings them back to life as significant figures that represent Chinese women's experience of the past and present, in their homeland and in diaspora. Liu's subjects include not only women in Chinese history, but also workers, wives, and refugees, mostly women, as a diapora community living in the United States. While the stories might be fictional, the work is enriched by Liu's own transnational experience, which is complicated by her up-bringing, education, artistic practices under the socialist regime in China and by the experience of migrating to the United States and living in a white-dominant society. She also explores the intense emotions that migration evokes and the constant dialogues between the love for the homeland and the life in the newly adopted home that many immigrants experience.

In this chapter, I will examine how Liu's work negotiates the tension between the Asian presence and the Euro-American presence experienced by an Asian immigrant woman. I will argue that the Asian North American diasporic identity portrayed in Liu's work reflects William Safran's concept that the diaspora community longs for an eventual return home. Liu's work expresses a strong attachment to her homeland in China as an important source of identity. In her book *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations cross the Pacific* (2007), Shumei Shi argues that Chinese American women face multiple agents of coercion including "Chinese patriarchy,

the Maoist state, the U.S. state and the Western gaze."[41] Liu's work draws the viewer's attention to these agents that shape Chinese American diasporic identity, rejecting the stereotypes and patriarchal oppression coming from both Chinese and American societies. Throughout her career, Liu has created a large body of work that touches on all these aspects; however, I will argue that, as a whole, Liu's work expresses most strongly nostalgic and ambivalent emotions towards her homeland and conveys a strong sense of connection to Chinese culture and tradition. The Asian presence, or particularly the Chinese presence in this case, is the most prevalent among all these agents that shape her identity. Her melancholic and nostalgic reminiscence of "Chineseness" in her work explores positive aspects of traditional values and beliefs that have even been abandoned in China due to progressive modernization. To explain my point using Hall's notion of continuity versus difference, the continuity of Chinese culture plays a more substantial role in the formation and appropriation of Liu's Asian American identity. Although Liu has chosen to settle in the United States, her connection to the original community and history in China is never weakened.

Formally, Liu's work is composed of multiple layers of images: human figures are usually represented in photographic form or the artist's recreation based on photographic sources; motifs of Chinese bird and flower genre paintings, such as insects, flowers as well as stylized figures and calligraphy, are overlaid on top of those figures; in most of her recent works, as her style has become personalized and recognizable, a layer of oil dripping or washes and circles representing the universe in Chinese culture are blended into the painted image. Liu's colours are

41 Shumei Shi, *Visuality and identity: Sinophone articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 63.

bright and bold, and the brushstrokes are loose yet powerful. These techniques create unsettling juxtapositions that make each layer distinct and visible.

Consisting of four easily distinguishable layers, *Relic I* (2004) contains many of the iconic images that characterize Liu's formal concerns: first are the two Chinese courtesans based on photographic sources from the nineteenth century; on another layer, Liu painted two stylized female figures and three pigeons resembling Chinese painting motifs; a few casually painted red circles were then laid on top of those realistic depictions; lastly, an image of a Chinese pottery bowl on a small square background in the centre painted in bright red draws the viewer into the work.

The most important elements in Liu's work derive from a series of archival photographs she found on her trips back to China. Her juxtaposition of various symbols with these photographic sources creates new meanings. In the painting I have just discussed, the juxtaposition of the Qing courtesans and the stylized Tang court ladies lends its meaning to the collapse of Chinese imperial society. The use of photography as a way to represent and recreate history is significant to the artist. Liu explains: "two layers of historical representation, from traditional painting and modern photography, eccentrically co-exist in my paintings, and the result, I think is a kind of mutual liberation and reinvention."[42] By liberating these Chinese subjects from their historical past and restriction, Liu examines her connection to the history, people and land, and confirms the impact that Chinese history and culture have had on her identity. I think the artist also attempts to liberate and reinvent Chinese female identity and

42 Liu Hung, "Biography," *Mills College Academics* http://www.mills.edu/academics/faculty/arts/hliu/hliu_cv.php.

invites the viewer to reconsider how Chinese women are represented and interpreted in the American context.

In the following section, I will briefly survey the history of modern China that frames the socio-historical context in which Liu has created her work.

Overview of History of Modern China

Liu was born in Changchun, a north-eastern city in China, in 1948, an important period of dramatic historical changes in Chinese history. Many provinces and areas were being liberated from Japanese invasion. The Communist party won the civil war. Subsequently, the People's Republic of China was established under the Communist regime in 1949. It opened a brand new page in the history of China. The new China was marked by drastic changes in state ideology and political discourse to establish and maintain the new rule.

Growing up in the "new China", Liu's generation was bombarded by socialist ideologies that emphasized sacrifice, devotion, and loyalty to the country and party. It was stressed by Mao Zedong, the first leader of the PRC, that a socialist contributor of the new country must demonstrate selfless and unconditional devotion. The utopian socialist common goal was to build a country without class differences for all proletarians. Capitalism and feudalism were identified as the two main enemies that prevented the proletariat from achieving its goal. These extreme left-wing political ideologies led to a disruptive and even violent brainwashing game. The Great

Proletarian Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966 and lasted for ten years leaving the country's education system and economy in disarray.[43]

Like thousands of youths in middle school and high school, who were sent to the countryside to be "reeducated" to become a well suited socialist constructor, Liu was sent to work on a farm for four years. Many considered the Cultural Revolution the darkest era of Chinese modern history. After a few years of reeducation, those students who were considered devotees to socialist construction and who possessed superior moral qualities were sent back to the cities to receive higher education. However the purpose of their education was clear, to serve the socialist party and the people. In 1975, Liu received her BFA degree from Beijing Teachers College and pursued graduate studies in mural painting at China Central Academy of Arts in Beijing. Trained in socialist-realism, the art Liu learned at those institutions was not concerned with individual expression; instead art was created to serve the communist regime for its propaganda campaign.[44]

Socialist-realism had been advocated by the young government since 1949, following the Soviet model. It reached its height during the Cultural Revolution and has remained influential in the Chinese art world ever since. The aim was to create a new art for the new China. Under this agenda, art should glorify the nation and serve the masses.[45] Mural painting was particularly

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43 June Grasso, Jay Corrin, and Michael Kort. *Modernization and Revolution in China: From the Opium Wars to World Power* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 208-240.

44 Julia Frances Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 314-360.

45 Ibid.

important at the time, as it was a major propaganda tool.[46] This intense and strict formal training gave Liu strong technical skills that allowed her to achieve almost photographic rendering of figures and objects. But in the context where the genre was used to serve the regime, it constrained her freedom to express her opinions. However, in the context of the United States, it becomes a medium of expression for Liu.

From 1972 to 1978, the artist painted a series of works named *My Secret Freedom*. These works are impressionist style landscape paintings which are not very interesting in themselves. But if one looks back at the time, when the official Chinese art world was completely dominated by socialist-realism, the impressionist style that interested Liu would have been indeed the "secret freedom." A style heavily influenced by the West was considered to be the result of the impact of corrupt capitalism and a politically incorrect route for any artist to pursue.

Restriction of freedom was not only ruthless in the art world: in the spirit of building a new socialist China, the Communist Party established control over public intellectual freedom in all areas. During the Cultural Revolution, the CPC launched a program to eradicate all kinds of art forms including literature, art and theatre associated with feudalism and capitalism. Hundreds of thousands of books were burnt by the "red guards," and many intellectuals buried their own publications for fear of being accused as anti-socialists. A complete new theatre art form called "Yang Ban Xi" (Model Opera) was created to glorify the regime, because traditional operas such as the Peking Opera were labelled as feudal.[47] The socialist-realist style was at its height during

46 Ibid., 147.

47 Grasso, *Modernization and Revolution in China*, 208-240.

the Cultural Revolution, when posters, brochures and illustrations in all types of publications were produced in the style.[48]

Many artists, intellectuals, writers and poets felt deep agony in the darkest age of Chinese modern history. They were frustrated and angry as the Cultural Revolution turned out to be a political battle within the party to eliminate internal enemies. Many who had the opportunity exiled themselves to the United States and Europe.

The year 1978 marked another new page in modern Chinese history. Following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of the first generation of CPC leaders, Deng Xiaoping initiated the open-door policy and economic reform; the economy skyrocketed as foreign investments flowed to China. Subsequently, the 1980s and 90s saw a tremendous influx of foreign influences in the social and cultural realm and a growing dissatisfaction with the monolithic political system, resulting in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. The government's brutal crackdown of the protests triggered the "second wave of political exile," and intellectuals who had experienced sharp restrictions to their freedom of expression, and some who were even prosecuted by the regime, left China.

Liu's Position in Relation to Contemporary Chinese Art

In 1984, Liu gained the opportunity to move to the United States. She obtained an MFA degree in 1986 from the University of California at San Diego and has been teaching at Mills College in Oakland California since 1990. Her work is in the collections of many prestigious

48 Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 314-360.

institutions in the United States, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. Liu has also completed several public art projects for the city of San Francisco and the Oakland International Airport. Throughout her career, Liu has produced a large body of works in a variety of media: oil painting on canvas, installations, and a unique medium called "Za Zhong," invented by Liu, which incorporates printmaking and painting techniques. Her work has been recognized by the rising scholarship on women artists and in Asian American studies in the past two decades; however, her name is seldom included in accounts of contemporary Chinese art, which has developed since the 1980s by a group of "political avant-garde" artists and is heavily dependent on Western art institutions and artists working overseas.

The so-called "85 Art New Wave,"[49] also known as the "political avant-garde" or "experimental art" in China is the major force that initiated the development of contemporary Chinese art in the view of a Western perspective. In the 1980s, following Deng's economic reforms, foreign investments, entrepreneurship and privatization of state owned entities started to put severe pressure on what used to be a completely state controlled economy. Meanwhile, Western ideologies that foreground democracy and humanist interests also began to have an impact on people's views of the state, culture and their own lives. The monolithic state ideology could no longer hold its absolutely dominant position. Although at the time the official art world

49 "Gao Minglu coined the term '85 Art Movement' (85 meishu yundong) for a lecture given at the National Oil Painting Conference held by the National Artists Association on 14 April 1986... the term bawu meishu xinchao ('85 Art New Wave') was briefly adopted as a less objectionable alternative." See Edward L. Davis, ed, *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005),233.

in China was dominated by traditional aesthetics of ink paintings and socialist realist style, politically oriented works started to emerge underground in reaction to these changes in society. Chinese art critic Huang Zhuan argues that, "the movement used almost exclusively Western modernist theories and practices as ideological preparations and visual reference."[50]

The 1989 avant-garde exhibition, entitled "No U-Turn" at the National Art Gallery in Beijing, marked the symbolic establishment of the new era for Chinese art and helped a generation of Chinese artists to be recognized globally. Art critic Gao Minglu, who eventually emigrated to the United States himself, was in charge of the exhibition which generated immense controversy. As a result it had to shut down twice during its scheduled one month duration. However, despite the short duration of the exhibition, many who originally exhibited in the show eventually became well known names worldwide. Some remained working in China, while others moved to major Western metropolitan centres such as Paris and New York. Artists such as Fang Lijun (b. 1963), Gu Wenda (b. 1956), Huang Yongping (b. 1954), and Xu Bing (b. 1955), have received significant attention in the Western art world as representatives of contemporary Chinese art. The commonalities among this group of artists are that they were born around the time of the beginning of the CPC's governance in China, experienced the Cultural Revolution, and received training in the official Chinese art style yet strongly challenged the totalitarian system and ideas in Chinese culture. They were making what Wu Hung calls "political pop art,"[51] which uses Western techniques such as conceptual art and pop art. However, the community of artists that represents the new face of Chinese art in the world almost only

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50 Zhuan Huang, "Reflections on the '80s Avant-Garde." *Artzine China*, 2008. http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid245_en.html.

51 Hung Wu, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, 2000), 3.

consisted of male artists for many decades. Only in recent years are female artists beginning to emerge.

If the narrative of contemporary Chinese art has been manipulated by Western art institutions who have participated in the development of the field to cater to the taste of Western audiences and follow the grand narrative of Western art, female artists from China like Liu are surviving under the pressures coming from both sources. Liu, whose experiences are similar to this generation of Chinese contemporary artists, was not part of this group of artists back in the 1980s. One of the most important reasons is that Liu's work does not fit into the discourse of the controversial and political Chinese contemporary art which initiated in the period of "experimental art." In addition, her subject matter is not politically charged, unlike others who seek to invent a language of expression outside the border of academic art.[52] As a result, she has been excluded from the recent development of scholarship on contemporary Chinese art.

In the following section, I will discuss Liu's work in three categories with slightly different focuses and meanings: her early installations and mixed media works that focus on the appropriation of Chinese American diasporic identity shaped by the tension between the Chinese presence and the Euro-American presence; later works that confirm Chinese culture and history as an important source of identity for Chinese American women; lastly, the most recent body of work that reflects on positive female roles in Maoist China. Although Liu expresses a strong critique of Chinese patriarchy, home is still a continuous source of belonging, even though she

52 Wu, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, 19.

lives in a diasporic location. These works are more importantly a celebration of Chinese culture, which suggests that the artist will return home eventually.

The Tension between the Two Homes

In the early years of her career in the 1980s and 1990s, Liu produced a considerable number of installation based works. These early works used the techniques of juxtaposition of images from diverse sources, painting and sculptural media, and realistic, photographic and abstract representations. Liu perhaps saw installation art as a liberating and expressive approach, a step away from her restrictive training in China. Influenced by the identity politics movement of the 1980s, these works are highly critical of American society's intolerance towards immigrants. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Hall points out that blacks living the Caribbean have to constantly battle against white racism, and as a result this experience (what Hall identifies as the European presence) has become part of their identity. Asian immigrants in North America share similar experiences with Afro-Caribbeans. What Safran refers to as the diasporic community's longing for an eventual return home, in the case of Asian Americans, is largely due to American society's hostile attitude towards these immigrants (as I discussed in the historical overview section in Chapter 1). In the following section, I will examine how Liu's work negotiates the tension between her Chinese origin and white dominant ideology and will argue that through the representation of cultural clashes, ideological differences, and discrimination, Liu's work shows that both critique of the white dominant ideology in the United States and an appreciation of Chinese origin are important components of Asian American diasporic identity. Her work critiques American society's construction of a negative image of Asia, especially China, as a

result of colonial history and the Cold War and points out the importance of maintaining strong ties to her original home in China.

In *Women of Color* (1991) , the artist juxtaposes pastel drawings of three Chinese women in a monochromatic palette of red, yellow and blue. Underneath these realistic portraits is a black shelf mounted to the wall, with glass bottles in identical colours aligned with the drawings. In this work, Liu critiques the use of the highly symbolic phrase “women of colour” used to describe non-white women in the United States. Red, yellow and blue are three primary colours. Red and blue are the colours of the American flag. By inserting yellow, the artist critiques the exclusion of Chinese Americans even though they are undeniably part of the national fabric. The stained glasses become coloured lenses, through which people are judged by nothing but the colour of their skin. The pastel strokes used to delineate the clothing are sharp and clear but minimal. In contrast, the facial expressions of the women are depicted in great detail.

This work also points out the problems of “Orientalism” and the residues of colonial power in China. The flower-motif decorations on these women’s hair, clothing and jewellery show that they are from the late Qing dynasty or the early Republican period when China, ruled by the Manchu royal family, was in decline. Following China’s defeat in the Opium Wars by several European nations in the middle of the nineteenth century, China was controlled by colonial powers for almost a century. Liu chooses to represent women from this period to remind the viewer of the colonial history and European expansion, which helped construct white supremacy and racism in China.

Although the perception of Asian art was highly positive, and Asian art was even valued as status symbols in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe,[53] industrialization and capitalist development had indeed changed European perceptions of and relations to Asia. Asia became a place for exploitation and colonial expansion. As Edward Said argues, the constructed divide between "West" and "East" originated in the history of colonial expansion as early as the nineteenth century: "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."[54] Although Said was referring mainly to the Middle East, "Orientalism" is useful to my discussion of the relationship between China and the West as China experienced the same colonial history in the nineteenth century. In fact, many early immigrants fled to Southeast Asia and North America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as a result of the Opium Wars and harsh living conditions.[55]

The constructed divide between West and East not only implies the differences between the two parts of the world, it has also becomes the foundation of a colonial mentality which confirms a societal order. It constantly perpetuates a negative image of the East in the eyes of Westerners. An irrational phobia of Asian immigrants in North America comes as a result of conceptions of "the East" by Westerners. The divide continues to have its impact on contemporary American society as the fundamental cause of racism, inequality, as well as racial stereotypes. Throughout American history of the past century, mainstream representations have

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53 Mayor, *Chinorserie*, 111-114.

54 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York : Vintage Books, 1979).

55 The decline of the Qing Dynasty and colonial rules in China caused many Chinese to emigrate overseas in search of a more stable life, and this coincided with the rapid growth of American industry, such as the need for railway workers, construction and other labourers. See Grasso, *Modernization and Revolution of China.*

portrayed Chinese immigrants as weak, cowardly, poor, and uncivilized, in sharp contrast to the affirmative American image of the mainstream. Chinese immigrants have suffered from the Exclusion Act to various unequal treatments in the contemporary society. Liu's representation of these women from the late Qing period, which is regards as the most chaotic and undermined society in Chinese history by historians in China, raises awareness of these issues that might have long been forgotten. It confronts the invisible and naturalized oppression of Chinese Americans and depicts torture of the mind and body.

The negative image of "the East" was further reinforced as a result of the Cold War and the divide between Communist and Capitalist worlds. The establishment of the PRC's communist regime was perceived as a threat to American liberal democracy. The tension between the East and the West reinforced by the Cold War still persists today. Moreover, in recent decades, mass media, such as Hollywood films, popular fiction, and television news and drama have also presented a distorted image of China and Chinese Americans.[56] Some works created by Chinese Americans, especially by the generation who exiled themselves to avoid political conflicts,[57] have reinforced this distortion. Their works served the American political ideologies, as they help construct an image of a corrupted, uncivilized, and totalitarian regime in China.

Like some writers-in-exile from Communist China, Liu became part of the American cultural construction of its ideologies against the Eastern bloc after the Second World War.

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56 Kang Liu and Xiguang Li, *Behind the Demonized China/Yao Mo Hua Zhong Guo De Bei Hou* (Beijing: Social Sciences in China Press, 1996), 1-10.

57 Ibid.

Exhibition reviews and writings on Liu from the United States in the 1990s construct an image of the artist as a traitor who abandons her home country for the democratic American dream. These reviews simply look at her work as anti-communist as it concurs with the ideological battlefield between the East and the West narrated by the American state. Instead, I argue that Liu's feeling towards the homeland, as expressed in her work, is extremely ambivalent. She has indeed expressed her frustration as an artist in China in an atmosphere that lacked freedom of expression; however, her love for the homeland has never weakened, even living in diaspora.

The word diaspora originates from the ancient Latin word used to refer exclusively to the population of Jews in exile.[58] In the 1960s, the term diaspora was associated with dispersed racial groups whose homelands were colonized or faced with intense racial conflicts. As I discussed in Chapter 1, in the past two decades, diaspora is used more broadly to describe the intricate and massive global movement of populations. In the very first issue of the journal *Diaspora* published in 1991,William Safran argues that the most difficult barrier faced by diasporic communities is the feeling that they will never be accepted by the new home. As a result, they maintain a "memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland" and long for an eventual return.[59] In some works, Liu demonstrates her frustrations with the totalitarian system in China;[60] nonetheless I think she expresses most strongly her love of the homeland and deep

58 John M. G. Barclay, *Negotiating Diaspora: Jewish Strategies in the Roman Empire* (Sheffield: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 15-20.

59 William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." Diaspora 1 no. 1 (Spring 1991), 83-99.

60 In works such as *Chinese Pieta*, *Where's Mao*, *Forbidden City*, Liu critiques the totalitarian system in China, and points out its repression on individual freedom.

connection with China in her representations of the memory, vision and myth about China as an important element of Asian American diasporic identity.

In works such as the Capp Street Project[61] installation *Resident Alien* from 1988 , Liu investigates Chinese traditions and cultures as crucial ties to keep Chinese families and communities together in the United States. The work narrates a history of social transitions from China to America, based on her study of five families who own businesses and live in San Francisco's Chinatown. The installation consists of poems written by turn of the century U.S. custom detainees, paintings of railway workers, and pencil drawings of family portraits of those Chinatown business owners, painted stylized figures on the wall and artefacts of Chinese culture, such as Chinese abacuses and fortune cookies. Using fortune cookies as a thread, this installation criticizes various negative stereotypes, historical misrepresentations, and racial discrimination in the United States, which decode the cultural myths about China and Chinese culture created by the mainstream.

Tang Ren Jie is one of the paintings included in the installation. The artist cleverly translates the Chinese word for Chinatown, "Tang Ren Jie," into a visual representation of the community of Tang people. She carefully juxtaposes three images and one artifact: a reproduction of a Tang painting of a court lady on the right, a photography-based image of a Chinese woman of the Qing dynasty and a white man in a black suit on the left, and another image of a ship of the kind that carried coolies from China to the United States on the right upper corner of the previous image. The woman is shown lowering her head and concealing her face as

61 An artist-run-centre founded in 1983 in San Francisco dedicated to new art installations. See: http://www.wattis.org/capp/

if she is in shame or is forbidden to look up at the man. On her left, the man is only shown from the back, but we can tell he is a late nineteenth century upper class European man by his morning suit and top hat. On the floor in front of the painting is a pile of fortune cookies, an American invention of the pseudo representation of Chinese culture. The title traces the historical origin of "Tang Ren Jie," which comes from the Tang Dynasty, when China was the strongest country in the world and the most prosperous in art and culture. The name was kept because Chinese immigrants took pride in this history, as they continued referring to themselves as the "Tang people" into the nineteenth century. The ultra feminine figure on the left side of the image represents China, in a powerless and feminine position in the relation to the west.

The whole installation juxtaposes divergent images and definitions that are "authentic representations" and American fabrications of China. On the one hand, the artist uses Chinese cultural artefacts and real family histories to construct an "authentic" story of Chinese immigrants. On the other hand, Liu includes many American fabricated ideas of China, such as the fortune cookies, Tang people, a weak nation defeated in the wars, and a bunch of cheap labourers to contradict the "authentic" representations. In doing so, Liu critiques the distorted and negative representations of Chinese immigrants in the United States. Liu says she constructed the installation based on a shrine that many Chinese families keep in their homes to worship their ancestors. Reflecting Safran and Hall's theories of diasporic identity, this work illustrates an imagined home for Liu and those Chinese American families. The shrine in her installation is a constructed "imagined community," which she keeps revisiting to maintain her identity as Chinese living in diaspora in the United States.

Chinese Culture as Sources of Belonging and Oppression

The history of Chinese immigrants has been written about extensively since historians, writers and activists started to pay attention to the field of Asian American studies in the 1980s. Although the number of Chinese immigrant women had been extremely small until the mid-twentieth century, they struggled with the same racial discrimination as men and even worse gender stereotypes. However, as Linda Trinh Vo argues, the scholarly field has been "slow to critically understand the ways in which Asian immigrant women (including Chinese women) have historically resisted the intersection of racism, patriarchy, and imperialism."[62]

In the following section, I will discuss Liu's paintings based on a series of archival photographs of Qing Dynasty prostitutes. This body of work focuses on women's experiences in Imperial China, through which Liu celebrates the rich cultural tradition in language and visual art and critiques the patriarchal oppression of women. I find the work critiques the domesticization and feminization of Chinese American women as the imposed ideal of femininity and claims that Chinese American women's experiences are inadequately addressed and often misrepresented in both the historical and artistic discourses. Liu writes that her responsibility as a Chinese artist in the United States is not to assimilate, but to express her Chineseness as clearly as she can.[63] I will argue that this body of work expresses her ambivalent feelings towards the homeland, which proves that the Asian presence or the "imagined community" in China, although oppressive, is the most important source of Chinese American female diasporic identity.

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62 Linda Trinh Vo, and Marian Sciachitano, "Introduction: Moving Beyond "Exotics, Whores. and Nimble Fingers": Asian American Women in a New Era of Globalization and Resistance," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 21, no. 1/2 (2000): 1-19.

63 Liu Hung. "Five Terms, Two Letters," in *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000*, edited by Hilary Robinson Oxford (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 429-430.

In the *Relic* series of 2005, the artist critiques the ideal female identity oppressed by the rules of patriarchy stemming from Confucian philosophy and developed throughout the Chinese imperial period. The work liberates the subjects, who were either invisible figures in history or victims of patriarchal society and claims these women to be equal humans. Liu creates images of Qing women based on archival photographs of nineteenth century prostitutes. These female figures are dressed in traditional outfits, looking out at the viewer with submissive gazes. In contrast to the Western idealization of female sexuality in art and popular media, these prostitutes do not reveal any part of their body and their gazes are much softer and less inviting. Their shyness is the emblem of the ideal femininity imposed by the patriarchy developed throughout the imperial period. The most valuable quality for a woman is chastity; therefore, even prostitutes, whose job is to sell their body, are still taught to be reserved, subdued, restrained, submissive, and respectful to their men. An ideal Chinese woman would serve her man, but not express her desires.

In *Relic 12* for example, a woman in a pink Chinese dress reclines on a chair, with one arm holding her head up. The composition resembles Manet's *Olympia; however,* Liu's realistic and vivid depiction of the soft eyes, the closed lips and the weakened body position presents us with a much less confrontational woman than Manet. The women depicted in Liu's painting represent Chinese women who were victims of imperial patriarchy, but were completely silenced. The image is aesthetically distorted by oil drippings, Chinese painting motifs and Liu's iconic circles that represent the universe. The artist recreates the story of these women out of their original context therefore offering the viewer an opportunity to consider these materials with new historical significance. The artist clarifies her goal as such: "Altogether, I hope to wash my subjects of their exotic "otherness" and reveal them as dignified, even mythic figures on the

grander scale of history painting."[64] I think the way the artist incorporates motifs in the traditional bird-and-flower genre painting, which was preferred by women artists, alters the viewer's perception of these courtesans. They belonged to the lowest social class in imperial China; however, these symbols elevate them to mythic figures that are dignified representations of women's life in Chinese history. These representations also become Liu's own construction of memory, vision and myth of the homeland.

In *Relic 12*, the butterflies symbolize exhilaration, happiness and freedom of love; the cherry blossom buds represent chastity and virginity; the full blossomed flowers embody subdued feminine beauty. The symbol on the red image in the centre is the ancient Chinese character "奴" (nu), meaning a slave or servant. The character "奴" is composed of "女" (a female radical[65]) on the left side and "又" on the right side, which resembles the shape of a guard. In imperial China, wealthy families had female servants whom the families owned. A female servant did not have independence and was usually married to the family daughter's husband as a concubine or a servant. Besides this work, other works exhibited at the show titled "Female Radical Nu Zi Pang"[66] interrogates several subordinate female roles in imperial China, such as the mother, the child bearer, and the daughter sold in exchange for money. The origin of the group of characters with female radicals suggests that women belong to the lowest rank in the social hierarchy in imperial Chinese societies.

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64 Liu Hung, *Artist Statement in Art Scene China*, http://www.artscenechina.com/chineseart/artists/statements/hungliu.htm.

65 Radicals in Chinese characters refer to the section headers of a Chinese dictionary. Radicals are used to organise Chinese characters in Chinese dictionaries. All Chinese characters can be classified into radicals.See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radical_(Chinese_character).

66 Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York, New York, 2005

The Chineseness visible in her work and the appropriation of Chinese traditional subjects are Liu's means of stressing how fundamental Chinese culture is to her Asian American identity. Nonetheless, to collectors and the audience who are interested in exoticness, Liu's work is decorative and colourful, resembling the traditional and ultra-feminine beauty of Chinese women. As a result of the perception of Asian women as exotic objects by the Western gaze, her work can be perceived as reinforcing the subject of exotic otherness. To audiences who appreciate them from a problematic Western male gaze, these works perpetuate negative stereotypes. However, I find these debates around her work in fact draw the viewer's attention to the problems of stereotypes and misrepresentations of Chinese women in the United States.

For Chinese American women, the stereotypes are slightly different from the negative feelings the West has towards Communist China and the East in general. Asian immigrant women entered the United States as picture brides, merchant's wives or prostitutes, who were perceived to have individual identities. Mail-order brides still come from Southeast Asia and China, only now through the internet. Internet comments show American men's perception of these women as highly domestic and unlikely to rebel. The U.S. government reports that an estimated 14,500 to 17,500 persons are trafficked into the United States each year – the majority of them women and girls from Asia smuggled for the sole purpose of prostitution.[67] The exoticization and fetishization of Asian women has also been reinforced by female roles in Hollywood movies and mass media. From Suzy Wong to the geisha, Asian females are portrayed as fetish objects of white men's fantasies. They are sexual, subordinate, loyal, and domestic

67 Clare Ribando Seelke and Alison Siskin, *Trafficking in Persons: U.S. Policy and Issues for Congress,* Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 2008.

companions who willingly and passively serve men's desires. Because Chinese American women are inadequately and prejudicially represented in contemporary art, literature and film, these negative stereotypes have become naturalized as they remain unchallenged. This group of Liu's works does not challenge stereotypes of Asian American women per se; however, her work as a whole constructs a memory and vision of China as a source of identity for Chinese American women. I will argue that these works call for critical examination of the constructed stereotypes of Chinese women in the United States. Most recently, Liu has painted a series based on her upbringing in Maoist China as part of her nostalgic memory of the homeland, but featuring much more positive experiences.

Heroines of Maoist China

This most recent group of works contemplates a complicated female identity for Chinese women who experienced the female revolution led by Mao Zedong. The socialist utopian ideology of the Communist Party of China attempted to liberate women from the history of male dominance to become socialist constructors in the labour force equal to men. The totalitarian ideology was both restrictive yet liberating for women. It stated that revolutionary figures were genderless: femininity was not defined as being a good mother or wife; instead, it was about devotion to the revolution. There was no female inferiority in the revolution; men and women were considered to be equal constructors of the great socialist project.

Nonetheless, decades later, the aftermath of the revolution has proven to be a communist utopian dream. Male dominance deeply rooted in Chinese imperial history was never eradicated.

Instead it was only temporarily controlled, since fulfilling the socialist goal was the top priority of the revolution. Women's access to economic means, resources and education was never equal to men, even in the Maoist era. Since the economic reform, men have controlled much more social and economic means than women. In addition, sexualized and fetishized female gender roles have become predominant in today's China as a result of Western influence. Liu has visited China several times since the late 1990s and must have witnessed these changes. She produced *The Prodigal Daughters* in 2008 to comment on the era during which she gained independence, power and courage as a female revolutionary. As she has written, "a kind of hard won feminism stayed with me the rest of my life and served me well in America."[68] I argue that this utopian and nostalgic memory and myth about China, and particularly about the Cultural Revolution, has served as a crucial source of her Chinese American diasporic identity.

The series is based on a well-known propaganda film made in China in 1949. Titled *Daughters of China*, the film tells the story of eight women soldiers who sacrificed their lives to save the retreating Chinese army. The film depicts how socialist spirits have transformed regular housewives into revolutionary heroic figures. It was the first film to win an international award for China due to its successful portrayal of female figures that are as strong and brave as men. Socialist propaganda movies were widely popular at the time. Many of them depicted female socialist constructors, as role models for the young generation. Feminist scholar Wang Zheng argues that living in the Maoist era in China for women was liberating. She writes that for a young girl, being a homemaker was much more oppressive and limiting than being a socialist

68 Liu, *Artist's Statement in Hung Liu.*

constructor.[69] Being a socialist new person is the identity of women constructed under the official ideologies of Maoist China.

Liu Hung saw this film as a child in China. She recounts her experience with the film, writing "it shaped my expectations of women as protagonists in the emerging socialist utopia."[70] This kind of socialist utopia was what Mao Zedong advocated, forming part of the socialist ideology during the Great Leap Forward period in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution in the 60s and 70s. One of Mao's slogans was "to construct a great socialist society, the mobilization of the broad masses of women to participate in productive work is of great significance." The state's effort was also accompanied by popularizing Engel's theory that women's participation in this process was the measure of their liberation.[71] For Liu Hung's generation, this "utopian socialist vision" contributed to their identity as being hardworking, strong and independent women.

In *Tis the Final Conflict #2* (2007) , the artist depicts one of the scenes from the film *Daughters of China*, and juxtaposes it with an image of a crane. On this larger than life canvas, Liu combines two unrelated images linking them visually by washes of paint, a technique she uses to aesthetically distort her canvas and to allow the viewer to perceive the meanings differently. On the left side, an image of a crane is painted against a black background. Near the crane, a not so perfectly drawn circle in red signifies the "universe". On the right side, two female soldiers from the film *Daughters of China* appear against a bright orange background.

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69 Zheng Wang, "Call Me Qingnian but not Funu a Maoist Youth in Retrospect," in *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing up in the Mao Era*, edited by Xueping Zhong, Wang Zhang and Bai Di (New Brunswick, NJ : Rutgers University Press, 2001), 34.

70 Liu, *Artist's Statement in Hung Liu.*

71 Wang, "Call Me Qingnian but not Funu a Maoist Youth in Retrospect."

Like many of her paintings, the depiction of the figures is realistic, but the brushstrokes are visible and powerful. The depiction captures the intensely weary facial expressions of the women soldiers. Her techniques capture the unique kind of flatness of wood-cut prints, a widely used technique during the Cultural Revolution for producing posters and brochures. It also reminds the viewer of the socialist-realist style that was typically used to depict revolutionary spirit and heroic figures. In combining these elements, Liu allows viewers to reconsider the history of the Cultural Revolution; as she writes, "I was never interested in being a victim struggling in an authoritarian society."[72] Liu has titled this group of paintings after lyrics from the Internationale, Eugene Pottier's 1872 anthem for the proletarian masses. Her most recent artist statement writes, "I grew up singing the Internationale… I admired heroes and wanted to be a tough soldier."[73]

The combination of the symbols in this work allows them to speak like words. The red-crowned crane, pronounced "he" in Chinese, has multiple meanings in Chinese culture. First, it refers to an outstanding individual distinguished from his or her group. It also represents longevity, purity and wisdom. Less commonly used in the ancient language, "he" is also used to describe the sadness felt when parting with someone. Liu also uses "he" as the main theme in her public art project for the Oakland International Airport, *Going Away, Coming Home* to symbolize departure and return. In *Tis the Final Conflict #2,* the symbols embody the virtues these female soldiers possess; meanwhile, the artist implies her own journey of migration: arriving and returning between two homes. The female identity constructed during Maoist China has been incorporated into her diasporic identity in the United States. In the artist's nostalgic

72 Liu, *Artist's Statement in Hung Liu.*

73 Ibid.

flashback, this memory and myth has become a positive element that cultivates Liu's identity in diaspora. As in the diasporic identity outlined by Safran, Liu has sought a return home. She left China, but with the completion of *The Prodigal Daughters* she has gone back to the "imagined community" in which her identity is rooted.

Although the women on canvas are not self-portraits (in very rare cases, the artist uses her own body in her work), Liu Hung's work is autobiographical. The stories of the women delineated on her canvas are a statement of her personal past which has become a means to confirm and re-examine her memory, vision and myth about Chinese culture. The work references multiple sources of oppression Chinese American women face as a group in China and the United States. Yet, she eventually goes back to her origins in China as the most important element of her Asian American identity in diaspora.

Chapter 3: Asian Diasporic Community Building and Jin-me Yoon

Unlike Liu Hung, whose works draw references from the experiences growing up in her homeland, for Korean Canadian artist Jin-me Yoon, her homeland of Korea primarily exists in her imagination and perhaps the fragmented memories of her childhood and her parents.[74] Yoon was born in Seoul, South Korea in 1960, and moved to Canada with her family at the age of eight. Yoon experienced the turbulent post-World War II era in South Korea as a child. These faded memories of her homeland are an important element of her work; however her identity is more deeply rooted in Canadian culture, where she grew up and spent most of her adult life. Following Fiona Adamson's argument that diaspora is a political identity, I will argue that the purpose for Yoon to keep referring back to her roots in South Korea is to reinstate the constructed Korean Canadian diasporic identity for the social and political union of Korean people in Canada. In her article, "Diaspora and Transnationalism," Adamson argues that diaspora is the outcome or product of transnational migration with particular political purposes, which include the construction and reification of a transnational "imagined community."[75] The work of Jin-me Yoon explores Korean Canadian diasporic identity as a political identity, which has constructed the transnational Korean community settled in Canada. Returning to Hall's theory of the three presences to interpret both Adamson's argument and Yoon's work, the

74 Yoon re-visited Korea several times and collaborated with Korean institutions on arts projects; however, because of her upbringing and education in Canada, her attachment to her ethnic roots is less direct than Liu and Lee.

75 Adamson, "Constructing the Diaspora."

Korean Canadian diasporic identity represented in Yoon's work reflects the existence of all three presences: the Asian presence, the European presence and the North American presence. However, unlike Liu, for whom the Asian presence still dominates, Yoon examines how the North American presence provides her a place that allows the existence of both identities, and how the Asian presence is used to resist the European presence, which is the white dominant ideology in Canada. Similar to Hall's discussion of the three presences, Paul Gilroy and Himani Bannerji both have discussed the possibility of building hybridized diasporic identities. Gilroy suggests an identity that is subject to both blackness and Britishness.[76] Bannerji argues that ethnic community building involves a black enlightenment thought which accepts "changing, opening and hybridized identities."[77] Based on these studies of other diasporic communities, I argue that Yoon's work presents a hybridized Asian Canadian identity rooted in the diasporic community, which is a transnational "imagined community" with political purposes. I will first introduce an earlier work of Yoon's as a backdrop for my further discussion.

Yoon's widely-written-about photographic series *Souvenirs of the Self* (1991-2000) challenges Canadian cultural and social discourse and the construction of the grand narrative of Euro-Canadian identity. In this series of wry self-portraits, Yoon puts on a theatrical performance. Dressed in an oversized Scandinavian sweater and a pair of light-wash blue jeans that do not seem to fit, the artist poses in front of the camera as if she was a tourist taking photos on a trip. Her awkward hair cut and static gaze increase the dramatic effect. Mirroring the format

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76 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

77 Himani Bannerji, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2000), 23.

of postcards, she sarcastically inserts herself into several easily recognizable tourist scenes in Banff, Alberta: in front of Lake Louise, with a group of tourists near a tour bus, and inside a souvenir shop in front of a display case. By placing herself in iconic tourist attractions yet making herself look strange and alien to the surroundings, Yoon questions the authenticity of this "odd-looking" woman's Canadianness.

In the following section, I will argue that Yoon's work reflects Korean Canadian diasporic identity subject to all three presences, which requires that Korean Canadian immigrants resist the dominant Canadian discourse based on Euro-Canadian traditions and experiences and constructs a Korean Canadian community which recognizes their history and honours their roots. Her emphasis on both her Koreanness and Canadianness establishes a Korean Canadian identity that underlies the possibility of existing on the "hyphen." Unlike Liu's nostalgia of the homeland, Yoon's work represents a hybrid identity developed in Canada. Yoon does not seek to return to Korea; instead she uses the political space of Korea as the transnational "imagined community" for the diasporic group in Canada. In addition, the pan-Asian Canadian identity in Canada is not only derived from their similar cultural heritages (despite the fact that there are diverse Asian cultures), it is also based on their similar experiences of discrimination and alienation as a result of Canada's neglect of immigrants and their contribution to the country. Therefore, contesting the notion of multiculturalism in Canada as a political tactic has become part of Asian Canadian diasporic identity in the process of battling against discrimination and alienation. It is also an effective strategy of essentialism for all Asian Canadians.

As a Korean immigrant woman, Yoon bears burdens rooted in traditional Korean values and Western patriarchy. Yoon has struggled to meet the expectations of being a traditional Korean housewife, as well as a modern career woman in the public arena. Similar to Liu, Yoon is

interested in histories and memories and uses these sources to embody the stories of Korean Canadian women in her work. Before Yoon completes each project, she often conducts extensive research of both historical and popular sources to support her argument. To understand her work in the context of Canadian history of the past few decades, I will begin with a discussion of the changes in the socio-cultural structure in Canada, and situate Yoon's upbringing, education, and artistic practices within this history.

Yoon's childhood in South Korea took place during an era overshadowed by residues of colonial powers and war traumas. Korea was ruled by Japan for almost four decades from 1910 to 1945. After Japan was defeated in World War II, the superpower conflict divided Korea into the Soviet-backed North and the American-supported South. The Korean War broke out in 1950, and lasted three years on the Korean peninsula, involving the United States, China, and 13 other countries including Canada. After the war, both North and South Korea became poor agrarian nations. South Korea became heavily dependent on U.S. aid resulting in sixty years of American occupation and pervasive cultural presence.

After the war, military brides and adoption migration were the major reasons for emigration from South Korea. Since the 1950s, more than 350,000 Korean women and children have left South Korea. Emigration was also pushed by the Park Chung Hee government, specifically through the 1963 Emigration Act, to relieve perceived pressures of unemployment and to increase foreign exchange earnings.[78] Although immigration was heavily oriented toward the United States, Korean immigrants ended up in dozens of countries around the world to

78 Hyung-chan Kim, ed., *The Korean Diaspora: Historical and Sociological Studies of Korean Immigration and Assimilation in North America* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-Clio, 1977), 156.

escape the political turmoil and harsh living conditions. As Canada initiated its new immigration policies in 1967,[79] immigrants were assigned points on a scale of 0 to 10 (or 15) in such categories as education, profession and language skills. Restrictions on family reunions were also lifted.[80] Under this new policy, Yoon, her mother and two sisters arrived in early 1968 to join her father, who was studying in Canada.

Yoon grew up in Vancouver where there is a large community of Korean Canadians. According to the *Korean Community in Canada* (2001), there are just over one hundred thousand people of Korean origin in Canada, accounting for 4% of the total population, with 70% being foreign-born. Among them, about 36,000 arrived in Canada between 1971 and 1990. 60,000 arrived in Canada in the 1990s. Koreans constitute the seventh largest non-European ethnic group in Canada. A majority of these people reside in British Columbia. According to British Columbia Statistics for 2001, Koreans are now the third largest "mother tongue and home language" group in British Columbia after Chinese.[81]

Yoon graduated from the University of British Columbia in 1985, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology and then moved on to receive her formal fine arts training at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design, later completing her Master of Fine Arts degree at Concordia University in Montreal in 1992. Since graduating, Yoon has been teaching visual arts at Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts.

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79 To understand the social and economic impact of the Point System in Canada, see Alan G. Green and David A. Green, "Canadian Immigration Policy: The Effectiveness of the Point System and Other Instruments." *The Canadian Journal of Economics* 28, no. 4b (Nov 1995): 1006-1041.

80 There are no quotas or restrictions placed on who could immigrate based on nationalities, so as long as the successful candidates pass the score higher than 67 on the Point System.

81 Colin Lindsay, *Profiles of Ethnic Communities in Canada: The Korean Community in Canada,* 2001. http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-621-x/89-621-x2007014-eng.pdf.

Yoon's Method and Inspiration

Compared with Liu's nostalgic sensibility, Yoon's critique uses subtle parody to challenge the dominant cultural, historical and artistic discourses in Canada. The inspiration Yoon draws on as a means of inquiry is Conceptualism started in the 1960s and 70s. Many conceptual artists were active in Vancouver in the 1970s.[82] The Vancouver art community could not have been more familiar and influenced by these works. Yoon described her understanding of Conceptual art as "a lot of the practices from the sixties and seventies that are inherently interdisciplinary."[83] Unlike Liu Hung and Nikki S. Lee who both come solely from professional artistic backgrounds, Yoon's journey from psychology to formal art training suggests an endeavour to combine interdisciplinary knowledge. Drawing on those conceptual works and her former background in the social sciences, Yoon uses her art as an exploration and an inquiry into social life, which has fascinated her.

Yoon uses texts and symbols to construct meanings. The subtlety and wit expressed in her imagery make Yoon's work worthy of profound semiotic readings. Yoon also achieves the conceptual goal through photography and video. To her, because photography and video are often associated with the most truthful and natural representation of reality, manipulating these images shocks viewers and makes them reexamine their reality. Her use of larger-than-life size lightboxes, composition, and combination of visual symbols together challenge viewers'

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82 Lucy Lippard curated an exhibition titled *950,000* at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1970. Robert Smithson also had an earth work entitled "Glue Pour" in Vancouver in 1969. See *Vancouver Art Gallery in the Sixties*, http://www.vancouverartinthesixties.com.

83 Jin-me Yoon, *Meet the Artist - Jin-me Yoon,* 2009, http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/cybermuse/showcases/meet/artist_e.jsp?artistid=14522.

normative understanding of vision and truth. I will discuss Yoon's use of medium in more details in respect to each work in the next section.

Yoon's simple, yet striking composition also helps her critical concepts come through. Most of Yoon's images are composed of one central figure or a group of figures in a social setting. Portrait and landscape are two major vehicles in Yoon's work, through which the relationship between the individual and the constructed social space is challenged. Nevertheless, Yoon's portrait-in-landscape combination is never a natural or casual snapshot. Deliberate ambiguity and bizarreness are created through juxtaposition and intervention. Yoon explains her juxtaposing approach saying, "there was something interesting in cutting things out, and putting them next to each other, and then writing something that would change the way you might think of those things."[84]

In this chapter, I will analyze Yoon's work in three sections representing aspects that are crucial to Korean Canadian diasporic identity, which is subject to the three presences I discussed in Chapter 1: firstly, the critique of Canadian multiculturalism as a strategy for Asian immigrants in Canada to resist discrimination and alienation is an important part of their diasporic identity. I will argue that by attacking the hegemonic ideologies of Canadian cultural institutions, Yoon identifies herself as a member of the Asian Canadian community. Secondly, Yoon's video installations that reexamine Korean history and contemporary society show us that it is crucial for the diasporic community to maintain its own constructed political space. This transnational "imagined community" allows the diasporic community to sustain social and political union.

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84 Ibid.

Lastly, as shown in the *Intersection* series (1996-2001), Korean Canadian diasporic female identity is also subject to the presences of both gender hierarchy associated with Korean cultural tradition and challenges faced by a modern career woman in Canada.

Critique of Multiculturalism and Hybrid Identity

Based on careful observation and contemplation of the social and cultural circumstances in Canada, Yoon argues against the flaws in multiculturalism in Canada by pointing out its ambiguity and the contradiction in her works *A Group Sixty-Seven* (1996) and *Touring Home From Away* (1998). This body of work points out that multiculturalism merely acknowledges the existence of diverse ethnic groups as part of the multiethnic national fabric; however, it does not represent its culture, people, and community in any way. Through exploring the role of cultural institutions in the narration of Canadian nationhood, Yoon deconstructs hegemonic cultural and historical discourses protected by Canadian cultural institutions such as museums, art galleries, and tourist locations, as well as the ideologies that these institutions uphold. Yoon also explores the possibility of establishing a hybrid identity surviving under and fighting against the hegemony. Through her criticism, Yoon identifies with other Asian Canadians who are also critical of the system in Canada, and who stress resistance to assimilation as part of their identity.

In *The House of Difference* (1999), Eva Mackey argues that Canada is a nation without nationality; therefore, its identity needs to be created and constantly protected.[85] What Mackey means by "nationality" in this argument is a common modern definition of shared experiences.

85 Mackey, Eva, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 22.

Most modern European and Asian nations were primarily built on monolithic ethnicity, shared geographical location and consistent history and heritage, whereas Canada established itself as a nation consisting of multiple races, cultures and histories. Despite its diverse composition, throughout Canada's modern history, the state has attempted to create a unified Canadian identity through various means. Since the 1920s, the Canadian art world had been dominated by the Group of Seven and its endeavor to represent Canada through pristine landscapes. As late as 1947, Prime Minister MacKenzie King stated: "Large-scale immigration from the Orient would change that fundamental composition of the Canadian population."[86] Until the 1960s and 70s, the monolithic identity based solely on Anglo-Canadian experiences had only been challenged by Francophones, but never by so-called ethnic minorities.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, three major problems emerged for Canada, which threatened the unified Canadian identity. Firstly, post-World War II Canada was eager to establish itself on the international stage as a nation free from British and American influences; secondly, since the 1967 immigration policy amendment, the number of immigrants from non-European nations entering into Canada has drastically increased, which required increased awareness of cultural differences; last but not least, forces of Quebec independence almost resulted in the separation of Canada. English and French were both declared official languages in 1969. The introduction of multiculturalism in legislation in 1971 marked the government's attempt to cope with these problems and protect unified Canadian identity through the

86 William Lyon MacKenzie King, "Canada's Postwar Immigration Policy," *Wikisource*, May 1, 1947. http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Canada%27s_Postwar_Immigration_Policy.

institutionalizing of various forms of differences. It was also a political strategy to differentiate Canada from the United States as more tolerant towards racial differences.

Nevertheless in practice, Canadian cultural institutions continue to protect the constructed identity rooted in Anglo-Canadian culture. Despite the diversified public, cultural institutions and government bodies play a substantial role in defending a unified "Canadianness." Michael Dorland argues that the Canadian state, through policy making, plays a fundamental role in framing and navigating its cultural institutions, with the expectation for a healthy development in the sphere of culture in Canada.[87] The national flag, anthem and the centennial celebrations of Confederation including "Expo 67" were all part of "a state intervention to structure the symbolic order in Canada" to help reinforce the institutionalized national identity. The National Gallery of Canada's official mandate is "to provide Canadians with a sense of identity with and pride in Canada's rich visual-arts heritage."[88] Institutions such as the National Film Board and the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission regulate the content of cultural production to help protect Canadian identity.

Arguably, multiculturalism was more of a political tactic than a real recognition of diverse communities and heritages. The policy has been in place for almost 40 years; however cultural institutions are still reluctant to recognize and adequately represent the experiences of minority groups. For artists like Yoon, the goal is to strive to be properly represented in the cultural narrative which upholds a monolithic Canadian identity and a hegemonic discourse.

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87 Michael Dorland discusses how American impact and American popular culture have a direct influence on Canadian culture; therefore, Canadian culture is always in defense. See Michael Dorland, *The Cultural Industries in Canada: Problems, Policies and Prospects*, edited by Michael Dorland (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1996), x-xiii.

88 (National Gallery of Canada)

Yellow Peril: Reconsidered, an exhibition organized by a group of Asian Canadian artists in 1990, was an attempt made by artists of Asian origin to have a unified voice to stress their identity and to be included in mainstream institutions. It toured Canada at various artist-run centres. This exhibition, along with two previous exhibitions[89] focusing on video and photography, marked the first attempt made by Asian Canadian artists as a group to explore an Asian Canadian sensibility and the struggle to represent their own experiences. Yoon showed her works *(Inter)reference Part I,* and *(Im)permanent (Re)collection* (1990) at the exhibition. These two works featured vintage photographs and family portraits from her childhood in Korea. The goal of *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* was to express what I discussed in Chapter 1: that Asian North Americans form coalitions strategically to express their identity as a united group. The group not only shares common cultural origins in Asia, it also shares a history of being discriminated against and alienated from mainstream society. Yoon identifies with this group by expressing clearly in these two works a critique of dominant society's non-acceptance of Asian Canadians. Since then, she has followed the spirit initiated by this group of artists. The following two later works reflect how Yoon's identity developed in the process of seeking proper representation of the experiences of the Korean-Canadian community, while challenging the dominant white discourse.

In the series *A Group of Sixty-Seven* (1996) Yoon invited sixty-seven members of Vancouver's Korean community to be photographed looking out from Lawren Harris's painting *Maligne Lake, Jasper Park* (1924). They were also photographed looking at Emily Carr's *Old*

89 Identities, Bitter Fruits, Recent Pasts and Modern Myths & Rituals, 1987 Vancouver; Yellow Peril: New World Asians, 1988 England.

Time Coast Village (1929-1930). This work challenges the dominant narrative of Canadian art and its role in Canadian cultural discourses. Both Harris and Carr are iconic figures in Canadian art history. The Group of Seven has defined a unique Canadian identity through their art, which emphasizes landscape and wilderness. Carr has been constructed as an icon that represents British Columbia's regional identity as defined by the tourist industry and an economy heavily relying on natural resources. These two chosen paintings represent the Canadian West, which is where Yoon grew up. However, Yoon's experience might look and feel nothing like the depictions in these paintings. Yoon critiques the hegemonic discourse in a subtle but effective way. The work encourages her community to explore its own history as well as to explore their connection to the land and the nation.

While *A Group of Sixty-Seven* is inspired by the Korean Canadian community in Vancouver where she grew up, Yoon's voice expands beyond the Korean Canadian community and becomes part of the larger context of rising Asian Canadian cultural awareness. British Columbia has a vibrant Asian cultural community, which includes writers, artists, critics and activists who were highly involved in the identity politics movement in the 1970s. The movement of Asian-Canadian consciousness took root in Vancouver. Members of the Chinese and Japanese minorities became aware that they shared common psychological and historical experiences and recognized their ability to use such commonalities for political effect. Xiaoping Li suggests that a Pan-Asian identity emerged in Canada in 1970 with the formation of the Asian Canadian Coalition and the Asian Canadian photo exhibition at the University of British

Columbia.[90] The subsequent events organized on the University of British Columbia campus marked the beginning of a radical Asian Canadian cultural production.[91] Activists such as Ron Tanaka encouraged Asian Canadian artists to resist assimilation and to create work that is associated with their community and "ethnic past." Critical discourses developed by the Asian Canadian magazine *The Asianadian* energized grassroots struggles against racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic exploitation.[92] During the following decades, artists, writers and critics such as Roy Miki (b.1942), Richard Fung, Paul Wong, and Aiko Suzuki (b. 1937) have been striving to represent their long been repressed heritages and pasts and define an Asian Canadian culture.

Yoon is inspired by this vibrant community and has always been an active advocate of Asian Canadian awareness. Like many scholars in the field who recognize the diversity within the group but still insist on the strategic essentialist position, Yoon recognizes the importance of retaining the concept of "Asian Canadian." She writes: "I think 'Asian Canadian' is a fiction we have to maintain for political reasons."[93] In *Souvenirs of the Self*, Yoon includes three Asian languages - Korean, Japanese and Chinese - to mark her position as part of the Asian Canadian community. In *A Group of Sixty-Seven*, although Yoon chooses to photograph people of Korean origin only, the significance could easily extend to the whole Asian Canadian population.

First exhibited in 1996, *A Group of Sixty-Seven* included 2 grids of 67 framed c-prints mounted on the gallery wall. The composition of all of these portraits is similar, a typical upper

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90 Xiaoping Li, *Voices Rising: Asian Canadian Cultural Activism* (Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2007), 25.

91 Ibid., 18.

92 Ibid., 29.

93 Jin-me Yoon, Cited by Charlie Cho, "The Intersections of Jin-me Yoon," *Ricepaper* 7, no. 1 (2001), 13.

body portrait in front of the two paintings by Harris and Carr. While one set has figures facing the viewer, the other has them with their back to the viewer. The title of this work suggests multilayered meanings. 1967 was the centennial of Canadian Confederation, when a series of national celebrations took place. As previously discussed, it was the year that Canada amended its immigration policy to accept immigration based on the point system, which consequently allowed Yoon's family to reunite with her father in Canada. The title also directly comments on the iconic role of the Group of Seven in Canadian art and cultural history. By titling her work *A Group of Sixty-Seven,* Yoon asserts that the role of her community in Canada is important as well. The contrast between the two grids: one group with identities fully revealed, the other with identities concealed, comments on the use of the term visible minority, suggesting that Korean Canadians are in fact invisible in Canadian society and historical and cultural representations.

When *A Group of Sixty-Seven* was first made, it was not intended to pay homage to these individuals from the community. However, when confronted with a truthful representation of a group of real people, one cannot help but be drawn to the life stories of these people. Questions like these have arisen in my mind: was any of these women a comfort woman during the war? did any of them have trouble finding a job in Canada? is the woman dressed in the beautiful pink traditional Korean outfit (jeogori) a hardworking homemaker serving her husband and children? In addition to the critique of the Euro-Canadian dominant narrative, this work raises viewers' awareness of the everyday life of Korean immigrants in Canada. These photographs are a realistic and vibrant representation of the community, which is rarely seen in mainstream media or artistic representations. It critiques the omission of a community that lives and grows in Canada in the dominant discourse.

This work addresses the Korean community's connection to the landscape of British Columbia raising an important aspect of diaspora identity that is a hybrid of the Asian presence and the European presence. Unlike the identity represented in Liu's work that is deeply rooted in her Chinese origins, the hybrid Korean Canadian diasporic identity explored by Yoon is primarily rooted and developed in the community in Canada, where the European presence exists as a source of oppression and dominance. Contrary to Safran, whose diasporic theories I discussed in Chapter 2, James Clifford suggests in *Routes*, that many diaspora groups do not necessarily wish to return because their homeland only exists metaphorically; instead they choose to recreate culture in a dispersed location.[94] For these groups, including the Korean Canadian community represented in Yoon's work, their identity is subject to both locations, and able to exist on the hyphen. The hyphen suggests a hybrid identity that accepts the changes brought by the lives in the new home while maintaining psychological connection to the original home. In *A Group of Sixty-Seven*, Yoon omits evident references to traditional Korean culture, except one woman dressed in *jeogori*. The figures are represented as contemporary Korean Canadians facing challenges of managing their identity against the backdrop of Anglo Canadian culture.

Another work of Yoon exploring problems of multiculturalism and cultural diversity is *Touring Home From Away* (1998) . The series was produced during Yoon's artistic residency at Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. It includes nine double-sided 81.5 x 66 x 12.5 cm lightboxes with ilfochrome translucent prints.

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94 Clifford, *Routes*, 205.

Each lightbox is suspended from the ceiling by two metal strings; so that viewers can walk around them and view the works from both sides. Each box includes a group of two images taken at the same or comparable location, but the identities of the figures on one side are revealed, while on the other side they are concealed or slightly altered.

The series brings the viewer to the birthplace of Canadian Confederation and intervenes in the historical narrative of Canadian nationhood constructed by various cultural symbols. Among them, Yoon focuses on landscape, which is deeply embedded in the historical and cultural discourse of P.E.I as well as Canada. Various studies on the cultural and social use of landscape argue that landscape is seen as symbolic, representative, and as a representation, duplicitous and gendered, class-based, politicized, and central to the (re)production of social life.[95] In the Canadian context, the empty landscape paintings of the Group of Seven played a significant role in the nationalization of nature in Canada, particularly in the development of ideas about northernness, wilderness, and identity.[96]

Using a technique similar to *Souvenirs of the Self,* Yoon invited members of her family and colleagues who worked with her in P.E.I. to join her project. These individuals, together with Yoon, play different characters representing identities that are constructed by space, landscape, and historical narratives throughout Canadian history. I think Yoon created these portraits of Asian Canadian women, a mixed race child and an aboriginal man as a quintessential means of intervening in the gendered, class-based, and politicized social construct of Canada's sense of

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95 Richard H. Schein, "The Place of Landscape:A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting an American Scene," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87, no. 4 (December 1997): 660-680.

96 John O'Brian and Peter White, "Introduction," in John O'Brian and Peter White eds., *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 3-11.

itself as a nation. Some of these portraits look like random snap-shots or family portraits, while some are strangely staged, with the figures displaying a sense of uneasiness in the environment. The contrast between casualness and ambiguity is passed onto the viewers, challenging their perception of Canadianness as based on Anglo culture. Stemming from critical thoughts on social space and discourse theory, Yoon attempts to deconstruct highly symbolic ideals of Canadianness constructed throughout modern Canadian history, and negotiates how identity and subjectivity are altered in different social contexts. The series displays a desire to participate in a heterogeneous engagement with different cultural identities and Yoon's refusal to live on the cultural margin.

The title of the series is as symbolic as her other works. Charlottetown is the birthplace of Canadian Confederation, an iconic place with saturated meanings of Canadianness as the conqueror of the new land and the confederation of colonies. P.E.I. is also a place of tourist interest, known for its lush landscape. Throughout the Atlantic Provinces, visitors are called "from away." Yoon deconstructs these various narratives that have built the identity of P.E.I.; in the meantime, the term "touring" addresses the nomadic, migratory, and dispersed subject. "Home" represents a constructed sense of belonging, fixed geographical location and a stable identity. Yet, "touring" and "home" are two contrasting ideas, which imply a strong sense of displacement. By juxtaposing these two contrasting ideas, the title implies Yoon's journey in search of a lost or illusive homeland.

In panel 5a , an older woman, standing in the pastoral PEI landscape and looking towards the ocean and the iconic Confederation Bridge, carries a child on her back wrapped in a podaegi, a traditional baby carrier widely used in Korea. The combination of red and blue on the podaegi suggests Koreanness as they are the colours of the Korean national flag. However, the figures are

positioned high up in the picture plane and do not face the viewers, so the identity of these figures is not clear. On the reverse panel 5b , the close-up shot reveals the identities of the figures: a Korean woman and a child of mixed race. The figures stand in front of a lighthouse styled motel with the phrase on top: “accommodations: $55.”

The racial contrast between these two figures and the intergenerational relationship suggested in the photograph bluntly evokes questions of race and belonging. In 5a, they are submerged in the landscape and appear lost, as if the empty political discourse of Canadian nationhood does not recognize this kind of union as a family. However in 5b in front of a temporary home, they appear in joy. This pair of images suggests a problem for immigrants in Canada, where they have strong family ties and support within the community, as depicted in panel 5b where the older woman is happy and content with her grandchild in a temporary home. However, immigrants’ social and political life can be unpromising because of society’s lack of acceptance and ignorance, as depicted in panel 5a where they face an empty landscape lacking deep connections.

The myth of the Canadian national identity project is deconstructed through another group of photographs in this series. On panel 2a , the image is simply composed of the storefront of an iconic Tim Hortons restaurant. The artist is seen sitting with a friend behind the store windows. Enjoying a cup of Tim Hortons coffee and a doughnut is a very common thing for an average Canadian. However, Tim Hortons has also branded itself as a representative of true Canadianness. As the biggest and most successful food service operator in Canada, Tim Hortons’s success is largely associated with hockey and the spirit that binds the nation together. On the reverse of this panel 2b , the artist is captured stepping out of a small convenience store called “Green Gables Food Store.” Like having a cup of coffee, getting some daily necessity

from a convenience store in the street corner is also part of an ordinary Canadian day. In contrast to the casual scene captured in this photograph, Green Gables is one of the most distinctive icons of P.E.I. because author Lucy Maud Montgomery drew inspiration from the land during the late Victorian era for the setting of her classic novel *Anne of Green Gables*. It is also a famous tourist destination that is heavily promoted by the government of P.E.I. and beloved by Japanese tourists. In this group of images, Yoon interrupts the viewers' understanding of seemingly neutral everyday lives and behaviors, and points out that Tim Hortons and Anne of Green Gables are icons that helped construct Canadian national and local identities, ideas of cultural and racial differences and sense of belonging.

On panel 3a , Yoon's son, dressed up as the red-haired orphan Anne of Green Gables, poses in front of Green Gables House carrying a pink girl's purse with lobster images on it. On the reverse side, her son is staged without the red wig and the straw hat, but still wearing the blue skirt and playing with the pink purse. With the theatrical and exaggerated costumes, the figure becomes as fictional as Anne of Green Gables. The ambiguity of the child's gender and identity suggests how unstable and fictional identity can be. By putting the figures front and centre occupying significant space within the image, I argue that Yoon's work contrasts the ideas of "home" and being "from away," suggesting cultural and racial minorities' ambiguous relationship to Canada: on the one hand, Canada is their home, yet many Canadians would consider people of Korean descent as being "from away." By presenting pairs of contrasting or correlated images, the series argues that identity is a fictional concept in relation to its social and cultural location and confined by Canadian cultural and political discourse. The series argues for cultural diversity against the white dominant discourse in Canada.

Exploration of Imaginary Space through Korean History

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the reason for Yoon to keep referring back to her roots in South Korea is to emphasize the importance of a unified Korean Canadian diasporic identity for the social and political power of Korean people in Canada. For the diasporic identity to integrate both Koreanness and Canadianness, it needs to establish a cultural ground that resists assimilation. Yoon has traveled to South Korea many times throughout her career. Many other Asian Canadian artists, such as Paul Wong, a Canadian born Chinese artist, have also travelled to their ancestors' homes to find inspiration. Although the idea of "home" for them is not as nostalgic as it is for Liu, these artists use the imaginary space of the homeland to construct the "transnational imagined community" discussed by Adamson.[97] Yoon's work and involvement with South Korea is an important part of the diasporic identity based on the Asian, European and North American presences beyond national borders. For Yoon, South Korea is not a source of belonging, but a source of identity that enriches her Koreanness and allows her to resist the white dominance in Canada.

The video *The Dreaming Collective Knows No History (U.S. Embassy to Japanese Embassy, Seoul)* (2006) provides an imaginary space for Yoon to explore her relationship to the homeland as a way of better understanding her diasporic identity. Seoul portrayed in her video is a transnational political space which integrates transnational consciousness and cultivates a hybrid identity. Unlike Liu who emotionally seeks an eventual return to China, and expresses

97 Adamson, "Constructing the Diaspora."

ambivalent love and attachment to her Chinese heritage, Yoon travels back to the "imagined home" to make a political statement.

The video was exhibited in Seoul, South Korea and extends the artist's interest in the interrelationship between the built environment of the city, history and the body. As in her other works, humor is an important element. *The Dreaming Collective Knows No History* documents Yoon's eighteen-minute-and-eight-second long trip crawling on a skateboard from the U.S. embassy to the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Her journey traces Korea's modern history via a tour of Seoul's modern cityscape with its traces of Korean traditional heritage, while moving along the history from Japanese colonization to American occupation. It makes the statement that migration is not a local issue, as many Koreans were forced to leave their homeland as a result of a complicated war history.

During this trip, Yoon has to stop constantly as exhaustion takes over. Her hands are protected by bandages and she wears special footwear to prevent injury. The artist's intense labour reminds the viewer of the trauma of war and the harsh conditions Koreans experienced under the dominance of Japanese and American powers. The crawling action of the artist creates an effect of forced slow motion, which obliges viewers to contemplate the otherwise overlooked cityscapes. The camera follows Yoon closely as she crawls and, as a result, cityscapes and humans in the video are inverted. The footage offers a different angle for the viewer to examine the social space from what one is used to. The hardship the artist endures while crawling on the street with the aid of a skateboard also reflects the historical burden that social spaces and memories have on a group of people.

Yoon explains the title of the work as, “the first part of the title makes reference to Walter Benjamin’s suggestion that modernity and the flows of history are phantasmagoric.”[98] In the video, the phantasmagoric illusion is represented by Seoul’s skyscrapers, prosperous commercial districts, busy traffic, and people on the streets. The illusion of modern progress, economic growth and fast paced lifestyle is interrupted in the video by the deliberate slow motion of Yoon and an unusual camera angle. Today, Seoul bills itself as a metropolitan international city, with a strong economy and an extremely fast paced lifestyle. By inverting the city’s streets full of skyscrapers and busy people, Yoon critiques the growth of consumerism and the economic progress happening all over Asia as a result of economic globalization.

Most of Yoon’s work, including the one just discussed, uses her own body as the subject. Yoon explains the significance of this strategy as follows: "I find that what may appear to be personal narratives in fact imply larger social and historical considerations. Seen in this light, what I choose to recount is no longer about me as an isolated individual."[99] In this video, by tracing this traumatic journey with her own body, Yoon represents her community of hundreds of thousands of Koreans who emigrated to dispersed locations around world. This statement also applies to the work of Liu Hung and Nikki S. Lee, as both women’s work depicts personal narratives of women as a variety of manifestations of Asian North American female identity.

Asian Canadian Female Identity at the Intersection of Race, Gender and Culture

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98 Jin-me Yoon, “The dreaming Collective Knows No History (U.S. Embassy to Japanese Embassy, Seoul)” *Vimeo*. http://vimeo.com/3705129.
99 Monika Kin Gagnon, "Other Conundrums: Monika Kin Gagnon in conversation with Jin-me Yoon." *Jin-me Yoon: Between Arrival and Departure* (Vancouver: Western Front, 1998), 46-47.

While interrupting hegemonic discourses and advocating an Asian Canadian hybrid identity are two vital messages Yoon delivers in her work, in the series *Intersection* (1996-2001), the artist argues for an Asian Canadian female identity that rejects gender and racial hierarchies simultaneously and constructs a narrative that represents Asian Canadian women's unique experience as a group. The work critiques the exploitation of the female body and the social processes that construct and reinforce gender hierarchy. As Yoon notes: "woman, artist, mother, Korean Canadian and teacher… …yes, all those terms are necessary and problematic."[100] By portraying herself as a character at the intersection of racial and gender frontiers, I argue that Yoon's work examines multiple sources of oppression that Asian Canadian women face coming from both patriarchy and racist stereotypes. She advocates a strong feminist position that rejects these oppressions.

Expanding on her interests in the relation between the body and social space, Yoon attempts to combine the autobiographical, the theoretical and the poetic. In this series of photographic, video and installation works, Yoon eliminates the references to specific social spaces. Instead she places the figures on clean monochromatic backgrounds as if they are commercial products with clear labels. The stereotypes associated with Asian Canadian women, such as a domestic homemaker, a loving mother and an ultra-feminine servant, are subverted by the glossy finish that mimics advertising, by the poetic composition of the figure and Yoon's unique wittiness.

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100 Yoon, Meet the Artist - Jin-me Yoon.

Intersection (1996) includes two life size transmounted c-prints. The figures in these photographs are staged against a saturated red background with their backs facing the viewer. Both of these figures wear men's dress shoes and have cropped dark hair. The figure on the left is dressed in a black suit, while the one on the right is wearing a black and white polka dot dress. The gender identity of both figures is ambiguous. The androgyny of these figures evokes discomfort in viewers and challenges them to question their conventional understanding of gender and the roles "naturally" associated with it. The figure on the left is armed with a baby bottle attached to a breast pump, which is pointing to the figure on the right who is holding a baby in the front with the back facing the viewer so we can only see a small leg around the mother's waist. They are both accompanied by a suitcase on the floor full of documents, while the suitcase in the image on the right has a splash of milk on it.

We know that both characters are played by Yoon herself from later work in the series. However, in this group of images, the identity is completely concealed and subverted by the bizarre combination of the dress-code, the hairstyle, and activities. These visual cues imply the commonly accepted signification of the female body in the patriarchal sense such as the breast pump, the milk splash, and the dress with polka dots, yet they also subvert these presentations of femininity with masculine symbols such as the shiny dress shoes, the black suit, and the cropped hair and a sense of humour. Yoon claims that the physiology of women to give birth and breastfeed should not become a constraint on their social identity. Subsequently, these labels are completely arbitrary, which merely serve the hegemonic narrative of patriarchy.

Intersection 2 (2001) is a multiple video projection that juxtaposes three videos: a head and shoulders shot of the artist, a giant jellyfish above the head shot, and a closeup of kimchi-making on the left corner wall. Moving away from her previous photographs in this series, this

work marked Yoon's entrance into video art, which the artist believes to be a liberating medium that allows her to overcome the fixity and containment of photography.[101]

This group of images is connected by the same contraction-like movement which represents birth. The jellyfish, which is the dominating image in this group, is dioecious, in other words, neither female nor male. Although highly poisonous, jellyfish is a common condiment consumed in East Asian countries, including Korea. Yoon's head shot underneath appears genderless with the cropped hair and makeupless face. She seems tired while trying to keep her eyes open and head straightened up. In the kimchi-making shot, a pair of busy hands, covered in latex gloves move fast and skillfully between layers of cabbages and applying red chili flake paste. Homemade kimchi is a symbol of motherhood and home in Korean culture. The combination of three unrelated images represents the intersection Yoon faces as a Korean Canadian woman, where oppressions coming from patriarchy, traditional female roles, family values, home, cultural heritage, and motherhood have worn her out. She critiques the hierarchy of oppressions in western capitalist societies discussed by Moraga and Anzaldua, which places women of color at the very bottom of social stratification.[102]

In the previous chapter, I discussed Liu's representation of the oppression Chinese women experienced in history. Obviously, growing up in Canada, Yoon did not experience the patriarchy of South Korea; neither does her work address the issue directly. However the Korean Canadian female identity explored in the series is inevitably shaped by the stereotypes originated

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101 Ibid.

102 Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, "Introduction," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua eds (Watertown, Massachusetts: Persephone Press, 1983), 2-10.

in a highly sexualized history. Korean women bear a horrifying history of sexual and economic exploitation. During their colonial rule the Japanese enhanced the commercialization of sexuality and conscripted Korean women as sexual 'comforters' for soldiers. In the postwar period the U.S. military presence played a preponderant role in expanding prostitution in that country.[103] Under U.S. dominance, the primary organization of sexual work catered to American soldiers stationed in Korea. Studies on Korean War brides prove they were alienated, and some experienced domestic abuse. Unlike Liu's work which seems to endorse the nostalgic image of a traditional Chinese woman potentially perpetuating these stereotypes, Yoon is reluctant to do so. Instead, she portrays an image of an independent and career-oriented woman through the figure with ambiguous gender and racial Asian Canadian identities. However, emphasizing visual elements such as kimchi, hair and facial features, Yoon still considers herself to be deeply connected to the Korean Canadian community. The female identity portrayed in this series of works amplifies the main argument of this chapter, that the Korean Canadian diasporic identity reflects the existence of all three presences: the Asian presence, the European presence and the North American presence. In this series, Yoon examines the existence of both sides of her female identity: a family oriented mother and daughter, which is required by Korean tradition, and a career woman, which is a social identity required by modern Canadian society.

Yoon's work emerged in the midst of Asian Canadian identity politics of the 1980s and 90s, which somehow still carries a sentimental aura. In the work of Nikki S. Lee, the tragedies of displacement and women as victims of patriarchy have been replaced by the excitement of new

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103 John Lie, "The Transformation of Sexual Work in 20th-Century Korea," *Gender and Society* 9, no. 3 (June 1995): 310-327.

locations, new roles and constant exchanges. However, Yoon's work displays the same performative quality of Lee's, which has been crucial to both artists to articulate a refusal to complement the hegemony of white-North American society.

Chapter 4 Nikki Lee Contesting National Borders and Global Citizenship

In the previous two chapters, I discussed two Asian North American artists who have struggled to maintain connections to their homelands as well as to manage their changing identity in exile and diaspora. As women of Asian origin in North America, they have battled against stereotypes and have addressed the pressures of assimilation they have faced. However, there is a strong sense of self-control and limitation in the development of their identities, bounded by a "strategic essentialist" position in which locality, authenticity and provenance are determinant identity indexes. As I argued in Chapter 1, the concept coined by Spivak rooted in postcolonial thinking, suggests that subalterns, such as feminists and Asians, temporarily unite, despite the diversity within the group, in order to effectively deploy their commonality to achieve a political goal. The "strategic essentialist" position has served as an approach shared by Asian North American artists, writers, and activists to address identity politics since the 1970s. Both Liu and Yoon follow this tradition. Their work has proposed an important postcolonial statement against white male dominance. Their struggle has built a foundation for young artists like New York City-based photographer and video artist Nikki S. Lee to establish a new realm in which she can negotiate more rigorously and perform more freely than previous generations the roles that she chooses.

Born Lee Seung-Hee in South Korea in 1970, Nikki S. Lee moved to the United States in 1994 and adopted the name Nikki after fashion model Niki Taylor.[104] Lee made her debut in the contemporary art scene in New York City in 1999 with her ongoing photographic series *Projects.* Lee, wearing exaggerated clothing and make-up, appears in all her photographs as the main subject. Displaying a unique sense of satire and casualness, these visually rich images, evoking numerous stories, provide easy access for viewers and critics to fully engage in the journey on which the artist has embarked. Before I start an in-depth analysis of the work, I will first discuss one example from the series to introduce Lee's formal concerns and working methods.

In *The Yuppie Project (17)* (1998) , Lee is dressed in a grey skirt suit while enjoying an outdoor lunch with two men who appear to be Wall Street brokers. It is hard to distinguish Lee from the group she was photographed with, even though both men are Caucasian. Lee achieves this convincing result by altering her makeup and style of clothing, and mimicking the gestures and lifestyle of Wall Street brokers. The coke can on the curb, the woman reading a newspaper behind the group, people relaxing in the background, the natural sunlight, and the date stamp on the right bottom corner all make the photo appear to be a casual snapshot taken by an amateur. However, while some photos from the *Project* series like this particular one look convincing and natural, others in the series do not. For example, in *The Seniors Project* (1999) where Lee puts on extremely heavy makeup to mimic the wrinkly skin of an older woman, the photographs look bizarre, unconvincing and extremely staged, and subsequently make the viewer uncomfortable.

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104 Museum of Contemporary Photography, *Nikki S. Lee*. 2005-2010. http://www.mocp.org/collections/permanent/lee_nikki_s.php.

As a whole, it is easy to spot Lee's appearance in every group as a thread, which confirms this whole series as an entirely put-on performance.

Since her first solo exhibition, Lee's work has attracted enormous attention and received rave reviews. Her work is now held by major public collections such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago and the Smithsonian Photography Initiative. Lee's instant success is not unexpected, as her work records the myriad cultural scenes of American society. Lee's critics highly praise her work as a sociological project that explores and captures metropolitan culture, and the fluidity of social identities in general. Comparable to the way post-war America applauded Andy Warhol's blurred fusion of indulgence in and criticism of bourgeois material culture, Lee's work shows how today we are excited about the swift changes in the metropolis. Lee's background in fashion photography gives her work a unique sense of fashionableness that excites the viewer. Lee discusses her internship with renowned fashion photographer David LaChapelle and her understanding of fashion saying, "it can be hard to get that kind of shallowness because of its depth and seriousness. It's very tricky!"[105] The sense of shallowness and attention to details of make-up and costumes in her work resembles fashion photography, which makes Lee's work attractive to the viewer.

However, hardly any reviews or critics discuss Lee's work in the context of the changing identity of Asian American women in the age of globalization. Although Lee works within a Western modern photographic tradition, she sophisticatedly rejects the Euro-American definition

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105 Nikki S. Lee and Gilbert Vicario, "Artist Interview: Nikki S. Lee." *Seeing & Writing 3*, 2001, http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/seeingandwriting3/interviews/interview5.asp.

of contemporary art. Her work is still concerned with the white male hegemonic ideologies, but she replaces the focus on Asian North American women's struggles with a sense of performativity. This notion is embodied in Lee's work through a renewed understanding of extensive global cultural exchanges, multiple sources of information, increased diversity in metropolitan centres across the globe, hard won women's rights and minority rights. The North American presence, in Stuart Hall's words, associated with negative aspects such as the Euro-American dominance, and the disempowered position for Asian immigrants, is completely neglected in Lee's work. Built on post-colonial and post-structuralist theory that has deconstructed the dominant Eurocentric narrative, Lee's work critiques previous generations' radical and critical parameters that emphasize Asian North American women's struggles under white male dominant ideologies.

I will argue that Lee's performance reflects a globalized Asian female identity that rejects classification based on race, gender, economic status and language. Lee refuses to bear multiple sources of constraint such as tradition, home, patriarchal oppression and female gender roles faced by Asian North American women. To Lee, the engagement with others is a process of rediscovering the self. By constant and effortless transitioning from one social identity to another, the character Lee plays has achieved a fluid identity that subverts the stereotype of Asian women regardless of citizenship. Lee interrupts stereotypes in a less confrontational manner than Liu and Yoon. She disrupts the social and gender hierarchies entrenched in the everyday, represented by the snapshot style of the photographs and her self-claimed "boring" documentary technique, with theatricality, represented by her exaggerated makeup and clothing. To understand Lee's work in a rapidly changing globalized world, I will first briefly discuss the impact of cultural and

economic globalization on Asian nations including Korea, with a particular focus on migration, national identity and cultural origin.

As globalization has penetrated all aspects of our lives, communities can no longer be defined by conventional perceptions of fixed geographical location, consistent social and cultural history and monolithic ethnicity. The twentieth century saw the growth and consolidation of nations and the reinforcement of homogeneity based on imagined commonalities and cultural bonds. These issues are acutely challenged in the twenty-first century due to increased mobility. Mobility includes extensive population movement, but also economic integration, where products, goods, and resources are moved easily across national borders. Technological advances enable the global flow of information and the transmission of cultural products. Consequently, transnational mobility also causes changes in the cultural arena. Hollywood blockbusters premiere simultaneously in Los Angeles, New York City, Shanghai, and Seoul. American consumer lifestyle is widespread all over Asia as the economies of countries in the region continue to grow. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Edward Said argues that "people and identities have always overlapped one another, through unhierarchical influence, crossing, incorporation, recollection, and deliberate forgetfulness."[106] Although the flow of capital and the influence of culture and lifestyle are still relatively one-dimensional, the dominance of American culture has been unavoidably restructured through its encounters with others.

In the art world, international exhibitions and biennials bring artists and nations around the world together with a goal of presenting diverse art to a global audience. However, these

106 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994),401.

international institutions are mainly dominated by Euro-American standards. Artists on the geographical peripheries face a challenge between representing local cultures and showing their awareness of international art practice.[107] Asian artists seeking to achieve recognition on a global scale have had to learn to use Western artistic language. In the past decades, a considerable number of artists of Asian origin have moved to study and work in American and European metropolitan centres. Two internationally known contemporary Korean artists, Jheon Soocheon (b. 1947) and Suh Do-ho (b. 1962) both studied abroad and established their reputation through international exhibitions. They use modes of representation that cater to Euro-American gazes; however, they have endeavoured to incorporate Korean culture and history in their work. As I discussed in Chapter 2, a considerable number of Chinese artists and curators emerged during the "85 New Art Wave" and moved to Paris and New York City. Their work seeks to represent Chinese culture and history, but is often criticized as serving the dominant narrative of Western art institutions.

In South Korea, the 1980s and 90s saw a tremendous influx of foreign influences. Postmodernist theories were introduced in the country and had an impact on the art world. Meanwhile, Western languages and forms of representation have become increasingly popular and widely accepted among young artists and students.[108] The new generation, many of whom had travelled and studied abroad, entered the art scene in Korea in the 1980s and 90s. In *Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea* (2005), Kim Youngna argues that "the meaning of 'tradition' is

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107 Discussions of the role of the Venice Biennale suggest a power hierarchy: national pavilions do not express clearly regionalism; instead, they appeal to international audiences and Eurocentric gazes. See Eliza Tan, "The 53rd Venice Biennale: Fare Mondi, Making Worlds," *Ctrl+P Journal of Contemporary Art*, no. 15 (October 2009): 15-19.

108 Youngna Kim, *Tradition, Modernity, and Identity: Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea* (Elizabeth, NJ and Seoul: Hollym, 2005), 67.

changing for them. The traditional culture of the Joseon Kingdom may be stranger to them than American pop culture."[109] The younger generation soon invented a new artistic language that represents their experiences.

As a child growing up in the small South Korean town of Kye-Chang, Lee obtained the opportunity to study photography at Chang-Ang University in Seoul in the 1990s, which she hoped would become a side door entry to filmmaking. During her university studies, Lee was exposed to a variety of foreign cultures and it was almost natural for her to explore the world after she completed her university education in Korea. She moved to New York City in 1994, and first was trained as a commercial photographer at the Fashion Institute of New York. After a few years as a fashion photographer's assistant, she started her Master of Arts degree in photography at New York University, which she completed in 1999. Since then, she has produced three series of works, including two photography series: *Projects* (1997-2001) and *Parts* (2002-2005), and one video *A.K.A Nikki S. Lee* (2006).

To answer the question of how she became an artist, Lee explains that she hated the technical aspects of photography even though she spent ten years learning it. However, she says, "I like photography and looking at pictures. I like the context of photography—I can read it clearly."[110] "The context of photography" is what gives Lee's work profound conceptual significance. In the following section, I will analyze her work in three sections using the theoretical frameworks of performativity, postmodern feminism, and migratory aesthetics, which

109 Ibid.

110 Lee, "Artist Interview: Nikki S. Lee."

I argue reflect the changing experiences of identity for Asian American women during the past ten years.

Lee's first series, *Projects* (1997-2001), involves mostly minority and subcultural groups. By putting the main subject, herself, in diverse environments to challenge racial, social and economic stratification, this series rejects the limitation of fixed labels. The work liberates the "strategic essentialist" Asian American identity by arguing for cultural hybridity and pluralisation. Secondly, Lee's work does not portray diasporic experiences as a struggle between Asian tradition and Euro-American dominance. *The Lesbian Project* (1997), *The Exotic Dancers Project* (2000) and *Parts* (2002-2005) question the gendered and racialized Asian American female identity constructed by mainstream American culture, but Lee does it in a subtle way so that it opens to interpretations from other perspectives.[111]

Lee's theatrical performance as a lesbian and an exotic dancer rejects American perceptions of Asian women as obedient companions. Lee's choice of these eroticized sexual objects implies another layer of criticism of how Asian women are perceived by the mainstream. *A.K.A. Nikki S. Lee* (2006) represents the intricate dual personalities of the character and multiple social roles she plays. Lee's emphasis on her heavily accented English and the Korean language addresses a strong connection between linguistics and identity. Rather than suggesting that a common language cultivates one's sense of belonging to a social group, the work argues for a hybrid identity rooted in globalization, which blurs provenance and embraces nomadism.

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111 As I discussed in the beginning of the chapter, many critics see Lee's work as a representation of the diverse metropolitan culture and a study of subcultural groups in the United States.

Projects: Performative Identity and the Rejection of Classification

An ambitious project lasting from 1997 to 2001, the *Projects* series, much larger than what was initially exhibited in 1999, includes fourteen projects such as *The Hip Hop Project*, *The Hispanic Project*, and *The Punk Project*, in which Lee performs diverse types of female characters, integrating herself seamlessly within these different social and ethnic groups. To thoroughly convince the viewer that she fits in, Lee would first spend three or four months with the particular group and learn their gestures and ways of dressing up so as to make herself disappear in the group. She then would ask a friend or simply a passer-by to take snapshots of the group.

The most important aspect of the series is that Lee simultaneously erases and emphasizes her identity as a Korean American woman. Lee appears in every photograph as a close friend of the group, but in the end she claims to be an outsider. On the first level, Lee rejects her label as a Korean American woman by associating herself with dramatically different and unconventional social identities. On another level, rather than erasing her identity, the photographs together make Lee's Korean identity more visible than if she were to appear as herself without the makeup and the costume.

Unlike Liu and Yoon, whose work critiques the dominant narrative from a "strategic essentialist" perspective emphasizing cultural and historical origin and the common ground shared by Asian North American women, Lee underlines the performativity and hybridity of identity, working from an anti-essentialist position. Yoon's performance in *Intersection* as the androgynous figure rejects the problematic and oppressive labels associated with her, such as

woman, mother, artist, and Asian Canadian. Lee's performance in *Projects* employs a different method with equal success. She challenges the boundaries of social identities that are usually associated with racial identities in the United States. By infiltrating herself into other socially marginal groups such as the Hispanic and the African American groups, Lee rejects the fixity of identity and social classification based on race and economic status.

In the following discussion, I will discuss how her work demonstrates a performative identity, defined by Homi Bhabha, in two examples from *the Hip Hop Project* and *the Hispanic Project.* In *The Hip Hop Project (1)* (2001) , Lee sits in the back of a limousine with a group of African Americans, who appear to be on the way to a social outing. The scene is captured casually with two men on Lee's left looking highly engaged, smiling and posing for the camera. The man on Lee's right seems less engaged. Although he looks into the camera, he does not seem to be interested in the camera's action. The woman on the far right sits on the man's lap and looks out towards the window as if her attention is attracted by something happening on the street. Lee's dark tanned skin, leopard patterned belt, white hat, flamboyant sunglasses, blonde wig, thinly shaped eyebrows, and thick lip liner are coherently put together. At first glance, Lee completely disappears in the group. Like other works in the series, Lee's assimilation is enhanced by her engagement with the group. Lee carelessly holds up her sunglasses as she slightly looks up and comfortably leans between the thighs of the man behind her. His hand wraps around Lee's waist while the other hand points towards the camera in a typical hip-hop pose. The man on the far left is cut off from the frame as it typically would happen in snapshot group photos. These men also appear in other photographs in the series, which suggests they have probably become friends with Lee through the project.

In *The Hispanic Project (18)* (1998) , Lee is snapped in the middle of a conversation with a Latino family in what appears to be Spanish Harlem. As Lee explains in one of her interviews, to complete her project she actually spent time in the notorious low income community in New York City, which has a history of poverty, crime and drug addiction, becoming friends with the members of this community. In this photo, as well as in others of the series, Lee completely transforms her appearance with poorly bleached blonde hair, tanned skin, thick and dark lip liner and kitschy jewellery. Lee disappears in the crowd again because of her natural performance and intense engagement with the group. In addition, the composition ensures that Lee is submerged in the crowd. In the foreground, a woman in black behind Lee and the family is coming home. Further away, two girls are looking out from their tiny apartment window. Behind Lee, a few men are sitting around a table playing poker.

The scene appears to be a "boring" documentary photograph[112] of a typical afternoon in Spanish Harlem. These photographs appear as natural and casual as the photographs we put in Facebook albums. The stories in the photographs cannot be more "boring"; however, the viewer is attracted by their intimacy and the everyday social setting that in some way echo with one's own life. Disguised under the "boring aesthetics" of the everyday snapshot style, Lee strikes the viewer with her intervention and repetitive appearance in all of them. As the Korean woman becomes an African American hip-hopper or a Hispanic woman, the American construction of racial classification is subverted.

112 Lee calls her work "boring" because it mimics a natural documentary style when nothing is staged and glorified. What makes her work interesting is it looks natural, yet everything is staged.

In these two works, Lee's journey as a black hip hopper and a Hispanic woman argues against the American perception of race as an identity benchmark. The choice of these two groups is significant, since both have had prolonged influences on American culture; yet are constantly being portrayed as threats to American society and seldom included in the glorified historical and cultural narrative of the nation. African American, Hispanic American, or Korean born, all are tools that white dominant ideology uses to construct a social hierarchy that classifies people based on race in the interest of American national constituency.[113] Benedict Anderson argues that imagined communities are constructed to serve the modern idea of nationhood. Ideas of home and provenance are also constructed and emphasized to maintain the concept.[114] Similarly, Bhabha explains in his theory of nationhood that dominant culture produces a "progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion"[115] which prescribes the many as one. In the United States, democracy, freedom and human rights are believed to hold the nation together, but the cohesive national narrative, what Bhabha describes as the "pedagogic identity", is defined by Euro-American experiences and their dominance of the country.

Lee contests the limitation of the American "pedagogic identity," which establishes white ethnicity as normative and other ethnicities as inferiors that need to be assimilated and elevated. For minority cultures to perform against the "pedagogic identity" prescribed by the modern nation, as "'subjects' of a process of signification, they must erase any prior or originary

113 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 204.

114 Anderson, *Imagined Community*.

115 Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation," in *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 137-170.

presence."[116] This originary presence goes back to Hall's discussion of the three presences. For Liu Hung, her identity is strongly tied to the Chinese presence; therefore, she continues to identify herself as Chinese, even though she no longer lives in the community. For many Asian North American scholars, this Asian presence serves as a strategy of unification. None of them share the same experiences with their countries of origin, but they constantly refer back to this "imagined community" in Asia, and use it as a source of their identity. Unlike these artists and writers, Lee chooses not to focus on her Korean heritage. Her choice of erasing the originary presence is a critique of the "strategic essentialist" position. I argue that Lee's work demonstrates a stance against the stereotypical representation of Asian women, but she does not stress the importance of belonging to any particular racial, national or social group as a sense of identity. Her anti-essentialist position enables her to act as a performative subject that disrupts the "linear discourse of nation".[117] By presenting herself as a person with absolutely no self-awareness and who does not bear any cultural burden of ethnicity and nationality, Lee makes a statement that identity is a performative process that resists both the dominant Euro-American discourse and the traditional sense of belonging to an "imagined community."

Feminist scholar Judith Butler argues in her theory of performative identity that identity is formed as a result of repetitive social performance of a given role.[118] In the case of the United States, racial minorities have been performing the roles assigned to them under the Euro-

116 Ibid., 297.

117 Ibid., 142.

118 Although Butler discusses gender identity in this particular case, the performative identity extends to the construction of minority identities under the white dominant discourse. See Judith P. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no.4 (1988): 519-531.

American "pedagogical identity." The expressions of racial identities such as that found in Hip Hop culture, is a performance that resists performance of the assigned identity. By transforming herself into a participant in these marginal cultures and non-white ethnicities, Lee deconstructs the dominant discourse and resists the pressures of assimilation.

In the beginning of this chapter, I argued that Lee is not the spokesperson for her community because she is reluctant to stress her Korean origin and the history and experiences shared by Korean women living in the United States. Her work presents itself against the essentialist position in the way that the self is not victimized. Unlike Liu and Yoon whose work focuses on oppression by hegemonic white patriarchy, Lee critiques it metaphorically without confronting it directly. In Liu and Yoon's work, the oppressions women face are visually represented as cultural symbols and landscape. For example, Liu's traditional Chinese painting motifs are representations of a Chinese identity deeply rooted in tradition, locality and a history shared by one group and under one national discourse. Yoon's juxtaposition of herself with the landscape representing the benchmark of Canadian identity is a direct confrontation of the dominant discourse. While these techniques work effectively as a reminder to the viewer to be aware of these sources of oppression, Lee dismisses the kind of provenance-based identity labels that are usually associated with cultural burdens and forms of oppression. By removing these representations, the dominant narrative of one pedagogical identity becomes invisible in Lee's images. What is being challenged is the ideology in the viewer's mind. The more invisible and engaged Lee appears with the group, the more uncomfortable the viewer feels, because these constructed images are too far away from what we are used to in a society with a history of racial discrimination and segregation.

Resisting the Stereotypes of Asian American Women by Playing Unconventional Roles

In series such as *The Exotic Dancer Project, The Lesbian Project, The Skateboarder Project and The Punk Project*, Lee portrays the kinds of female characters who take part in cultural and social activities that are not usually associated with Asian women. These works are entertaining and theatrical as well as discomforting. Lee critiques the Asian American identity constructed to serve the American patriarchal discourse in a series of subversive acts. Lee's performance as an exotic dancer and as a lesbian breaks through the stereotypical Asian American female identity perpetuated by mainstream representations.

In the *Exotic Dancer Project (19)* (2000) , Lee and her dancer friend are shown in their performance outfits backstage. Probably in the process of preparing for the next performance as her outfit is half off with breasts exposed, Lee is caught in a playful photo-op with her friend in a scene that might happen among badly behaved young girls. The two heavily made-up girls sit facing one another, mirroring each other's pose with legs open, hands on thighs, and tongues touching. Worn-out blue lockers, dim lighting, and simple metal frame chairs in the background, portray a badly maintained strip club.

In the *Lesbian Project (14)* (1997) , Lee is smooching with her lesbian lover in bed. The close-up is neatly composed with Lee and another woman, both short haired, lying on a pillow cuddling tightly while tongue kissing. Both enjoy the moment passionately with their eyes closed. The artist deliberately left the photo upside down to keep its casual look to appear as though it was taken from the end of the bed and never adjusted. Meanwhile, the inverted image offers the viewers no easy access to these women's world. The labrys tattoo on Lee's right arm clearly

states her performed identity as a lesbian. Lee transforms her sexual orientation to completely destroy the dominance of heterosexuality, which is the definition of gender hierarchy.

Viewers are intrigued by this image because it does not resemble the conventional roles an Asian American woman is expected to play in real life. Lee not only disguises her racial identity, but also subverts widely accepted social assumptions about a well-behaved Asian girl. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Asian women are portrayed in American media as exotic and ultra feminine erotica. They are fantasized as submissive and domestic wives who are willing to serve their men. Asian women are rarely represented as erotic dancers with the power to manipulate men, or as tongue kissing and beer drinking lesbians.

Liu and Yoon both acknowledge the problematic nature of identity politics and strategic essentialism, but they heavily rely on it to critique patriarchy. Unlike her predecessors, Lee clearly rejects the categorization of Asian North American women with racialized, gendered and heterosexual identity. She does not seek an answer to what the Asian American woman identity should be; instead, she performs an act that rejects fixity and homogeneity within the group. As I will argue, Lee as the exotic dancer is as effective as Liu's Maoist feminist heroine and Yoon's portrait of the androgynous figure, in the way that it challenges racial stereotypes. In the mean time, it accepts diversity within the racial group and questions the effectiveness of strategic essentialism.

Yoon stands at the nexus of various intersecting roles: a mother, a Korean Canadian, an artist and a career woman. She attempts to deconstruct these cliché labels but also expresses frustration. Lee does not act as a mother, a Korean, or even an artist in her performances, even though in real life, she might be all these. Her female character is actively performing and excited about opportunities to change herself. For Lee, the constructed female identity is easily

transformed and subverted because it is ultimately a performance. Simone de Beauvoir claims, "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman."[119] Drawing on this argument, Judith Butler argues "if the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style."[120] In both *The Exotic Dancer Project* and *The Lesbian Project*, Lee's "outrageous acts" are a means to subvert the repetitive representations of Asian American gender identity and to culturally transform gender identity.

These seamless transformations are the most crucial aspect of Lee's work, yet they also rely on the participation of her "new friends." To complete these projects, Lee has spent time with all these groups going to dinners, clubs and parties with them and sometimes becoming their friends without them having a clear idea of what the artist is doing. She admits that sometimes she tells them what is going on, but people just open up to her off guardedly because they see her as a student completing an art project. As an artist, she is privileged to enter other people's lives, whereas it would not be as easy in real life. Her ethics may be questionable, since the artist has become a privileged observer, what Hal Foster discusses as the cultural ethnographer, who is not observed or critiqued by the groups he/she chooses to represent in the work.[121] Nonetheless the projects raise a question that, in reality, cultural transformation among

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119 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Translated by H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Book, 1974), 38.

120 Judith Bulter, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York :Routledge, 1990), 97.

121 Hal Foster, "The Artist as the Ethnographer," *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 171-200.

social and gender hierarchies in real life is not as fluid as it can be in her "art projects." In the *Parts* series (2002 – 2005), Lee started using real actors in her staged documentaries.

Lee describes her goal in *Parts* (2002 -2005) as being to "create a realistic point of reference in a love affair."[122] She practiced and observed how women behaved in different kinds of relationships or situations with men. The artist explains her goal as exploring the impact that intimate relationships have on women's identity. It further challenges the stereotypes of Asian women as perfect companions and obedient homemakers. Some of these women are the affectionate and clingy type of girlfriends an Asian woman is expected to be. Some are cool, non-committal and irresponsible female players. All the images in the series are cropped leaving only a hand or a foot of her male companion in the frame. The photographs are left with three white borders to emphasize that only one side that has been cropped, suggesting that the male figure has literally been "cut out" of the picture.

In *Part (14)* (2002) , Lee is in the back seat of a car with her man, with long sleek black hair and exquisitely finished make-up. She is fashionably dressed in a black jersey and a striped vest, but is far away from the man sitting on her right, whose arm is stretching to reach her left shoulder. On the contrary, in *Part (3)* (2003) , Lee appears much more vulnerable and dependent. She wears a much more feminine outfit including a pink silk tank top and a flowy skirt, while her hair and make-up is carelessly done. Her hands gently hold onto the man's arm as if she is intimidated by the big city and busy street behind her.

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122 RoseLee Goldberg, "Only Part of the Story: Nikki S. Lee in Conversation with RoseLee Goldberg." in exhibition catalogue, *Parts* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz; New York: D.A.P. Distributed Art Publishers, 2005), 47-53.

Even though Lee claims that she is recreating relationships in her photos, cropping the images is a violent act that refuses to acknowledge these relationships. The whole series is about the solo performance of a woman going through different stages in life. She presents the character as an autonomous self, affected by her love affairs, but not burdened or oppressed by patriarchy. She portrays a woman who is free to choose. The work suggests the type of feminist critique that focuses less on the contrast between men and women. Instead, Lee asserts that interactions within intimate relationships contribute to her identity. This less holistic position is a critique of the "essentialist position" that accentuates common experiences shared by all Asian North American women. Donna Haraway argues for a less stable female identity which moves beyond the limitations of traditional gender roles, feminism, and politics.[123] The *Parts* series explores an opportunity to accept female identity that is less concerned with patriarchy and the limitations it creates on female identity, instead focusing on the self.

AKA Nikki S. Lee: Migratory Aesthetics and Internationalism

As I discussed previously, gender and racial identities are neither fixed nor stable. Identity is much more complicated than simple classification based on certain indexes, especially as globalization continues to complicate so-called local and authentic identity. In the video *AKA Nikki S. Lee,* (2006) (Figs 29 and 30), Lee presents a transnational identity that embraces multidimensional and nonhierarchical cultural flows among diverse global participants.

123 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), 159-181.

With the premiere of *AKA Nikki S. Lee* at the Museum of Modern Art, the artist not only fulfilled her childhood dream of becoming a movie star and a producer, Lee also told us a story of a migrating female subject who has embraced what Homi Bhabha calls "the flux of cultural exchanges." In the analysis of Allan Sekula's photographic project *Fish Story* (1999), Bhabha comments that, "the harbor is the site in which material goods appear in bulk, in the very flux of exchange."[124] In *AKA Nikki S. Lee,* by portraying the story of a global migrant and an artist embracing diverse cultures, Lee creates a kind of art that Bhabha summarizes as what "takes the borderline condition of cultural translation to its global limit." [125]

Described as a "conceptual documentary,"[126] this 60-minute single channel video alternates segments presenting Lee as two distinct personalities: Nikki One, a reserved academic and Nikki Two, an outgoing socialite. It opens as Nikki One is being interviewed in a book-lined studio. "In this documentary," she says solemnly, "I create Nikki Lee based on what people think her character is." Later on, Lee was filmed on tours meeting curators and art dealers and attending social events and exhibition openings in Paris, New York, Venice and Frankfurt, constantly changing her performances to suit different cultural and social circumstances. The scene switches from Lee "lounging in a Venetian water taxi on her way to stay with wealthy collectors and visit the Venice Film Festival," to her "at a reception at the Peggy Guggenheim

124 Bhabha, *The* Location of Culture, 8.

125 Ibid.

126 Ben Davis, "Cultural Karaoke," *Artnet*, October, 24, 2006 http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/davis/davis10-24-06.asp.

Collection on the Grand Canal and padding around the collector's apartment in her nightgown, wearing an eyeshade that reads 'Princess'."[127]

Reminding people of the thought-provoking 1999 movie *Fight Club* which also tells a story about dual personalities, it is not mistaken to interpret the video as a story about the two sides of Lee. But it moves beyond the dual personalities in one society, and comments on migratory culture and a globalized Asian female identity that is responding to it. Globalization has not been revolutionary in terms of its capacity to overcome the negative aspects of traditional Asian societies, in which patriarchy had been more oppressive and exploitative for women. Based on studies of Muslim, Japanese and Chinese immigrant women, the political theorist Susan Moller Okin, in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*(1999) asserts that some cultures, mostly Western liberal cultures ," have departed further from the patriarchal past than others." She suggests that female members of "a more patriarchal minority culture" may "be much better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become extinct (so that its members would become integrated into the less sexist surrounding culture)," or if the culture were "encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women. . ."[128] Although the relationship between globalization and feminism is more complicated than what I have simplified above based on Okin's discussion (Western feminism has been introduced to Asia along with capitalist consumer lifestyle, commodification of the female body, sexual liberation,

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127 Carol Kino, "Now in Moving Pictures: The Multitudes of Nikki S. Lee." *Art & Design, The New York Times*, October 1, 2006. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/01/arts/design/01kino.html.

128 Okin, Susan Moller. *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 22-23.

etc, which arguably have resulted in more oppression of women), Western feminist ideas have been a liberating force in some Asian societies.

Lee sees globalization as an opportunity to liberate the Asian female subject from patriarchy constructed by Eastern traditions[129] and the history of oppression and exploitation of women in Korea throughout its modern history (discussed in Chapter 2). She discusses her career and education path in an interview saying that, growing up, she wanted to be a movie star but she realized she was not pretty enough to be an actress in Korea. She also dreamed of becoming a movie producer, but as a woman, it would have been almost impossible. It was also a difficult time for a woman to be an artist in Korea.[130] For Lee, New York City is a diverse and liberating place that inspires her performance and allows Lee to liberate herself from the patriarchal oppression she would have experienced if she were living in a small Korean town. In this sense, her female identity has been empowered, rather than burdened and displaced, by the force of globalization. She claims her fondness of the diversity of New York City, seeing it as a harbour that offers endless opportunities to engage with multiple cultures. She adopts an identity as a New York City dweller that eliminates national identity as a label that carries hegemonic burdens.

Besides the story that introduces Lee's engagement with diverse cultures, *A.K.A. Nikki S. Lee* also constructs a bilingual discourse which disrupts the dominance of English as a global language. The narration highlights Lee's heavily accented English throughout, as she speaks with a calm tone and a lack of engagement with the viewer as if she is telling the story to herself.

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129 Confucius patriarchy was the dominant ideology in pre-modern Korea. For an analysis of patriarchy in South Korea, see Jongwoo Han and L.H.M. Ling, "Authoritarianism in the Hypermasculinized State: Hybridity, Patriarchy, and Capitalism in Korea," *International Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 1(Dec 2002): 53-78.

130 Lee and Vicario, "Artist Interview: Nikki S. Lee."

Several scenes depict Lee reading an English book, *Creativity and Disease* in Korean translation in a hotel room on her trip. Lee, with a pair of nerdy black-rimmed glasses, lies down comfortably on a green couch, concentrating on the book in her hands.

The scenes appear ordinary, as most of them are real documentations of what happened during Lee's trips. (Lee had a cameraman follow her on real trips to gallery openings and events that she attended around the world during the two-year period.) However Lee disrupts the realism of the image with an unfamiliar voice to prevent the viewer from fully engaging with the story. The viewer is constantly reminded by the foreign voice-over that this is a story about a Korean woman. Subsequently, the voice becomes part of the performance in the documentary. Lee says, "I'm most comfortable with Koreans but...there's a whole side of me they don't know. That's why I talk to people like you [the interviewer, British artist Shane Waltener]. But then I have to speak English, and that's like a performance for me."[131] Speaking English is a role Lee needs to play as an artist working in the West; however, incorporating the accent as part of the aesthetics of the globalized identity subverts the oppression that comes from speaking English.

In a traditional sense, language is a very important part of identity making. As Benedict Anderson has discussed, a shared language is significant to the development of modern nations.[132] Franz Fanon also argues in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) that, "to speak means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. Speaking French means that one accepts, or is coerced into accepting, the collective consciousness of the French."[133] On a

131 Nikki S. Lee and Shane Waltener, "The Real Nikki." *Modern Painters* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 69.

132 Anderson, *Imagined Community*.

133 Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Translated by Constance Farrington (New York : Grove Press, 1963),17-18.

global scale today, the cultural flow between the East and the West relies on Western languages, mostly English, as the norm. The collective consciousness of the English speaking culture is also the norm of global cultural exchange. In the video, Lee's narration in heavily accented English suggests a refusal to accept the burden of speaking English and bearing its cultural weight. The emphasis on the Korean language and the translation between the two languages suggest finding a common ground between both cultures. Language gives personal strength and pride. Speaking a second language places the speaker in a weakened and disempowered position. Most immigrants experience language problems as part of their experiences of alienation and displacement. Nonetheless, in this case, Lee's inability to speak perfect English becomes an aesthetic that suggests what Bhabha calls the harbour, where exchanges of goods, ideas and cultures constantly take place. As I will argue, when Lee's work puts exchange between the two cultures on centre stage, it asks us to think differently about the traditional sense of identity, which relies on shared language and continuity.

The pluralism of culture represented by Lee's fluid transformation between both selves evokes a "migratory aesthetics" that enables the possibility of representing a globalized culture to a global audience. Mieke Bal suggests that "the state of migration today, for any society, has become an act of performance as well as a state to be or live in; mobility is not the exception but on its way to becoming the standard, and that their [migrants'] presence is an incontestable source of cultural transformation."[134] In the video, reading a translated book, speaking with an accent, touring around the world, and interacting with people from diverse cultures and locations

134 Mieke Bal, "Lost in Space, Lost in Library," in *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices between Migration and Art-making*, edited by Sam Durrant and and Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2007), 23.

are all indications of the mobility that the contemporary world enjoys. Bal uses the concept of "globalized art" to explain the notion, which is not an art that comes from nowhere, but an art that addresses globalization as problematic and anchors it; in other words, art that derives its identity labels from globalization. In *AKA Nikki S. Lee, 2006*, Lee derives her identity label from the migratory self instead of her Korean origin.

The video proposes a never ending journey that Arjun Appadurai defines as flux. Appadurai suggests that the world is faced with a new cultural phenomenon where "both points of departure and points of arrival are in flux."[135] For many recent immigrants from Asia, North America is not their final destination to fulfil their dream of a better life; rather, it is just a step in one's life to experience something different. For Lee, the journey spans the globe, the cultural exchanges that are brought along with it will continuously change her identity. Appadurai also points out that cultural production in our contemporary globalized world has become "an arena for conscious choice, justification and representation, the latter often to multiple and spatially dislocated audiences." [136] As I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, it is difficult for newly settled communities in displaced locations to maintain connections with their original homeland and culture. But with the idea of transnational and transcultural exchangeability, settlement may no longer be a relevant standpoint. Unlike Liu and Yoon, whose work focuses on their settled communities in North America, Lee presents a contemporary vision that rejects classification

135 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* , 44.

136 Ibid.

and provenance and an Asian female identity that incorporates transnational fluidity; in Stuart Hall's words, a state that is continuously becoming, and maybe never settling.[137]

For Liu, her Chinese origin, or in Hall's words, the Asian presence, is crucial; for Yoon, ethnicity and shared histories are very important elements that hold her community; for Lee, her ethnicity is visible in her work, but not as an identity indicator; instead, it is a performance that disrupts the repetitive acts that perpetuate hegemony. Nonetheless, her exoticness, namely being an Asian woman in the United States is still addressed as part of the problem of globalization, of the current art historical and cultural narrative that still centers in the West. There is still a tendency to label, categorize and isolate Asian North American art as minority art. The tradition rooted in identity politics is overthrown in the work of Lee. As Lee claims, "I look for those kinds of similarities too (between the East and the West)."[138] Lee enters into the Western art world with western images that the audience understands and accepts easily, which in fact allows Lee to insert her views more effectively.

137 Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 393-402.

138 Lee and Vicario, "Artist Interview: Nikki S. Lee."

Conclusion

This analysis of work of Liu Hung, Jin-me Yoon and Nikki S. Lee presents a study of Asian North American female identity over a thirty year period. The work of these artists has demonstrated that migrating from Asia to North America, either voluntary or coerced, either as an adult or as a child, has shaped their identities through an engagement with the cultures of homes. Through these cultural encounters, the artists experience the process of what Hall describes as identities that are constantly "changing and becoming,"[139] balancing the three presences of Asia, Europe and North America.

I conclude that Asian North American female identity evolves in a space that is between two cultures: here they endure the cultural and social oppressions coming from both societies, yet they liberate themselves from the oppressions of one particular location as they travel back and forth between the two societies. Asian North American female identity has transformed from maintaining a close tie to its ancestral culture, to constructing a diasporic community that represents the experiences of Asian North American women and eventually to moving oneself from culture to culture and role to role with a great sense of mobility and fluidity.

In Liu's work, Chinese cultural origin is an important source of her identity although she is away from China. Many immigrant women, who are living in the bicultural reality, share this nostalgic vision of home. For Yoon, growing up and receiving education in Canada has removed her foreignness, yet she has been forced to live in a marginal community as a racial minority. For

139 Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora."

her, the original home in South Korea is an imaginary political space that cultivates resistance to the hegemonic political discourse under an arbitrary policy of multiculturalism in Canada. While Liu and Yoon's work portrays the burdens of migration and the obstacles of living as a cultural minority, Lee's work presents a somewhat idealized image of identity as transnational, cross-cultural and characterized by gender fluidity. This is dependent on the future development of cross cultural understanding and more broad and equal identity exchanges among nations and cultures.

The flow of capital and the influence of culture and lifestyle are still relatively one dimensional, meaning the cultural and economic impact of North America in Asian countries is far more substantial than vice versa; however, the dominance of American culture has been shaken as a result of its encounter with others. Scholar and curator of Chinese contemporary art, Hou Hanru remarks on the global cultural changes: "as the East-West division is dissolving, a critique of Eurocentrism in culture, including a multi-orientational restructuring of Western society and of global culture, is being put forward as the new central concern of international cultural life."[140] We are faced by an inevitable global cultural restructuring, which will provide opportunities for artists of Asian origins to represent their cultures on the world stage.

In addition to their common interests in race, ethnicity and migration, these artists, especially Liu and Yoon, draw on historical references by recreating historical events in their work. These works call for a continued strengthening of analyses of art history and women's history in the field of Asian North American Studies. The work of Asian North American female

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140 Hanru Hou, *On the Mid-Ground*, edited by Hsiao-Hwei Yu (Hong Kong: Timezone Ltd, 2002), 201.

artists also represents an increasingly important aspect of contemporary visual art that challenges the Euro-American male dominance in the field. This body of work allows the audience to comprehend the cultures of Asia and the lives of Asian North American women from a renewed perspective.

Finally, the evolution of the Asian North American identities I have derived from the analysis of the changes in the work of Liu Hung, Jin-me Yoon and Nikki S. Lee and the sociopolitical contexts of China, Korea, Canada and the United States has raised a question on the contradiction between preserving local culture and strengthening global integration. The divide between two regions that are considered culturally and ideologically distinct still exists, suggesting that local, regional and national cultural and sociopolitical structures are still the determining parameters in the construction of identities.

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