Amorphous Roots: The Visualization of Liminality

by

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# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements** ................................................................. iii

**Introduction:**
Rooted in the In-Between ............................................................... 1

**Chapter One:**
“Over and Over”: The Incessant Search for an Unattainable Name and Home in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Exilée* ......................................................... 8

**Chapter Two:**
Distance, Homelessness, Anonymity and Insignificance:
Critiquing a Utopian Belonging in the “Virtual Home” with Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries ................................................................. 35

**Chapter Three:**
Next Destination: The Flexibility and Malleability of the Asian/Asian American Body in Nikki S. Lee’s *Projects* ................................................................. 71

**Conclusion:**
Traveling to Utopia? : A Brief History of Desires ......................... 102

**Works Cited** ............................................................................. 105
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To my readers:
It would be most ideal if you could take the time to visit Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, the artists I examine in my second chapter, and their Internet video artworks to gain a better sense of the highly unique viewing/reading experience.
The URL is http://yhchang.com, which takes you to the homepage with a list of their works.

Thank you,
Hibiki Mizuno
Introduction:
Rooted in the In-Between

*Kikokushijo*—the word that always ejects me as an outsider. Meaning “returnee” or one who has lived abroad in Japanese, the term splits my sense of existence whenever I return to Japan. In a small island country that prides itself on its ethnic homogeneity, once you leave the country for a time, you may never remain fully Japanese. Although I was born in Japan, I have moved back-and-forth every four years of my life between Japan and the United States. Neither feeling entirely at home here nor there, my personal philosophizing of this disoriented sense of belonging has constituted the crux of my life. This inner dilemma I confront daily then encountered a catharsis when I read Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* in Professor Tang’s class, “Representing Race in American Culture”. This passage remains the one I return to time and again:

I have the documents. Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature. One day you raise the right hand and you are American. They give you an American Pass port. The United States of America. Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph. The other one. Their signature their seals. Their own image. And you learn the executive branch the legislative
Portraying Cha’s fraught naturalization process, this passage illuminates on the procedural and bureaucratic treatment she experiences. Never before had I felt a piece of writing encapsulate my agitation whenever returning to the United States, waiting in line with my visa documents to pass the U.S. Customs and Borders Protection. This passage captures the ambivalent relationship that Cha has to belonging in the United States, of reconciling carrying a family legacy of experiencing the “repressed history of U.S. imperialism in Asia,”\(^2\) and claiming an American identity. Although I am not a naturalized U.S. citizen, a green card holder nor a carrier of such historical lineage, reading this passage reminds me of the liminal status of my own belonging in this country. After twelve years of living in the United States, I still remain an “alien” needing “documents, proof, evidence,” pondering daily how to stay after my student visa expires. Ambivalence towards a simplistic notion of belonging in one’s “home” nation-state that runs through Cha’s work, then, motivates my project to examine such representations.

In fact Cha’s reception history illuminates on the question of inclusivity in Asian American representation. Since the publication of the anthology *Writing Self, Writing Nation* in 1994 that presented readings by leading Asian American scholars such as Lisa Lowe and Elaine H. Kim, Cha’s *Dictee* (1982) has solidified its canonical status as an Asian American text. On the other hand of this drastic

\(^1\) Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 56.

ascendance of *Dictee* stands the fact that Asian American scholars largely neglected the work for the first twelve years of its publication. The experimental and poetic prose that spanned English, French, Korean and Chinese jumbled with black-and-white images and film-stills alienated scholars seeking more direct and accessible content. Perhaps due to the way in which the scholars of *Writing Self, Writing Nation* explicitly introduced *Dictee* as a radical autobiographical text, the tendency to focus on Cha’s historical, political and familial concerns persists. These readings, in turn, do not always illuminate Cha’s constitutive interest in abstraction as exemplified in *Exilée*, or the second half of *Dictee* that veers away from the first half’s explicit references to Cha’s mother and contemporary Korean history. Taking this interpretive discrepancy into account, for my reading of *Exilée*, I attempt to read her Korean immigrant female experience in a middle ground between the personal and the abstract. Beginning with this thread of Cha’s liminal status within the web of Asian American representation, I examine two other Korean/Korean American contemporary artists that situate themselves ambiguously within these identity categories to examine the ways in which they explore the themes of home and belonging.

Since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished national-origin quotas and exclusions and sparked a new wave of Asian immigrants into the U.S., the term “Asian American” has evolved into a

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3 Elaine H. Kim expresses her initial disconnect “with its seemingly incongruous juxtapositions, its references to Greek mythology, and its French grammar exercises seemed far afield from the identity [she was] after” in “Preface,” in *Writing Self, Writing Nation: Essays on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Dictée*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994), 21.
heterogeneous one that testifies to the multifarious nature of the population. The artists in my project can all loosely be categorized as Korean/Korean American but each in their own distinct ways. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who moved to San Francisco from Korea in 1964 at the age of 13, has the longest affiliation with the United States. Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries stand at the borders of Asian/Asian American as a duo consisting of Marc Voge (American) and Young-Hae Chang (Korean), who currently reside in Seoul, South Korea and display their work mainly online. Nikki S. Lee grew up in Seoul, South Korea until moving to New York City at the age of 24 and considers herself as Korean, though sometimes labeled as Korean American. Due to my own background of neither identifying as fully Japanese nor Japanese American, it seems inevitable to be attracted to artists with these transnational backgrounds. Taking into account the liminality of their identity categories, I approach the connection between their national and cultural affiliation and their work not as emblematic but rather as one of many layers adding to the possibilities of interpretation.

My eyes naturally drawn to ambiguities and fissures as opposed to cohesive subjectivities, the three artists I have chosen at first seem disparate and perhaps random. However, all three, besides having South Korean ties, take into consideration the questions of home and belonging, of which the opposite can be considered as traveling and displacement. The themes of home and belonging traditionally connote stability, security and permanence. Yet the three artists that I analyze in this project actively disrupt such associations through the variant
artistic mediums of multimedia installation (Cha), Internet art (YHCHI) and photography (Lee). In *Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha in fact reminds us of the significance of home in manifesting larger historical ruptures:

“[t]he recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.”

Indeed, all three artists provoke disorientation—whether through the experimental impulse of Cha’s installation, the fast-paced flash video artworks of YHCHI, or the quasi-ethnographic images of Lee situated in a world that blends staging and improvisation.

Although Asian American art as a canon has gradually developed over the last decade, especially as witnessed in the “Asia/America” exhibition at the Asia Society in New York City in 1994, Cha has rarely been included in such identity-based exhibitions. At the same time, contingent with the rise of multiculturalism and identity politics of the 1990s, exhibitions centered around identity categories have a tendency to be considered “outmoded.” In an essay titled, “The Last Asian American Exhibition in the Whole Entire World,” art historian Susette S.

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5 It is difficult to assess how YHCHI and Nikki S. Lee figure into such canonization due to their only recent emergence in the art world.
Min calls for innovative exhibitions that, although still rooted in identity-based categorization, “are fraught with visually disparate works, uncomfortable or unanticipated viewing situations, and/or a true reliance on the contingent nature and multiple factors that activate an exhibition space” which “highlight the potential to transgress the “boundedness” of an identity-based framework.”

Following Min’s approach, I view the three artists that I have selected as offering much more than a “sameness-in-difference” homogenous representation of home and belonging, traveling and displacement. For each of the artist’s work, I inquire, how do these transnational Korean/Korean American artists rupture, complicate and expand on representations of home and belonging, traveling and displacement? How do these representations complement, contradict or amplify one another? What implications do these artistic productions offer in considering the larger framework of navigating the intersections of Asian/Asian American representation?

Performing a close reading of each artists’ texts, in this project I seek to examine Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s film/video installation Exilée (1980), Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries’ flash video work Traveling to Utopia: A Brief History of Technology (2006) and three-part series Porto Alegre Suite (2011), and Nikki S. Lee’s photography series Projects (1997-2001). Spanning over two decades and utilizing a variety of media, these artworks offer a sliver of the dynamic artistic production propelled by Asian/Asian American contemporary artists. As they have yet to be
analyzed in conjunction to one another, I hope to open up the possibilities of examining works by artists residing at the liminality of identity categories who often remain obfuscated by prefixed frameworks of either Asian or Asian American. Reflecting on Asian/Asian American contemporary artists that visualize the complexities of borders that demarcate a sense of belonging, I revel in discovering innovative ways of conceptualizing my life long query of making sense of my and others’ liminal existence.
Chapter One:

“Over and Over”: The Incessant Search for an Unattainable Name and Home in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Exilée

Beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years; but in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’: an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words au-delà—here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither, back and forth.”

--Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture

In a brief artist statement titled “Summary of Work,” artist and writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha writes that she is “looking for the roots of the language before it is born on the tip of the tongue.” Indeed, whether in her seminal text Dictée or video art pieces, language plays a central role beyond its function as a communication tool. Using multiple languages spanning English, French, and Korean, she deconstructs words and writing to contest the possibilities of textual movement in relation to subjectivity and abstraction. Exilée (1980) is no exception. A multi-media installation, Exilée shows a TV screen fit into a larger cut out film screen. Weaving in Cha’s own voice-over narration, images and texts displayed on the TV as well as images and texts projected onto the larger film screen, the 50-minute piece brings to the forefront Cha’s deep interest in the

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9 Bhabha, 1.
question of belonging through abstraction. The piece revolves around Cha reciting text in voice-over, which I reference as the ‘main text’ for clarification, while segments from this main text occasionally appear on the TV screen and the larger film screen. As Joseph Jonghyun Jeon has noted, the occasional text projection provides an appearance resembling a book page, creating a slippage between the book and film medium on screen, causing disorientation for the audience. Not only is *Exilée* disorienting on a formal level, but also in terms of the main text, which lacks a conventional narrative structure or a consistent subject “I.” This disorientation and abstraction in both form and content prompts a question of interpretation. How do we read a text that attempts to disorient and alienate the audience, especially through abstraction? In this chapter, I read *Exilée* as an exploration of the female exile subject’s search for a singular name and home albeit one that is fraught from its conception. The piece explores various instances of liminality and the painful process with which the exile continues its futile search, contrasting with Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of the in-between as a triumphant site of resistance. The diasporic search for a singular identity and sense of belonging in the case of Cha’s exile highlights the failure of such an endeavor but also the helpless urge to repeat the process through textual movement.

Cha’s biography contextualizes her brief but vibrant artistic career that led to creating *Exilée*. Born in Pusan, Korea in 1951, Cha and her family moved to the

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11 I viewed *Exilée* (DVD) at the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive in June 2014.
United States when she was thirteen after a year of living in Hawai‘i. She studied at the University of California, Berkeley from 1969 to 1978, earning four degrees including two master of fine arts. Working as a student employee for the Pacific Film Archive especially cultivated her taste in foreign and experimental films. In 1976, she studied abroad in Paris at the Centre d’Etudes Américain du Cinéma. This led to her editing an anthology on psychoanalytic film theory by her professors, including Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, titled *Apparatus—Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings* (1980). While also pursuing her interest in film, Cha was affiliated with the Conceptual Art scene in the Bay Area in the 1970s, producing a range of performance, conceptual and video artwork. *Exilée* was in fact presented as the first major work made after her rigorous education, exhibited at the San Francisco Art Institute as well as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Just as *Dictee* became published in 1982, a stranger murdered Cha in New York City, ending her budding artistic career.

As a fascination with the experimental and avant-garde tradition runs throughout Cha’s biography and work, in analyzing *Exilée*, I draw from literary scholars Timothy Yu and Joseph Jonghyun Jeon in their mode to contextualize Cha between the experimental and avant-garde tradition and Asian American literary criticism. By doing so I hope to contribute to existing scholarly work by reading her text in a middle ground of valuing her experience as a Korean

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14 For an in-depth summary of Cha’s biography and influences, see Constance Lewallen, *The Dream of the Audience.*
immigrant female artist who draws from the personal and autobiographical while also focusing on her interest in abstracting such elements to textual movement.

Cha’s reception history provides an important context for understanding the current issues surrounding the tension between aesthetics and political form under the rubric of Asian American studies. In *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965*, Timothy Yu traces the reception of Cha’s works from the 1980s to the 1990s first as experimental writing then subsequently as Asian American writing to point out the pitfalls of perceiving the two traditions as separate or even oppositional. As part of his larger argument that both Language poetry and Asian American poetry draw from formal experimentation and racial politics instead of exclusively Language poetry from formal and Asian American poetry from the political, Yu calls for *Dictee* to be read as “a way of keeping these two paradigms in productive tension, always visible but never resolved.”15 In his reading of *Dictee*, Yu argues that Cha presents a multiplicity of “home” that is not nation-bound to “Korea,” such as spirit, memory, language, song, writing, and mother.16 He ends his reading, however, by underlining the centrality of language and writing within Cha’s exploration of these multiplicity of representations of belonging: “For Cha insists that the move through this "experimental" phase is crucial to finding a new kind of agency, one that can return again to the world of the present; only in language can we find a

16 Ibid., 127.
new kind of ‘home.’” Taking his perspective and reapplying it to *Exilée*, I read this piece as a dramatization of the exile’s desire to obtain a singular name and home, which leads to and ultimately remains within the realm of language.

While Yu focuses on historicizing the connection between the avant-garde and Asian American writing, Joseph Jonghyun Jeon incorporates the theoretical framework of objecthood to scrutinize the relation between aesthetic and racial form in *Racial Things, Racial Forms: Objecthood in Avant-Garde Asian American Poetry*. He draws a middle ground between postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon’s discussion of racial objectification and art critic Michael Fried’s idea of objecthood as something that obfuscates meaning in art. His reading of *Exilée* ultimately rests on drawing parallels between the illegibility and difficulty of the piece with the “ineligibility” of the female exile’s existence. Jeon writes:

In other words, central to the project of *Exilée* is to imagine the confusion and disorientation before the art object as a correlate reaction to and also of the exiled figure, which becomes more distant and whose objecthood remains sealed, as if one were meant increasingly to regard the *ineligible* (the exile) in the same terms that one understands the *illegible* (the word). For Jeon, the disorientation and alienation that the audience experiences through the piece mirrors the condition of the female exile—as an existence predicated on obscurity. This reading merges the aesthetic and political elements of Cha’s work, foregrounding the importance of considering her interest in abstraction as a way

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17 Ibid., 136.
18 Jeon, 31.
to convey an affect of disorientation. Combining the two scholars’ reading of Cha and their attempt to reconcile the gap between experimental/avant-garde aesthetics and Asian American writing, I argue that Cha simultaneously addresses issues of belonging, displacement and language on both a formal and content level. Indeed I draw from Yu’s concept of finding a home beyond the nation-state in language as well as Jeon’s reading of *Exilée* as figuring the unattainability and illegibility of a singular material wish to read the piece as the divided exile’s futile search to attain a singular name and home.

*Exilée* is a 50-minute film/video installation that captures a back-and-forth textual process of an exile trying to obtain a name and a home. Formally, the installation consists of a large film screen with a cut-out in the middle that shows a TV screen placed from behind. As the film screen projects images from the front and the TV screen from behind, two projections occur simultaneously from opposite directions (Fig. 1.1). Three elements ground the piece: typed text projected onto the screen, Cha’s voice narrating the text and black and white still photographic images projected onto the screen. Both the voice-over and the projected text draw from the same main text but recite different sections intermittently and rarely synchronize with it, while the photographic images serve to blur the line between the smaller TV screen and the larger film screen. The installation consists of two rounds of Cha narrating the main text with a slight variation at the end. A text version that only includes the first round of the installation is available in *Exilée / Temps Morts: Selected Works*, but this version does
not contain the black and white photographic images that are inserted into the installation. In fact without the subsuming multi-media combination of Cha’s voice-over and projected images and text, the text version in *Exilée / Temps Morts* presents the piece as a kind of poem. Although drawing from the same main text, the multi-media installation of *Exilée* and the text version should be considered as separate works as the former is audiovisual and the latter strictly textual. At the same time, comparing the two versions enables us to examine the distinct disorienting effect that the installation achieves.

Establishing the problematic condition of the exile may prove useful before further delving into the piece. Cha growing up in Hawaii before moving to San Francisco and her mother being born in Manchuria to first-generation Korean exiles, the female exile subject draws on both a personal and abstract level. On a personal level, we can read Cha’s female exile as deriving from her family lineage containing histories of displacement, exile and immigration. On an abstract level, *Exilée* explores the inherent contradiction of the female exile needing to obtain a new name and a new home once banished, yet the impossibility of such desires due to its banishment. Indeed, Edward Said’s “Reflections on Exile” echoes the unattainability of a sense of (re)belonging for the exile:

> Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place,

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19 For consistency however I will be using the punctuation and spacing displayed in the text version of *Exilée* when citing Cha’s voice-over sections.
between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.20

This Saidian permanent sense of loss marks the unattainability of a name or a home for the exile in Exilée because once exiled, the figure may never return to “its true home.” Indeed even if the exile were to hypothetically return, the place is no longer a “true home” because of the exile’s past of having been banished before.

As if emphasizing this permanent sense of loss, the opening sequence of Exilée deconstructs the title along with the process of naming to probe the multiple meanings contained within the word for female exile in French. The voice-over begins by narrating:

BEFORE NAME
NO NAME
NONE OTHER
NONE OTHER THAN GIVEN
LAST ABSENT FIRST
NAME

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Meanwhile, a word play on the “name” of the installation appears on the screen:

EXIL
EXILÉ
ILE
É
ÉE

By coupling the deconstruction of the naming process and the name of the piece, Cha underlines the inherent alienating meanings contained within the word Exilée. As Yookyoung Choi notes in her dissertation, “Globalization and Ethnic Identity in the Art of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Yong Soon Min, and Nikki S. Lee,” Exilée contains the following meanings: “‘exil’—exile, banishment; ‘exilé’—a man who is away from his home, or a state of being exiled; ‘île’—island; and ‘é,’ signifying the female gender.” Connotations such as island and banishment further establish the condition of the exile as inherently doomed due to its unattainable desire for a

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21 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Constance Lewallen, Exilée : Temps morts : selected works (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 34.
22 Ibid., 33.
23 Yookyoung Choi, “Globalization and Ethnic Identity in the Art of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Yong Soon Min, and Nikki S. Lee” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2012), 83.
new name and new home in hopes of replacing its permanent sense of loss. The specificity of the female exile’s experience also becomes pronounced through the use of the French gendered noun. This beginning of deconstructing the “name” of the piece then establishes the pattern central to this text, as movement through textual deconstruction propels the exile’s search for a name and home.

As the opening voice-over as well as the deconstruction of the “name” of the installation on screen foregrounds, *Exilée* begins and ends with a fixation on obtaining a name. After the first round of the installation ends with the voice-over reciting “over and over,” the second round returns to the opening of the piece in which stages of naming are textually explored with “before name.” However, the second round does not end with the same section but instead with “some name. any name. to a given name,” suggesting an ambiguous ending that evades the question of whether the exile was able to obtain a name. By continuously aligning the desire to obtain a singular name with liminal instances in which the exile seems to be placed in an in-between space, Cha seeks to equate obtaining a name with attaining a singular sense of belonging for the exile. As the process of naming is the first step in subject and identity formation, without a name the exile cannot exist beyond its liminal borders. In this piece, then, the desire to obtain a name and the desire to attain a singular belonging function co-dependently.

Cha highlights the exile’s unattainable desire for a singular name and a home by instantiating various moments that explore an in-between existence.
Temporally, this is most clearly done when Cha’s voice over and the projected text synchronize in a sequence exploring time difference and duration:

- ten hours twenty three minuits sixteen hours ahead of this time.
- ten hours twenty two minuits sixteen hours ahead of this time.24

Interspersing photographic images of airplane seats and clouds, Cha ties in the flight duration and time difference between Seoul and San Francisco into a single phrase to produce a temporality that is at once both ten and sixteen hours. By doing so, she highlights the strangeness of multiple present times and locations that air travel enables. She seems to suggest that the exile figure has a heightened sense of time awareness, which allows two distinct measurements of time—countdown versus time difference—to merge.

This in-betweenness of temporalities is furthered by language conflation by the insertion of the French “minuits” which means “midnight.” As the above passage is preceded by “following daylight to the end. of daylight,” the bilingual pun underscores Cha’s interest in the liminality between daylight and midnight. “Midnight” inserts another liminal concept of being in-between temporalities. Although midnight is literally the middle of the night, it also marks the border between day and night as well as yesterday and today. Existing within these very multiplicities of borders, whether of present time, duration or time difference then constitutes the condition of the exile. However, this awareness of multiple

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24 Cha and Lewallen, 37.
temporalities further isolates the exile from its desire to attain a singular name and home.

Another example of Cha presenting the liminal status of the exile is visual, through the two overlapping Xs projected on the screen. A visual sequence of one X on the center of the screen, two Xs aligned side by side, two Xs overlapping and then a return to the single X takes place throughout the piece. The Xs are drawn with a thick calligraphy-like brush, a distinctly Asian marking and occupying the center of the screen. As the first single X appears after the voice over ends the naming section previously discussed with “named,” the more direct connotation of this X is of the universal signature, particularly for official documentation as well as presence. An X can also signify as a marker of absence, negation, as well as the alphabetical “ex/x” within Exilée. Indeed, I read the singular X as a representation of the exile’s desire to have a name, a home and a cohesive sense of identity. In a later section, Cha narrates:

As a standard marking a standard marking
maintained as a marking, repeated, has been always
repeated as long as i can remember, started before,
even before my time.

traced as standard procedure for marking25

This “standard marking” may be read as the single X, which incorporates a coercive tone to this desire. In turn, the overlapping two Xs visualize the

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25 Ibid., 51.
predicament of the exile that attempts to reconcile the differences and discrepancies that co-exist within temporal and spatial realms. For example, the gradual countdown of the flight duration and time difference that closes the gap may culminate in the overlapping of the two Xs, of two temporalities merging. However as the overlapping suggests, visual markers of its past prevent the exile from attaining this impossible desire for singularity. Further when the two Xs overlap on the screen, Cha narrates, “abolition/effacement,” which implies erasure of the multiplicities of existence that the exile possesses to become a “standard marking.”

This single desire for a name and home is presented most saliently in this parenthetical text that is repeated twice in voice over and twice in text:

(repeated as an invocation

of that one thing

that only thing

the only thing and

the only place)\textsuperscript{26}

Joseph Jonghyun Jeon argues that this passage presents “the impossible wish of the exile, for the one place as a material wish.”\textsuperscript{27} Yet this section’s articulated desire for a singular place contrasts with the rest of the text, which focuses on restless linguistic movement both spatially and temporally. This suggests that the “one place” represents an ideal yet impossible singular sense of belonging. This

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Jeon, 31.
desire for cohesive singularity grounds the exiled figure, underscoring how this impossible “wish” appears as the only clear goal in an otherwise destabilizing process of obtaining a name and home.

Another indicator that suggests this single desire as a wish to obtain a home consists of the multiple instances in which Cha references the “inside,” and “room.” For example, in this section the repetition of “there,” “already,” and “inside” generate a textual vacillation of restlessness:

There. has begun. already
there. room. rooms. as is. all left as is.
from the Inside
white inside white white noise white wind
snow. shades. light wind shadow
There. has started. is on the way.
there already already past and
already again there. room. rooms.
white ringing room.
rooms. from the Inside.
wind. shadow. in the shade.28

The grammatically incorrect usage of “there” instead of “it” emphasizes distance, ambiguously referencing some point of departure for the exile that is clearly not “here.” Indeed this section indicates the exile’s desire to enter the “inside” of the

28 Cha and Lewallen, 35.
“white ringing room” yet shows no sign of actually succeeding. It further places the exile in another in-between space, in this case between the “there” of the exile’s origin of location and of the inside room, blurring the distinction of the two locations. As this section immediately follows the “before name” one, once again Cha merges the desire to obtain a name with the desire to be “inside,” to attain a home.

Further, throughout the piece Cha inserts black and white photographic images that allude to domestic interior space yet simultaneously expose their false sense of home for the exile. In fact after the first single X appears on the screen, a photograph of a white bowl on a Japanese tatami mat is displayed. At first glance Cha seems to be representing domesticity, a feeling of home and belonging. A white bowl also stands for an empty container, which triggers associations with the previously introduced spatiality of the “white ringing room.” Yet simultaneously this image of “home” is ruptured by the fact that it evokes a distinct Japanese domesticity--that of Cha and her family’s colonizer--and instead underscores the unattainability within such an unhomely home. Indeed, throughout the piece, Cha intersperses still photograph images of traditional Japanese domesticity, whether of geta, or Japanese wooden sandals, neatly lined up by an entranceway, or suggestive images of shadows reflected on a tatami mat (Fig.

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20 In fact, Yasuko Ikeuchi, the Japanese translator of Dictée, has discovered that the images for the video portion of Exilée were in fact shot in Kokubunji, Japan, in the midst of her trip to South Korea in 1979 (“Cha no Eizo Tekusuto” [Cha’s visual texts], in Ikyo no Shintai: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha wo Megutte [Exilic body: About Theresa Hak Kyung Cha], eds. Yasuko Ikeuchi and Masahiko Nishi [Kyoto: Jinbun Shoin, 2006], 258).
1.2). Although these images appear as homely, by combining them with the text iterating the unattainability of home for the exile, they reveal their precise unhomeliness in the context of Japan’s colonial history with Korea. These images then further underline the unattainability of the exile’s singular desire for a home.

Although the piece continues to underscore the unattainability of a singular name or home, it importantly suggests language as the crucial space in which the exile may potentially belong. Following the two Xs overlapping along with “effacement,” the voiceover narrates:

the one place the one thing the only thing
the only place replaced with tenses with conjugations
with numbers with chronologies
plural pasts taken place beforehand

Here a clear replacement of the singular home (“the only place”) with language (“tenses,” “conjugations”) occurs. The teleological process with references to “numbers” and “chronologies” parallels Cha’s strategy in using language procedurally to convey the exile’s restless movement towards a desire to attain a name and home. Indeed as the installation itself is heavily language-based with text subsuming the audience both visually and aurally, the emphasis on language as the mode in which the exile mobilizes towards its desire for name and home aligns with the formal mode in which the piece conveys this very idea.

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30 Cha and Lewallen, 43.
However, even this sense of home in language seems fraught with contradictions for the exile. In one of the most visually evocative moments in the piece, a white envelope with the seal propped open appears when the voice over narrates “as own, phantom definitions” in this section:

Deny.

either two. both.

either only as otherwise only as elsewhere

PRESENT ACTIVE
PRESENT PASSIVE
PRESENT ACTIVE
PRESENT PASSIVE

either both modified sentences

phrases

tenses

moment by moment modification

modified duration

sentence. phantom phrase for absence’s shadow

absence’s own. as own, phantom definitions.

destinations. 31

Slowly, the white envelope becomes layered with white powder until the envelope is no longer visible (Fig. 1.3). In the next shot the envelope is gone, revealing an

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31 Ibid., 53.
outline that looks like a triangular-shaped house. This moment echoes an earlier voice-over that utters,

Here. to have happened. unavoidably
spectre uniformly scattered uniformly lit
exact. without defining. defining all the same.\textsuperscript{32}

Indeed, the gradual layering of white powder, something that seems borderless and “without defining,” results in creating a clear outline of a home that is “defining all the same.” At the same time that the borders of this home are clearly demarcated, it is empty, a mere outline, a “phantom phrase.” An envelope can also be seen as the exact opposite of a home, suggesting a medium to carry letters, mobility and transience. If language is where the exile arrives at in its search for a singular name and home, then this linguistic “home” created by an outline of an empty envelope again seems to be anything but home-like with its emptiness and emphasis on absence. Cha suggests then that the idea of home for the exile is constructed through negative space of its non-existence.\textsuperscript{33}

In “Location and Home in Beckett, Bhabha, Fanon, and Heidegger,” J.P. Riquelme argues similarly about Samuel Beckett’s writing style.\textsuperscript{34} Analyzing Beckett’s pieces “neither,” \textit{Company, Ill Seen Ill Said} as well as \textit{Worstward Ho} and his

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Cha has created several mail-art pieces such as \textit{Audience Distant Relative} (1977). For a reading of this piece, see Mayumi Inoue, “Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s “Phantomation,” Cinematic Specters and Spectral Collectivity in \textit{Dictée} and \textit{Apparatus},” \textbf{criticism} 56, no.1 (2014): 63-88.
\item As many scholars have noted, Samuel Beckett’s writing heavily influenced Cha. For a comparative reading of Beckett and Cha, see Timothy Yu’s dissertation, “The Sociology of the Avant-Garde: Politics and Form in Language Poetry and Asian American Poetry” in which he compares Cha’s video-art work \textit{Mouth to Mouth} with Beckett’s \textit{Nat-1}.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
use of cryptic syntax, he makes the case that Beckett deploys an anti-locative style of writing which refuses to evoke “[a] style in which we feel we can locate or position ourselves within little or no strain [...] whether the locative literally exists in the grammar of the language or not; it makes us feel at home.” He concludes at the end: “From this anti-locative position, we know home when we recognize that our location is no home.” Indeed although for Cha the exile appears to find a name and home in language, this discovery is overturned by the home’s emptiness as an outline of a home and a “phantom phrase.” As the piece begins and ends in textual deconstruction and movement, it suggests a sense of entrapment within the realm of language for the exile. Ultimately then even as the exile seeks and appears to discover a belonging in language, the piece presents a “no home” defined by its non-existence.

Although this process of trying to attain a name and home proves futile from the beginning, the piece shows how the exile cannot but repeat its hopeless search. After the first time the voice over narrates the above discussed parenthetical text that establishes the exile’s singular desire for name and home, the voice over continues:

  can’t be helped. from the beginning as repeated
  as standard mark standard wound
  just one more name by chance one more given not

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36 Ibid., 564.
to be repeated again by chance. by chance there,
to be repeated again to remain as marking as wound.\textsuperscript{37}

This repetition is portrayed as involuntary yet necessary, which is further underscored by the ending of the first round, “over and over” which leads to the second round in the installation. As noted earlier, Joseph Jonghyun Jeon’s suggestion of reading the fading illegible text of the second round as mirroring the ineligibility of the exile deepens an understanding of the significance of repetition for Cha. The repetition then not only is a simple repeat of sameness but always a marker of compounded failure as the exile becomes less legible and further away from the goal of the singular name and home.

Indeed, the repetitive process is accompanied by various markers of pain and desperation. As seen above, Cha invokes pain in the repetition to become a “standard mark” through the repeated use of “wound.” “Wound” alludes to involuntary pain and a sense of dejection with the admission of “can’t be helped” as well as the permanence of “to remain.” This suggests that the singular desire to obtain a name (to become a “standard marking,” a singular X) and thus to attain a home is not only unattainable but a violent and painful process. Indeed, in the installation, Cha’s way of speech makes it difficult to decipher if she is saying “room” or “wound,” creating a conflated vocal meaning within those repeated words. The merging of “room” and “wound” alongside a repetitive process of

\textsuperscript{37} Cha and Lewallen, 51.
trying to become “a standard marking” conveys the painfulness in the exile’s futile search for a name and a home that cannot be stopped.

A sense of desperation in the exile’s search appears when the screen projects identification categories required in official travel documentation:

“NAME-NOM,” “SEX-SEXE,” “BIRTHPLACE-LIEU DE NAISSANCE,”

“BIRTHDATE-DATE DE NAISSANCE,” “WIFE/HUSBAND-EPOUSE/EPOUX,” “X X X,” “MINORS-ENFANTS MINEURS,” “X X X,”

“ISSUE DATE-DATE DE DELIVRANCE,” “EXPIRES ON-EXPIRE LE.”

These texts are accompanied by the voice over narration:

some door some night some window lit some train some city some nation some peoples

Re Named

utterly by chance by luck by hazard otherwise.

any door any night any window lit any train any city

any nation any peoples some name any name to a

given name38

The bilingual identification categories locate the exile in-between English and French. The issue date and date of expiration establish another kind of countdown for the exile figure, not of flight duration but duration of stay in a newly entered nation. This temporal countdown for duration of stay implicates the exile as always foreign. Coupled with the development from “some nation

38 Cha and Lewallen, 55.
some peoples” to “any nation any peoples,” this section expresses a desperate and transnational wandering for the exile. Further it highlights the lack of choice stuck between “some nation” and “any nation.” Again, as established at the beginning of the piece, this desire to locate a home merges with the desire to attain “some name any name.”

This painful and desperate tone in the exile’s search for a singular name and home within liminality marks a striking contrast to Homi Bhabha’s insight on triumphant resistance. In his canonical postcolonial text, *Location and Culture*, Bhabha writes, “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself.” The passage invokes a triumphant and self-determined construction of identity within ‘in-between’ spaces that the postcolonial subject may cultivate. However, Cha’s exile subject appears more abject within these liminal openings, repeating the painful process of yearning and searching for a singular name and home. *Exilée’s* affective tone in turn mirrors that of Said’s reflection on exile and represents a divided abject figure rather than a triumphant cosmopolitan postcolonial subject that thrives on liminal existence. Cha resists glamorizing the exile figure’s predicament by instantiating moments of pain and desperation; the exile in *Exilée* remains anything but successful in attaining its desire.

39 Bhabha, 2.
Compounding the desperate tone, the piece conveys a deep sense of failure in attaining a name or home at the end of the first round as well. This section introduces a kind of corporeality with references to “limb to limb” and “buried”:

Moved in towards Time. continued to disappear
little by little in parts. from limb to limb.
just to the end. and towards the end, over again
little by little, in pieces.
night fell. twice over. it snowed.
it was forgotten. a few steps away. from the room.
a few steps. two or three. arm’s length.
from the outside the windows slid.
forgotten white. a view, towards the end,
from the Inside of all that would ever be ever
Inside. buried. end to end. forgotten.
over and over

Here Cha presents a clear indication of the exile remaining outside, just “a few steps away” from the room. Again, a hopeless yet yearning desire is conveyed through “from the Inside of all that would ever be ever Inside.” Although the exile is “forgotten,” “buried” and “continued to disappear,” at the end it still manages to convey repetition through “over and over.” This hopeless yet

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40 Cha and Lewallen, 57.
incessant occupation suggests that the restless linguistic movement must continue for the exile. Although these references to failure indicate that the exile is trapped within the realm of language, language also appears to be the only available mode with which it can even begin the process of trying to reach the singular desire. The fading and illegible attempt itself to move beyond liminal borders to a singular name and belonging then constitutes the condition of the exile.

In *Exilée*, Cha draws out multiple instances of the repetitive process of border-crossing for the exile to contrast with the singular desire for a name and a home. The process of naming is equated with obtaining an identity and thus a sense of cohesive belonging, of belonging “inside” the borders “as a standard marking.” However, the exile cannot obtain a singular name or home because its existence is constituted by the in-between space of borders in time, location, absence and presence. The two overlapping Xs can be seen as a visual representation of the exile’s condition, trying to merge “plural pasts” and contradictory meanings into a singular marker of identity. Within this restless process, the exile’s desire for “the one place” is replaced with language. However, this language as home is also not singular and cohesive enough. In fact, it is a mere outline of a home and a “phantom phrase,” a “no home” that does not provide a singular sense of belonging. Thus the piece contains no triumphant ending or success, concluding the first round with “over and over” and the second with “some name. any name. to a given name,” which leaves the question of whether the exile attains a name ultimately ambiguous. Said’s insight into the
permanent sense of loss that the exile carries helps to better contextualize this obsession with singular belonging that is inherently unattainable. Although the exile may never return to having a singular name or a “true home,” it repeats the painful and unsuccessful process to reach such a state, only to remain trapped within language. As language is both the mode with which the exile mobilizes but also the one that entraps it, Cha speaks to the power of language on both ends. Indeed through *Exilée* she explores the contradictory power language holds in providing a tool of mobility and expression but simultaneously of entrapment. The exile’s condition is predicated on an inherently doomed status of desiring to overcome its permanent sense of loss. Ironically the piece suggests that the continuous repetitive process of attempting to find the unattainable singular name and home constitutes the exile’s very existence, depicting an abject figure rather than a defiant postcolonial subject. Painful as the process is, the exile cannot remain silent because it would result in stasis without tongues and language, which would mean truly having nowhere to go or no mode with which to mobilize.
Fig. 1.1. 1992.4.236. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Exilée, 1980 (detail); Super-8mm film and video installation; Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Conceptual Art Archive, Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley.

Fig. 1.2. 1992.4.235. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Exilée, 1980 (detail); Super-8mm film and video installation; Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Conceptual Art Archive, Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley.
Fig. 1.3. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Exilée, 1980 (detail); Super-8mm film and video installation; Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Conceptual Art Archive, Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley.
Chapter Two:
Distance, Homelessness, Anonymity and Insignificance:
Critiquing a Utopian Belonging in the “Virtual Home” with Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries

There is no race. There is no gender. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds.

Utopia? No. The Internet.

--“Anthem,” produced for MCI by Messner Vetere Berger McNamee Schemetterer, 1997

All paradises, all utopias are designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed in.

--Toni Morrison41

In considering another experimental text that examines questions of home and displacement in a transnational context, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCH) provide a contemporary comparison to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Based in Seoul, South Korea, YHCH is an Internet art duo that creates text-on-Flash works available online. Comprised of South Korean female Young-Hae Chang and American male Marc Voge, YHCHI have gained international acclaim through its unconventional approach to art as well as low profile persona since releasing work online in 1998. Indeed, their career launch coincided with the ascendance of the Internet, which foregrounds their interest in critiquing the medium itself. Similar to how Theresa Hak Kyung Cha creates a disorientating experience with a combination of voice over, projected text and images in *Exilée*, YHCHI play on an “aesthetic of difficulty,” displaying rapidly moving text with

rhythmical jazz or electronic music that often require multiple viewings to comprehend.⁴² They state in an interview: “we can’t and won’t help readers to ‘locate’ us [...] Distance, homelessness, anonymity and insignificance are all part of the Internet literary voice, and we welcome them,” refusing to provide further insight into their work.⁴³ In both form and content, their work focuses on the very liminality of categorization. Formally, their work can be categorized as Internet art, electronic literature and electronic poetry. Their narratives span a variety of topics from a re-adaptation of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* Part I and Part II (*Dakota*) to depicting an imaginary bombing in South Korea (*Operation Nukorea*). However, migration, travel and technology take place as their central themes within these seemingly disparate works. Many of their characters appear lost, confused or desiring to reach a place but failing. If in *Exilée*, the desire for a singular name and home is replaced by language as a “no home,” YHCHI’s narratives also contest facile definitions of belonging and home vis-à-vis technology and surveillance. By blending narratives of geographical migration with technological mobility, YHCHI draw parallels between traveling across nation-state borders and on the Internet. They formally critique romanticized notions of the Internet medium as a “virtual home,” reminding the audience that

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the Internet perpetuates existing hierarchies of racial, gender, and class inequalities instead of providing an imaginary utopian community in which identity categories dissolve in anonymity.

Although at first glance the fast-paced Flash videos of YHCHI may appear to have little in common with Cha’s experimental multimedia installations, a closer examination reveals their many similarities. Besides both Cha and YHCHI having South Korean ties, their works may be largely grouped as experimental narratives influenced by the Modernist tradition and the European avant-garde. As a multimedia performance artist of the 1970’s, Cha was exposed to conceptual art and Dadaism that trace their roots to Marcel Duchamp. YHCHI also name Duchamp as having a strong influence on their playful tone of work and pay tribute to him in the piece, *The Lovers of Beauborg*, commissioned for the Centre Pompidou. Cha revered the works of Samuel Beckett; YHCHI feature him as one of their characters in *Beckett’s Bounce*. Coincidentally, both Cha and Chang studied in France albeit in different but related fields of film theory and aesthetics respectively.

In terms of critical reception, both YHCHI and Cha similarly occupy positions that are difficult to categorize. Although YHCHI are frequently grouped

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44 Lewallen, 6.
46 Lewallen, 6.
48 Mark Tribe and Reena Jana, *New Media Art* (Köln: Taschen, 2006), 94.
with other contemporary Korean artists, the American and Korean duo stands at the very borders of Asian and Asian-American art. Indeed, Warren Liu asks:

What to do then, with a text that is published in multiple nations and languages instantaneously, and moreover, is “produced” not as a physically locatable object, but rather, a stream of data that one does not purchase and “read,” but instead accesses and “experiences”? To whom should authorship be attributed when the process of production is shared between multiple individuals?49

The very format with which YHCHI release their work as well as their configuration as a multinational duo complicate an attempt to categorize them in simple terms. Rebecca Walkowitz also speculates the difficulty of categorizing them: “it would be difficult to anthologize Chang and Voge’s works in any strict collection of Korean writing, women’s writing, or even global Anglophone writing. The works fit uneasily into categories of this sort.”50 Indeed, in their piece Cultural Identity, Nothingness and Loneliness, YHCHI denounce any intention to convey a “KOREAN CULTURAL IDENTITIY” through their works, problematizing the notion of interpreting pieces through an essentialist lens solely based on the art duo’s national affiliation.51 Simultaneously many of their pieces, such as Samsung, Cunnilingus in North Korea, and Back in the R.O.K, explicitly feature

50 Rebecca Walkowitz, “Close Reading in an Age of Global Writing,” Modern Language Quarterly 74, no.2 (June 1, 2013): 192.
Korea as their subject matter. Their multilingual narratives set in locations all over the world nonetheless make clear their agenda to transcend beyond essentialist interpretations of their work to address larger issues.

As touched upon earlier with the mention of YHCHI’s “aesthetic of difficulty,” both Cha and YHCHI may be categorized as producing inaccessible work. Although YHCHI’s narrative content that deploys colloquial language may, as Walkowitz notes, “owe more to popular and middlebrow genre fiction than to the last century’s experimental prose,” the formal demands of actually reading these fast-paced and multiple texts nonetheless provide a challenge to the audience.\(^{52}\) Indeed, there is no pause or play button for the streaming narratives on Flash, denying agency to the audience in reading speed. Though cyber studies scholars such as Lisa Nakamura note how “[s]cholars and critics write about interactivity as if it were a drug, the drug of choice for cultural elites or ‘networked subjects,’”\(^{53}\) YHCHI notoriously dismiss any interest in interactivity in their works, eliminating one of the revolutionary characteristics of the Internet and setting them apart from most other Internet artists.\(^{54}\) Young-Hae Chang notes: “In my work there is no interactivity; no graphics or graphic design; no photos; no banners; no millions-of-colors; no playful fonts; no pyrotechnics. I have a special dislike for interactivity.”\(^{55}\) Although some of their more recent

\(^{52}\) Walkowitz, 187.
\(^{54}\) Mark Tribe and Reena Jana, *New Media Art* (Köln: Taschen, 2006), 94.
\(^{55}\) Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge, “Dakota description.”
works have deviated from their minimalist style to incorporate occasional background images or colored texts, since the launch of their website in 1998 the duo have maintained a bare aesthetic of deploying the black MONACO font on a white background. This minimal yet fast-paced and disorienting viewing/reading experience constitutes YHCHI’s “aesthetic of difficulty.” Cha’s work also tends to disorient the audience both in form and in content, as seen in the first chapter with Exilée, which similarly make her work difficult to categorize and analyze. Thus both YHCHI’s and Cha’s work provide an interpretive challenge to the audience, but while Cha applies disorienting techniques both in form and content, YHCHI’s formal difficulty belies narratives that remain relatively chronological and comprehensible.

However, among these various similarities, YHCHI’s works and that of Cha differ greatly in terms of availability, tone and overarching themes. While YHCHI’s works are available to view for anyone with Internet access through their website (yhchang.com), Cha’s multimedia installation pieces like Exilée are only available for viewing at the Pacific Film Archive at UC Berkeley. In terms of tone, Exilée explores a somber and nostalgic one rooted in the experimental and avant-garde film tradition of the late seventies while YHCHI’s Flash video artworks are characteristically pop, mostly upbeat and often explicit in content. Thematically, Cha seems to be grounded in an incessant occupation with

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56 Pressman, 303.
postcolonial identity formations while YHCHI deal with chronological narratives on migration, traveling and technology in a global context.

Since YHCHI started presenting their work around 1998, just after the IMF financial crisis hit most of East Asia as well as Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, contextualizing their work within the rapid economic “miracle” that the Republic of Korea (ROK) experienced proves useful. As Charles K. Armstrong writes in *The Koreas*, the economic growth of the ROK has been historically unprecedented: “[n]o country in the world has industrialized as quickly and extensively as has the Republic of Korea. It is the first country since Japan to move from the periphery of the global economy to advanced industrial status, and did so in a single generation.”57 The duo’s attention to globalization and ROK’s rapid ascendance as a first world nation can be seen in YHCHI’s name itself. Mocking corporate culture, they brand themselves as a corporation with Young-Hae Chang’s title as C.E.O. and Marc Voge’s as C.I.O. The works *Samsung* (2000) and *Samsung Means to Come* (2000) parody Korean high-tech corporate culture by presenting over-the-top narratives that feature characters that become entranced by Samsung.58 Their interest in narratives of traveling, immigration and technology can be contextualized in the fraught history of Korea, in which the Korean War catalyzed the formation of the contemporary Korean diaspora.

Indeed, in *Ends of Empire*, Jodi H. Kim writes: “the war set off the significant,

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58 Ironically, YHCHI’s pieces including *Samsung* have been exhibited at the Samsung Gallery in Seoul, South Korea.
hitherto unprecedented, migration and scattering of Koreans internally within Korea itself and across the globe, especially to the United States.”\textsuperscript{59} Within this historical context of globalization and immigration at the forefront, YHCHI contest the potential for the Internet to be a “virtual home” to all by juxtaposing narratives of traveling online and geographically, depicting the limits that ensue.

YHCHI’s critique of utopian notions of belonging begins with the presentation of their home page, which Walkowitz calls a “portal” in which no audience feels entirely at home due to the multiple versions of each piece being available in different languages (Fig. 2.1).\textsuperscript{60} Many of their pieces have multiple versions and language options, including English, Korean, Portuguese, and Japanese. However this multilingual format is never consistent for each piece. Some pieces offer only one option with one language while others may have four or five language options in addition to a music change such as the “Tango Version” available for Samsumg. Yet out of the many language versions available, English stands out as the most widely available one, reproducing existing hierarchies within languages on their site. Indeed Walkowitz argues: “By amplifying themes of translation and nontranslation, they make languages less neutral, and in this sense they register the inequality of languages— including the inequality that functions in their own works.”\textsuperscript{61} YHCHI assert in an interview on NetTime: “We think that language, especially English, is up for grabs these days.

\textsuperscript{59} Jodi H. Kim, \textit{Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 150.
\textsuperscript{60} Walkowitz, 186.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 191.
It’s a powerful political and cultural tool for people around the world.”  

They further comment on the politics of language in an interview with Thom Swiss:

“Each one comes with a full baggage of history and culture. Language is the essence of the Internet, the real gateway to using the Internet. To write, read, chat in English on the Internet is to implicitly justify a certain history.”

Fully aware of the dominant power of English in a global context, YHCHI seek to deconstruct its dominance on the Internet by creating a space in which no one, not even English speakers, may fully grasp the scope and multiplicity of their works.

As observed in *Exilée* and even more so apparent in *Dictee*, Cha also fluidly deploys multiple languages to play with the idea of translation and multilingualism. Cha, however, grounds her interest in language as an abstract postcolonial concept, exploring its implications as the basis for domination in conforming colonized bodies into that of the colonizer. She especially explores this idea in *Dictee*, in which a graphic scene of the physical labor necessary in uttering a foreign word takes place.

While YHCHI avoid mixing multiple languages within one narrative version and tend to offer a translation whenever utilizing a linguistically specific word, Cha merges different languages into one sentence and toys with multilingual puns, such as the use of “minuit” for “minute” in *Exilée*, or deconstructs a French word to reveal English words implicit in its spelling such as in her work *Commentaire* (1980).

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63 Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge, “Distance, Homelessness, Anonymity, and Insignificance.”
64 Cha, *Dictee*, 3-5.
positions *Dictee* as oppositional to YHCHI’s use of multiple languages, categorizing it as “untranslational” work that “insist[s] on the long-standing multilingualism of US culture and to exclude monolingual readers.” However, Cha inserts French in *Exilée* and *Dictee* almost always to emphasize translation, whether through a multilingual pun, often lining up the two language versions next to each other. Granted that understanding French most definitively helps the audience deepen their appreciation of her language play, the greater aim for Cha seems to be hinged on the juxtaposition between the languages rather than the discrepancy in meaning. As such both YHCHI and Cha possess a common interest in consciously using multiple languages to illuminate on the potential different connotations as well as the existing historical hierarchies within languages.

Beginning with the multilingual structure of the website itself which reveals their interest in the politics of language, YHCHI further critique utopian notions of the Internet as an ideal “virtual home” in which anyone can become whoever they desire through their narratives on migration, travel and technology. This deconstruction of a utopian “virtual home” aligns with how Cha’s exile figure remains in a “no home” within language if we consider the process of disillusionment in both cases. While the exile yearns for a singular name and home yet fails to fulfill this desire, YHCHI’s characters become coerced into belonging to places not of their own choosing. They contrast narratives that deal

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65 Walkowitz, 185.
with geographical and “(il)legal” migration such as the three-part series *Negritude and Solitude, Immigrant as Geopoet Part I, Part II*, with references to utopian Internet mobility to deconstruct such idealized notions of identity and belonging. By doing so they highlight the inherent “homelessness” of the Internet as a medium, which instead provides a false sense of belonging while increasing surveillance. Indeed, Lisa Nakamura echoes their agenda:

> The multilayered visual culture of the Internet is anything but a space of utopian posthumanism where differences between genders, races, and nationalities are leveled out; on the contrary, it is an intensely active, productive space of visual signification where these differences are intensified, modulated, reiterated, and challenged by former objects of interactivity, whose subjectivity is expressed by their negotiations of the shifting terrain of identity, whose seismic adjustments are partly driven by their own participations within it, the result of several major cultural shifts and a digital technology industry that both compels and confounds vision.\(^{67}\)

Although here Nakamura focuses on the notion of “identity tourism” in particular to online chat communities such as LambdaMOO in which white male users create stereotypical racialized and gendered avatars such as that of Asian geishas, both YHCHI and Nakamura have a mutual interest in exploring the

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\(^{66}\) Although the term “illegal immigrant” is considered derogatory, I use the term due to the fact that these pieces explicitly do so.

\(^{67}\) Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 34.
consequences of anonymity in identity travel as well as deconstructing this utopian posthumanist conception of the Internet. Indeed, *Traveling to Utopia: A Brief History of Technology* provides a clear example of YHCHI’s intent to critique utopian notions of technology as providing a sense of universal belonging.

*Traveling to Utopia* has two language versions available, one titled “English/Korean” and the other “Francais/English.” However, while the English/Korean version provides one main narrative in English and two sub narratives in English and Korean, the French/English version only displays the first main narrative in French and English (Fig. 2.2, 2.3). This unequal translation not only underscores YHCHI’s interest in reproducing hierarchies within languages but also reveals the hierarchies within the multiple narratives. Though it is already clear how the main narrative is central since it occupies the center of the screen in the English/Korean version, by considering the French/English version this speculation becomes confirmed. Corresponding to the way in which YHCHI present and prioritize the main narrative, I will examine the work as having the main narrative with two sub narratives in English and Korean.

The main narrative establishes a parallel between the nation-state and technology providing a sense of home and belonging albeit one that is coercive. Most aligning with the title *Traveling to Utopia: A Brief History of Technology*, the

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narrative follows a young woman’s humorous journey from her “home” country to studying abroad and returning, focusing on the different technologies she encounters through this travel. Several forms of technology, including a computer, typewriter and e-mail, function in this narrative as instigators of a new plot twist. This pattern culminates into the woman discovering that she has a “SAMSUNG Z-3000” digital GPS chip implanted in her abdomen, which limits her from accessing spaces with metal detectors such as airports. The narrative closes on the woman’s newfound appreciation for airport hotels to gain a sense of mobility: “WHERE THE ATMOSPHERE IS EXOTIC BUT REASSURING/IN THE MIDST OF WHICH I FEEL LIKE I’VE GONE/TO A FAR-OFF PLACE/THAT’S BOTH EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE.”

YHCHI draw a parallel between nation-state and technology by depicting technology as an extension of national conceptions of surveillance through monitoring the female body. At the beginning of the narrative, the woman’s fascination with the new computer brought into her house prompts the disappearance of her father:

ALTHOUGH MY FATHER, A CIVIL SERVANT, FORBIDS IT,/ I SNEAK INTO THE ROOM/ WHERE, DAY AND NIGHT, THE COMPUTER HUMS, TO STARE AT THE MONITOR/ WITH ITS GREEN CHARACTERS ON A BLACK BACKGROUND. ONE DAY,

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69 To best reproduce the MONACO font of the screen, I capitalize all the letters that I have transcribed from the flash videos; Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge, Traveling to Utopia: A Brief History of Technology, 2002, http://www.yhchang.com/TRAVELING_TO_UTOPIA.html (accessed January 8, 2015).
MY FATHER LEAVES FOR THE MINISTRY/ AND NEVER COMES HOME.

The explicit reference to her father working for the ministry as a civil servant foregrounds the connection between nation-state and technology, suggesting technology’s infiltration into the home as prompting his disappearance. It is notable that the piece itself mirrors the description of the computer screen, with the two sub narratives being displayed with green text on a black background.

Once the woman studies abroad, she is repeatedly requested to “SEND FAXES BACK HOME” and scolded by a distant relative who calls her when she fails to do so. As “A FELLOW COUNTRYMAN” mysteriously appears where she is studying abroad to gift her a laptop from “OUR LITTLE COMMUNITY,” she is encouraged to send e-mails. Indeed every opportunity of technological advancement that is provided to her demands increased communication, attention and response, depicting not only the excitement that comes along with new technologies but the increasing interconnectivity it produces and requires.

The narrative depicts the gradual process of technology’s infiltration into the woman’s life, beginning with the computer appearing in her home and culminating into the GPS chip invading her body. Indeed, Warren Liu argues that she ultimately loses her subjectivity and becomes a technological object:

The narrator is thus born not simply as a subject whose very constitution appears authored by technology--the narrator is, quite literally, technology’s “object”--but into a technocratic state that
offers the metaphors of “house” and “home” as a kind of technological inscription that is suggestively borderless, and ultimately impossible to refuse.\textsuperscript{70}

The GPS chip, which is not only a tracking device but also used to find one way’s home, ironically entraps her in a “home” that transcends the confines of the nation-state and is imbedded within her own body. This representation of home challenges conventional notions of belonging by showing how technology, with its promise of interconnectivity, can function as the most perverse and coercive mode of “home” surpassing the boundaries of the nation-state as a physically embodied space. The woman’s body then simultaneously becomes a “home” and an entrapment, a “home” that does not allow her to belong nor leave.

Further, the sense of belonging that the woman experiences at the end of the piece in airport hotels that feel like “EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE” conveys a contradictory one. The GPS chip functioning as a monitoring device rather than one that helps find one’s way home, the woman feels entrapped within her own body as a coercive home. Ironically then, the GPS chip as “home” shifts to invasion, the opposite of belonging. However, not being able to resist the desire to travel, she finds comfort in the closest location to border-crossing--airport hotels. The liminal space of airport hotels, a temporary home specifically created for people waiting to leave for the next destination, serves as an ironic representation of the closest location the woman can reach towards the airport—

\textsuperscript{70} Liu, 12.
the constructed entry and exit point within the nation-state. The ending suggests that she continues to wait by the contours of these borders, never actually attaining mobility. The piece then represents the most coercive and invasive definition of “home” possible—remaining trapped within one’s body, which prompts her to “escape” to the liminal space of airport hotels.

The piece further depicts the gendered female body as technologically malleable and more susceptible to surveillance. Although the main narrative does not specify the country in which it takes place, the setting of the first sub-narrative as Seoul, the common reference in both pieces of an “interior ministry” and the second sub-narrative presented in Korean all suggest that this unspecified home nation is South Korea and the woman South Korean. If the GPS chip does in fact turn the woman into a technological object as Liu argues, the question of female labor in digital production surfaces. As Lisa Nakamura notes, the linkage between labor by women of color producing technologically “liberating” products for the masses cannot be ignored: “technoscience is, indeed, an integrated circuit, one that both separates and connects laborers and users, and while both genders benefit from cheap computers, it is the flexible labor of women of color, either outsourced or insourced, that made and continue to make this possible.”

Although the woman does not explicitly serve as the producer of technology in this narrative, this analogy provides a framework to understand the irony of the producer on a structural level becoming the product of technology. If the piece

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depicts a punishment for a lack of interest in technological interconnectivity by engraining technology into the female body, it then exhibits the female body as the very site that becomes most affected by this “brief history of technology.” It produces a “home” that prohibits her from mobility, a belonging that does not allow travel but remains an entrapment within her own body. Instead of a romanticized notion of home and belonging, YHCHI present a technological home as entrapment that is even more coercive than the boundaries of the nation-state, a kind of bodily prison that is exactly the opposite of home.

The first sub-narrative in English complements the main narrative by presenting a similar story on access and travel yet not incorporating technology. It follows a man being asked for identification on the Seoul subway, which prompts him to compare it to his experience of being racially profiled and asked for identification in Paris. Compared to the first person narrative of the main one, this sub-narrative deploys the second person “you” to amplify the various interpellations and interrogations that the man recounts. The audience learns that the “you” is an Asian man with an English passport:

THE POLICEMAN IN FRONT OF YOU DOESN’T READ ENGLISH, YET PORES OVER WHAT HE PRESUMED WOULD BE A NATIONAL I.D. CARD., REAL OR FAKE. [Seoul]
YOU WERE AWARE OF THE HIERARCHY/ IN THE DÉLIT DE FACIÉS:/ ARAB, AFRICAN, SWARTHY, ASIAN./ BEING LAST AND LEAST IMPORTANT. [Paris]72

The “BEING LAST AND LEAST IMPORTANT” points to his Asian position in the French racial profiling hierarchy as the bottom of the tier. Another indicator that he is Asian stems from this passage lamenting his interrogation in the Seoul subway: “EVEN THOUGH FOR THE FIRST TIME IN YOUR LIFE/ YOU’RE ALL OF THE SAME COLOR.” Further, he hints at vaguely understanding Korean while the Korean police officer talks to him: “IN A LANGUAGE THAT IS FOREIGN TO YOU,/ BUT THAT YOU UNDERSTAND ONLY TOO WELL.” The narrative then reveals a presumed Asian man with an English passport, perhaps a diasporic figure, supposedly able to “pass” in South Korea as a native but who still manages to find himself being interrogated and suspected to be an outsider, a “SPY.”

Examining the main narrative and this sub-narrative together, they suggest that technology functions similarly to or even surpasses surveillance on a nation-state level as the most nefarious form of entrapment. The sub-narrative helps to emphasize the connection between nation-state, surveillance and displacement explored in the main narrative, adding another story of the failure to successfully cross borders. Indeed, the man in this narrative also struggles to find a sense of belonging, either in Paris or Seoul. He in fact only dreams of what it feels like to

72 The bracketed “Seoul” and “Paris” are my insertion to clarify the locations of each reference, not part of the flash video’s text.
not fear interrogation: “FOR ONLY THOSE WHO WILL NEVER BE STOPPED,/ WHO WOULD NEVER DREAM ABOUT BEING STOPPED,/ CAN FEEL THE WAY YOU DO IN YOUR DREAM.” In this sub-narrative case, “passing” as the “SAME COLOR” as well as the various references to racial profiling introduce the idea of appearance determining one’s mobility. Both narratives then explore displacement in a location that the characters supposedly belong to or can “pass” as belonging, further complicating any simple notion of belonging to a nation-state.

The second sub-narrative in Korean (translated by Ka Ya Lee) continues the thread of exploring the possibilities and limits of “passing” but specifically within the digital realm. Offering two speakers who praise the “Digital God” for “cutting-edge technologies” that allow them to choose his or her gender and race, the narrative underlines YHCHI’s interest in critiquing utopian notions of becoming anybody one desires online. The emphasis lies in the speakers’ ability to choose dominant social positions. The first speaker thanks the “Digital God” for allowing him to become a man, while the second for her to become a “beautiful white girl.” By repeating this short sub-narrative over and over like a chant while the other two narratives unfold, YHCHI provide a foil to the failure of belonging or “passing” within the first two. In fact, in this second sub-narrative, the anonymous digital realm is presented as a liberating medium to relieve people from their identities offline. However, the liberation consists of an assimilative one, gender-crossing to a man in the first case and racial-crossing to a white
woman in the second. This identity crossing offers a switched version of identity
tourism that Lisa Nakamura provides in *Cybertypes*, in which she explores how the
dominant white male internet user deploys identity tourism to try out minority
identities online: “Internet users who adopt other racialized personae can practice
a form of tourism by adopting a repertoire of racial cybertypes. They replicate
versions of otherness that confirm its exotic qualities and close off genuine
discourse with the pronounced minority of users who are not white and male.”

In this YHCHI narrative, they show how in turn the non-white non-male subject
is potentially coerced into identifying with the dominant social position online due
to the benefits of “passing” as an unmarked and universalized subject, while the
white male user freely travels between “exotic” minority identities as play. This
sub narrative then contrasts with the first two in which characters are unable to
transcend structures of surveillance to travel freely wherever they desire, since the
two speakers successfully “become” a man and a “beautiful white girl.” However,
by presenting an ironic celebratory chant to the “Digital God” that enables
assimilation into the white and male position, YHCHI signal the way in which
existing social hierarchies in the non-digital realm permeate into the digital,
precisely dismantling the myth that the Internet universalizes identity categories
and erases difference through anonymity.

In the three narratives, YHCHI offer obstacles to notions of belonging on
a nation-state or technological level through merging questions of technology,

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surveillance and freedom. In this second sub-narrative, they critique the utopian notion of anonymity online by showing how the social hierarchies offline manifest as desires to assimilate online for the minority subject. While the man in the first sub-narrative understands the “language” and is of the “same color,” he still finds himself interrogated as a foreign Other. The main narrative ends with the woman contemplating her strange sense of entrapment within her own body as simultaneously a “home” and an invasion by the GPS chip. Technology then resurfaces as the most physically intrusive and coercive mode of belonging, as anything but a utopia that reflects existing social hierarchies and reinforces racialized and gendered differences.

If Traveling to Utopia explores how technology extends notions of home and belonging beyond the nation-state into a coercive one, the three-part Porto Alegre Suite titled Negritude and Solitude, Immigrant as Geopoet Part I and Immigrant as Geopoet Part II considers the meaning of home and belonging itself as inherently privileged concepts.74 These pieces present a provocative question—what happens when one does not desire to belong to where s/he should? What are the costs for those who must travel and leave their home country out of inevitability? YHCHI pose geopolitical questions of home and belonging by contrasting small islands and lesser-known locations to the influential cosmopolitan cities of “PARIS, NEW YORK, AND TOKYO.” By doing so these narratives probe the hierarchies

between geographical locations and people’s desires to belong to these privileged cities. Indeed, just as YHCHI highlight the hierarchies within languages through the presentation of their website, they examine hierarchies within geopolitical locations, contesting romanticized notions of feeling at home where one is born. By contrasting the characters struggling to mobilize geographically with subtle references to the idealized mobility available on the Internet, once again YHCHI seek to critique the very medium on which they display their work.

In *Negritude and Solitude*, YHCHI create an interpellative narrative (“HEY, YOU!”) in which the narrator, who is later revealed to be a human trafficker, attempts to convince a low-wage worker (“EARNING TWO DOLLARS A DAY”) in an unspecified small island (“ROCK”) to “illegally” immigrate by sneaking into a boat container (Fig. 2.4). Emphasizing the arbitrariness with which one comes to be born in a given country with little opportunity, the narrative probes the way in which the desire to immigrate, though with immense legal and physical risks, surges. This piece serves to compare the risk of immigrating with no visa or passport and the cost and impossibility of obtaining such legal documents, ultimately doing away with any optimistic notion of traveling and belonging when one desires to leave one’s birth place.

The piece presents a series of rhetorical questions to challenge the notion of feeling at home in one’s birthplace. Here the human trafficker attempts to convince the worker to immigrate by ventriloquizing his dilemma in the first-person: “*WHY WAS I BORN? WHY WAS I BORN WHO I AM? WHY*
COULDN'T I HAVE BEEN BORN SOMEWHERE ELSE? I KNOW
THINGS ARE DIFFERENT ELSEWHERE AND I KNOW I COULD BE
DIFFERENT ELSEWHERE?" By establishing these rhetorical questions of
geopolitics and the inequalities inherent in birthplace locations, YHCHI invite the
audience to consider their own geographical locations and the innate inequalities
that are attached to them.

YHCHI’s interest in highlighting the limits and risks of immigration and
travel can be observed in the section in which the human trafficker prompts the
man to imagine the possibilities and opportunities available abroad. Indeed, the
human trafficker admits:

O.K., SO THERE’S THE LITTLE PROBLEM OF/ BUYING/
A/ PLANE TICKET. AND/ GETTING/ A/ PASSPORT./
AND/ A/ VISA./ SAY YOU’VE GOT THE PASSPORT AND
THE/ VISA--/WHAT?/ BUT/ THAT’S THE HARD PART?
O.K. WELL, WHAT EXACTLY DOES/ THAT/ ENTAIL?
The utopian and fantastical idea of simply getting away from this man’s
“MISERABLE FUCKING LIFE” is undermined by legal and monetary
complications. Finally, the human trafficker presents illegal immigration with
“NO PASSPORT,/ NO VISA” as the “EASY” “DREAM” solution to the man.
However, the ending reveals that the human trafficker will charge the man for this
option as well, exposing the financial bargain with which the man must engage in
for this “LUCKY” deal. This narrative then questions the cost of “illegal”
immigration (smuggling oneself into a shipping container) versus legal (obtaining a passport and visa).

The piece also deals with questions of race and colonialism by inserting a quote at the opening: “ONE DOES NOT HAVE TO BE BLACK TO BE A NÉGRE’--SOULEYMANE DIAGNE.” By citing a Senegalese philosophy scholar who has written on Negritude and its prominent proponent Léopold Sédar Senghor, YHCHI contextualize this immigration narrative within the discourse of African postcolonial struggles. At the same time, this specific quote poses for a kind of diasporic and global conception of “NÉGRE” that suggests a hybrid and heterogeneous definition beyond the borders of nation-state and regions. Negritude connotes a diasporic collective consciousness that is global while solitude that of individualism and self-determination. The title then contrasts the diasporic undertone of negritude with the individualism of solitude, alluding to how the narrative focuses on a single man’s seemingly independent decision process to “illegally” immigrate but contextualizing it on a global and communal scale. The narrative suggests then that these seemingly individual decisions are in fact heavily affected by the larger structural, geopolitical and transnational issues produced by the inherent hierarchies existing between nation-states.

A similar thread of questioning the privileges that come with feeling at home in one’s birthplace continues with the two other pieces which add subtle references to the Internet. In Immigrant as Geopoet Part I and Part II, which were
presented with *Negritude and Solitude* at the Mercosul Biennial in Porto Alegre, Brazil, a game-like exploration of imagining the possibilities of existing elsewhere persists. Similar to their strategy in *Traveling to Utopia*, YHCHI present optimistic notions of mobility and becoming whoever one desires, only to deconstruct such an idealization. In *Part I*, YHCHI offer a concrete image of global mobility: “THE WORLD IS A PIN CUSHION./ STICK A PIN AT A 90° ANGLE THROUGH ANY POINT ON ITS SURFACE/ AND FOLLOW IT THROUGH TO THE OPPOSITE SIDE.” Jose from Brazil is introduced as a character “LOOKING FOR AN ESCAPE ROUTE,” highlighting a similar predicament to the first character in *Negritude and Solitude* that desires to belong elsewhere. He decides to stick the pin through Porto Alegre, the location in which the piece was shown, to arrive to YHCHI’s living room in Seoul. Instead, for an unknown reason, he sticks it through Santa Victoria do Palmar, a municipality located at Brazil’s southernmost point and arrives at Jeju Island, the equivalent in South Korea. By highlighting the location where the piece was created (Seoul) and presented (Porto Alegre), YHCHI indeed create a pincushion of their own through the piece itself by prompting the audience to imagine teleporting between these places through the visual text. On a metacritical level, the audience experiences this pincushion as a metaphor for the instant mobility enabled by the Internet, traveling between different websites and communities as if teleporting. However, this initial playful tone develops into a more cynical one as the narrator examines the implications of escape:
ESCAPE--IT'S A SIMPLE IDEA./ TUNNEL YOUR WAY OUT OF YOUR PRISON--SORRY, YOUR LIFE./ RUN AWAY, FROM YOURSELF. [...] TO BECOME SOMEONE ELSE. TO DISAPPEAR INTO A HOLE,/ THEN REAPPEAR SOMEWHERE ELSE, FREE TO BE SOMEONE ELSE. YOU CAN/ FORGIVE YOURSELF FOR THINKING ABOUT IT EVERY NOW AND THEN./ WE FORGIVE YOU, JOSE, FOR WANTING TO LIVE ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE/ OF THE WORLD.

The use of “prison” implies entrapment as well as morbid living conditions while location travel is presented as always necessitating an identity travel of becoming “SOMEONE ELSE.” This paralleling of location and identity strikes a chord with how Cha considers obtaining a name and home as a co-dependent process in *Exilée*. Both pieces establish that moving to a new place necessitates forming a new identity, though YHCHI’s narratives are less concerned with obtaining a singular name and home like Cha’s exile subject. As the narrator continues to prompt Jose to “REIMAGINE YOURSELF ELSEWHERE,” a reference to becoming someone else on the Internet takes place: “GO AHEAD, YOU’RE NOT ALONE. ON THE CONTRARY./ GET ON LINE. WAIT YOUR TURN./ FOR, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, EVERYONE’S OUT TO ESCAPE THEIR PAST.” By replacing “in” with “on,” YHCHI toy with a wordplay of prepositions to suggest the Internet as the miraculous space in which
users may go online and escape into identity travel—becoming someone else, somewhere else. They seem to suggest that, in the anonymous landscape of the Internet, location traveling can never be considered without identity traveling since the thrill lies in not necessarily imagining oneself in a different location but imagining the very transformation of one’s identity through fluid traveling.

At the end of the piece, the gap between infinite mobility via the Internet and the reality of being stuck in one’s birth place is furthered to underline hierarchies within locations: “THE CURSE OF BIRTH./ THE DREAM OF ESCAPING IT./ OF RIGHTING THE INJUSTICE OF IT. [...] FORGIVING YOURSELF FOR HAVING BEEN BORN HERE AND NOT THERE.” The inequality between borders, locations and nations is projected onto the metaphor of the pincushion (the Internet) to highlight its functionality. Indeed, the piece is amusing to the audience precisely because such mobility within geographical location and national identity is not possible for many, especially those who feel that their life is a “prison.” The metaphor of Internet mobility then sharply contrasts with the gravity and immobility of one’s geographical location.

In Immigrant as Geopoet Part II, another Internet trope of the “global village” as well as the ties between artists and immigrants is introduced. The playful pun of titling the piece “GEOPOETICS” instead of “GEOPOLITICS” serves to highlight this parallel that YHCHI draw between aesthetic creators (artists) and political subjects (immigrants) both in marginalized positions of being deemed excessive or useless in society. The theme of immigration is even more explicitly
stated than in Negritude and Solitude, opening with: “IN CONTEMPORARY TERMS: IMMIGRATION, LEGAL OR ILLEGAL./ IMMIGRATION: IT MAKES THE WORLD GO ROUND./ IT GIVES ARTISTIC THEMES TO THE ART WORLD.” In Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement, Caren Kaplan positions displaced artists as both aesthetically and politically estranged in Western literary history:

Exiled for political infractions or vilified for revolutionary developments in aesthetics, the artist/statesman can be viewed as doubly estranged. The exile is homesick at home or away, and exilic displacement becomes the sign of the creative, contemplative life in the West.75

Indeed, in this piece YHCHI highlight the ironic similarities between the immigrant and the artist by creating an analogy between the immigrant’s political and the artist’s aesthetic displacement:

99.9% OF THE TIME ART IS A FAILURE IN THE EYES OF SOCIETY./ AND ARTISTS ARE LIKE ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS FROM A TINY ISLAND WHO, FULLY AWARE OF THIS VITAL STATISTIC, STILL THROW AWAY THEIR LIVES. [...] I COULD HAVE BEEN YOU AND YOU

By comparing how both the immigrant and the artist are viewed as a “FAILURE IN THE EYES OF SOCIETY,” YHCHI present an identity collapse between the “I” as an artist and that of an immigrant by claiming “I AM YOU.” Here then YHCHI perhaps offer a clue to why their themes often focus on questions of immigration and travel, evoking the undeniable kinship artists feel as failures of society for the immigrants who “STILL THROW AWAY THEIR LIVES” knowing the risks of “illegal” immigration.

At the same time, by bringing in another Internet reference of the “global village,” YHCHI seek to critique an easy conflation between an “illegal” immigrant, an artist and anybody else. In conjunction with Part I, Part II deploys a wry attitude towards an optimistic view of globalization, technology and the Internet by referencing Marshall McLuhan’s well-known concept of the “global village”:

DIDN’T SOMEONE SAY THE WORLD IS A GLOBAL VILLAGE?/ TOO LATE TO TAKE IT BACK./ THE GLOBAL VILLAGE MENTALITY. TAKE ON THE WORLD, TRAVEL TO ITS FARthest CORNERS./ VISIT THE ANTIPODES. FEEL ALIVE./ THE VILLAGE AMBITION IS A TRAGIC AMBITION. FROM MUD HUT TO MANSION./ AH, GEOPOETRY.
In his seminal text, *Understanding Media*, McLuhan argues:

After three thousand years of specialist explosion and of increasing
specialism and alienation in the technological extensions of our
bodies, our world has become compressional by dramatic reversal.

*As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. Electric speed in
bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has
heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree. It is this
implosive factor that alters the position of the Negro, the teenager,
and some other groups. They can no longer be contained, in the
political sense of limited association. They are now involved in our
lives, as we in theirs, thanks to the electric media.76*

Although McLuhan was referring to the emergence of video-related technologies
accelerating the heightened interconnectedness of human lives, YHCHI reapply
this concept of the global village to the “GEOPOETICS” of identity travel--
imaging one as someone else, somewhere else. Whereas geopolitics concerns the
power relation lying within locations, YHCHI’s “GEOPOETICS” suggests that
within identity categories. That is, drawing from their insistence upon location
travel always necessitating that of identity, “GEOPOETICS” suggests the
insertion of subjectivity and identity categories into the equation of inequality.

Here again, Nakamura’s understanding of the Internet’s marketing rhetoric as a

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Emphasis mine.
borderless traveling world helps to illuminate on YHCHI’s perspective. In referencing McLuhan’s concept of the “global village,” she maintains:

This idea that electronic communication technologies would gift users with an intimate yet cosmopolitan experience of the world figured prominently in print advertisements from the 1990s: campaigns such as IBM's 'Where Do You Want to Go Today?' and MCI's 'Anthem' print and television advertisements represented a world where exotic places and people are made immediately accessible to the 'wired' consumer. [...] If the effect of earlier media like newspapers was to produce a new sense of a national self, imaginary as it might have been, the internet was shown in these discourses to produce a sense of a self that seemingly transcended nation, race and gender.77

As if precisely mocking this “intimate yet cosmopolitan experience” utilized in marketing rhetoric, YHCHI distort the utopian connotation of the “global village” by drawing on imperialist language such as “TAKE ON THE WORLD,” and “VISIT THE ANTIPODE.” “TOO LATE TO TAKE IT BACK” further deepens the sarcastic tone in which they critique this utopian conception of transcending boundaries of identity categories. Considering that McLuhan coined the term “global village” with an optimistic view towards the possibilities of

networked societies, YHCHI’s use of the former term questions its validity. Indeed, “THE VILLAGE AMBITION IS A TRAGIC AMBITION./ FROM MUD HUT TO MANSION,” flips the equalizing narrative of the global village to underscore the benefits of globalization reserved for the privileged and wealthy living in “MANSION”(s) versus the impossibility of upward mobility for those living in “MUD HUT”(s). At the same time, the use of “MUD HUT” evokes an exaggerated primitive destination that the “‘wired’ consumer” could travel to, attesting to the exoticism implicit in the “global village” metaphor as well as in the marketing rhetoric of the Internet.

The three-part series as a whole represents the fissures that exist between physical, geographical and legal migration in opposition to the seemingly risk-free and transcendental mobility available on the Internet. By exploring the juxtaposition between geographical and digital traveling, YHCHI critique utopian notions of a universal virtual belonging on the Internet in which people can become anybody, anywhere. The desperateness with which characters in this series attempt to escape their lived realities becomes projected onto the myth of the Internet as transcending inequalities and differences. However, by ironically referencing McLuhan’s vision of the “global village” and subtly inserting puns that link geographical and digital traveling, YHCHI suggest that the Internet as a virtual home cannot exist in separation from the non-digital realm.

By examining Traveling to Utopia and the three-part series of Negritude and Solitude together, YHCHI’s focus on critiquing utopian notions of universal
belonging on the Internet and through technology emerges. Each of these narratives serves to present an overarching theme of characters not belonging—whether within their “home” nation-states or within the virtual home of the Internet. Just as YHCHI refuse to help locate readers in their pieces, they do not provide a sense of belonging for their characters either. In *Traveling to Utopia*, the main narrative and the two sub-narratives draw out how technology extends the nation-state’s function of surveillance while also referencing the idea of “passing” both in the non-digital and digital realm. Although at first glance the three narratives may not appear to align, the first sub-narrative serves as a comparison to the main narrative to draw parallels between technological and civil surveillance. The GPS tracking chip literally impregnating the woman suggests technology as having the potential to perform the most intrusive type of surveillance in which the woman’s body, her own existence, becomes the very entrapment that hinders mobility. The second sub-narrative corresponds with the first sub-narrative on the theme of “passing.” While the Asian man in the second sub-narrative ultimately fails to even “pass” when he is of “THE SAME COLOR,” the second sub-narrative features two speakers celebrating their successful “passing” as a man and a “beautiful white girl” in the digital realm. This concept of identity transformation through the Internet links to the next three series in which YHCHI contest the common metaphor of the Internet as a “global village.” By weaving metaphors of the Internet in narratives of physical, geographical and “(il)legal” migration in the three-part series, YHCHI seek to
dismantle the myth that the Internet “produces a sense of self that seemingly *transcend[ed]* nation, race and gender.”78 Rather, through producing these narratives on the Internet, YHCHI construct a cautionary “portal” site that critiques the very medium that houses their work as if to remind viewers not to get absorbed in the “global village” rhetoric.79 If Cha visualizes the exile’s impossible desire for a singular name and home, YHCHI contest the notion of a universal virtual home on the Internet. Similar to Cha’s exile figure that continues to search for her destination, YHCHI’s characters attempt to belong but fail to do so, finding themselves in coercive modes of belonging. In fact YHCHI present metacritical narratives that highlight racial, gender, and class inequalities that deconstruct a utopian and universal notion of the Internet providing a virtual home for all. Precisely because they are presented on the Internet, YHCHI’s narratives carry a weight of their own, interrogating the urge to consider this revolutionary technology as providing a universal and virtual solution of belonging to all people. In the world of YHCHI, such an idealized and equalizing notion can never be achieved. As no reader or character can feel at home in YHCHI’s works, they ultimately testify to the impossibility of fully belonging, continuing to probe the fissures of mobility between nation-states, technology and most importantly, the Internet.

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78 Nakamura, “Race and Identity in Digital Media,” 337.
79 Walkowitz, 186.
Fig. 2.1. Screenshot of Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries’s main webpage. Last accessed on April 8, 2015, at www.yhchang.com. Used with permission of the artists.

Fig. 2.2. Screenshot from Traveling to Utopia: A Brief History of Technology (Korean/English). Used with permission of the artists.
MALGRÉ
L'INTERDICTION
DE MÔN PÈRE,
UN BUREAUCRATE,

ALTHOUGH MY FATHER, A CIVIL SERVANT, FORBID ME TO,

Fig. 2.3. Screenshot from Traveling to Utopia: A Brief History of Technology (Francais/English). Used with permission of the artists.

SI
HEY, YOU! YEAH,
YOU, OVER THERE!
THAT'S RIGHT!

Fig. 2.4. Screenshot from Negritude and Solitude. Used with permission of the artists.
Chapter Three:

Next Destination: The Flexibility and Malleability of the Asian/Asian American Body in Nikki S. Lee’s *Projects*

Distance has made of us all strangers.—Carolina Hospital

If Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Exilée* visualizes the exile’s unattainable search for a singular name and home, and Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries’ flash video artworks critique utopian notions of belonging on the Internet, Nikki S. Lee’s *Projects* (1997-2001) provide a visualization similar to YHCHI’s utopian world in which opportunities for identity transformations abound. Mimicking the various groups’ appearances then taking snapshot photographs with them, Lee inserts herself into an amalgamation of projects, of which the titles, *The Punk Project, The Lesbian Project, The Yuppie Project, The Hispanic Project, The Ohio Project* and *The Schoolgirl Project* literalize. The series pivots on Lee’s ability to alter her appearance and seamlessly blend into a range of communities, giving an impression that such performances of “passing” are possible to all. Upon closer examination, however, Lee’s particular identity as an Asian/Asian American female reveals itself as the crux of this work. In this chapter I read Lee’s body in her series as a site representing the flexibility and malleability of the Asian/Asian American figure, showing how the work hinges on visual qualities particular to such a body. Lee’s *Projects* then seemingly invites the viewer into a world abundant in utopian identity travel opportunities for all, but in fact this mobility is

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predicated on her assigned identity category and its particular privileges of flexibility and malleability.

While YHCHI’s works contest a utopian notion of becoming whoever one desires through technology by depicting the permeation of existing racial, gender and class hierarchies into the realm of the Internet, Lee’s photographs provide a slightly reconfigured conception of utopian identity traveling. By performing “passing” not only in white communities as seen in The Yuppie Project (Fig. 3.1), in which she poses with upper class Wall Street brokers, but also in minority communities such as in The Hispanic Project (Fig. 3.2) or The Hip Hop Project (Fig. 3.3), Lee’s images present an Asian/Asian American figure that appears to desire assimilating into all kinds of communities regardless of their position in existing social hierarchies. As assimilation conventionally hinges on a power hierarchy between the dominant subject and the assimilative, this utopian identity traveling then suggests a removal of power hierarchies within the act of assimilation. However, Lee’s success in capturing these moments of utopian identity travel is in fact dependent on the specific flexibility and malleability of the Asian/Asian American figure within U.S. racial discourse. In this chapter, I interpret the images, which Lee self-defines as “fake documentary,”81 as a visualization of utopian identity traveling. I do so by extracting salient characteristics within her methodological and aesthetic approach which seek to merge staged and improvised elements together. Then I analyze how certain

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critics celebrate Lee’s ability to “belong” in different communities to prove the arbitrariness of identity categories. Finally I read into specific images and series to elucidate the flexibility and malleability of the Asian/Asian American body as essential to the multiple identifications that Lee prompts through her utopian identity traveling.

Lee’s biography and methodology attest to her interest in constructing “fake documentary,” which blurs the line between staged and improvised components that create this distinct seemingly utopian imagery. These images then permit her to surpass categorical identity differences to perform inconsequential and non-hierarchical identity traveling between communities.

Nikki S. Lee was born in Geochang, South Korea in 1970 as Seung-Hee Lee. She graduated the Chung-Ang College of Arts, University of Korea, in 1993 before moving to New York City to pursue fashion photography. After obtaining a degree in photography at the Fashion Institute of Technology as well as a master’s degree in photography at New York University in 1998, she worked as an assistant for fashion photographer David LaChappelle. The burgeoning of this series began as a final project for her NYU graduate program. Her preliminary interest in pursuing a career in fashion photography manifests in her keen sense of style in mimicking the appearance of the various groups for the Projects series.

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82 Nikki S. Lee, *Parts* (Ostfildern-Ruit [Germany]: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), 81.
Also initially aspiring to become an actress in South Korea, Lee’s passion for transforming herself and enacting various roles manifests explicitly in her artwork.

Lee’s idiosyncratic methodology lies at the core of creating this distinct imagery of utopian identity traveling in which she sees the communities as un-staged “locals” whom she attempts to mimic. Although self-identifying as a conceptual artist, her method for the Projects series is often compared to the anthropological ‘participant observer’ or ‘method actor’ practice.\textsuperscript{84} When she first decides on her target community, she reveals her project transparently to the group, approaching them as an artist. Spanning from a few days to a few months, Lee “commutes” to the group to spend time with them to familiarize herself with their mannerisms and lifestyle.\textsuperscript{85} She pays special attention to their shopping habits, purchasing clothing from their local favorites to better mimic the group’s style.\textsuperscript{86} After spending time with the group, she either asks a passerby or a group member to take snapshots of her within the group with an inexpensive point-and-shoot camera.\textsuperscript{87} The result yields a series of photographs that appear amateurish and not artistically composed, a raw effect that Lee maintains throughout the various projects.


\textsuperscript{85} With the exception of \textit{The Ohio Project} and \textit{The Exotic Dancer Project}, most of Lee’s target groups reside in urban cities such as New York City or San Francisco where she visits them and returns to her own place at the end of the day.


\textsuperscript{87} In initial projects such as \textit{The Punk Project}, she asked her friend Soo Hyun Ahn to accompany her and take the photographs.
However, this rawness remains highly constructed in that Lee goes through extensive self-manipulation prior to taking the photographs. For example, for *The Hip Hop Project* in which she spends time around hip-hop rap group Mobb Deep and their friends, Lee heavily tans her body by going to a tanning salon.\(^8\) For *The Exotic Dancer Project*, in which she performs as a stripper, she tones her body with a professional trainer for three months.\(^9\) Indeed, Amelia Jones writes how Lee “begins from the point of self manipulation, while using straight forward, unmanipulated analogue photographic techniques.”\(^9\) Lee’s extensive self-manipulation bolsters the idea that appearances and therefore identity categories are malleable when in fact some of the physical changes, such as the gradation of skin tones she deploys through tanning or whitening, are a characteristic of the flexible and malleable Asian/Asian American body.

Briefly examining her other works reveals that the focus on Lee herself and on her transformation within various situations runs as the common thread. While in *Projects* she portrays herself in a range of roles, from punk rocker, hip hop groupie, Korean high school girl to a lesbian, her subsequent work *Parts* confirms her core interest lying not necessarily in others but in *herself* in relation to others. In *Parts*, Lee creates photographs by staging evocative scenes with hypothetical male lovers then crops it in half to reveal only herself and a hint of

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the lover’s existence, such as a hand on her knee. Indeed in a 2000 interview with
*Harper’s Bazaar*’s A.M. Homes, she bluntly admits, “I’m interested in myself.” In
her more recent work *Layers*, Lee travels and asks different street artists to draw
portraits of her, categorizing the versions by country such as “Rome,” “Madrid,”
or “Hanoi.” She then layers the different illustrations and photographs them on a
light-box, which creates portrait images of translucent and layered representations
of Lee. Though the work lends itself to a stereotypical premise of comparing the
street artists’ perception of Lee in each country, nonetheless it highlights Lee’s
relentless interest in impressions of herself across the world. The rigorousness
with which she attends to the possibilities of experiencing an amalgamation of
communities, situations and representations of herself remain consistent
throughout her work.

Critics celebrate this interest in self as Lee’s deft “passing” abilities,
attesting to her quick ascendance in the contemporary U.S. art world.91 Cathy
Covell Wagner affirms Lee’s transformations as representing the fluid
transformation of identity as a process: “Lee is creating a new story, which shows
that, like for other passers, her ‘history is a work in progress’ beyond the identity
category predetermined by a relatively fixed social and ethnic hierarchy.”92
Jennifer Dalton also articulates a similar rhetoric of fluid identity, writing: “Her

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91 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Guggenheim and the Museum of Contemporary Photography
grace the prestigious list of institutions that house her work.
92 Cathy Covell Waegner, “Performing Postmodernist Passing: Nikki S. Lee, Tuff and Ghost Dog in
Yellowface/Blackface,” in *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History and Politics*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez
work argues that even the subcultures one is apparently born into, such as ethnic
groups, are more socially fluid and self-subscribing than conventionally
believed."93 Equating ethnicity to subcultural groups, Dalton notes how Lee
“brings a fresh and energetic spirit to what is often a deadly serious debate over
assimilation and ‘passing.’”94 These critics accept her images as affirmations of
fluid identities, on the basis that she “become”(s) part of the communities
through photographic evidence.

These celebratory tones toward Lee’s work echo a “postidentity” rhetoric
that calls for transcending discussions of identity categories. As Cherise Smith
argues, Lee’s popularity owes much to the work’s compatibility with such rhetoric
of the current cultural climate: “Nikki S. Lee’s Project series (1997-2001) was
undertaken at the turn of this century, during the backlash against “identity
politics” which had come to be regarded as an artistic mind-set that was divisive,
hackneyed and ultimately passé.”95 She identifies “postidentity” as referring to the
period after the civil rights and other liberation movements in which self-
determination governs all and “one’s particular identity [has] no bearing on one’s
success or failure.”96 The “postidentity” rhetoric goes hand-in-hand with the
“postracial,” both views dismissing identity differences and structural

94 Ibid., 47.
95 Cherise Smith, Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna
96 Ibid., 199.
inequalities. Specifically, Smith refers to the infamous 1993 Whitney Biennial, which is also known as the first “multicultural” Biennial. As Amelia Jones expands upon, this Biennial exposed the art world’s critical attitude toward generating a conversation on the relation of art and identity politics:

To this end, the Biennial simply confirmed the infiltration of radical identity politics into the art world that had begun with the rise of the feminist art movement in the late 1960s in the Los Angeles area and in New York, but had now—with the Whitney a major New York venue—to some degree become institutionalized. Finally, the critics had one major show against which to project their anxieties; the negative criticism was extensive, some of it thoughtful some just plain vitriolic.

As the show put a spotlight on many artists of color and women, it spurred a contentious dialogue among critics who felt the Biennial chose artists due to their minority identities. Within this cultural climate, Smith reads Lee’s work not so much as a testament to her individual talent in “passing” but in fact as a reliance on her very identity category:

In other words, critics who charge Lee with chameleonism accord her a certain exceptionalism that, they neglect to realize, is contingent upon her intersectional identifications and that,

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97 Ibid., 231.
99 Ibid., 123.
ironically, does not much prove postidentity discourse as much as it
retrenches the politics of identity.100

Pursuing Smith’s argument further, in this chapter I interpret Lee’s images as a
site of utopian identity traveling that promotes the performance of “passing.” By
delving into how Lee uses the markers of her Asian/Asian American female body
as the departure point of self-manipulation, I read Lee’s performance of utopian
identity traveling as contingent upon the representational flexibility and
malleability of the Asian/Asian American female body.

Always hinged upon dichotomies of foreign and domestic and Asian and
American, the Asian American figure has been configured as “an inevitably
foreign threat (the ‘bad subject’) or as an exemplary example of domestic
integration--the ‘model minority.’”101 By playfully traveling between different
groups and choosing photographs that suggest companionship rather than
tension, Lee does not depict herself as a “threat” to these communities. At the
same time, she neither reproduces the stereotype of the “model minority” by only
assimilating into white privileged communities. In fact, The Yuppie Project can be
viewed as the one and only project in which she explicitly uses a derogatory term
in referring to a group, suggesting a stronger mocking tone. This distinct
ambiguity of the Asian/Asian American body then seemingly fits into the
“postidentity” rhetoric that disregards identity difference and emphasizes self-

100 Smith, 191.
determination. However, by reinscribing how the ambiguity of the Asian/Asian American body became situated in such a middle ground precisely by responding to the existing racial hierarchy of white privilege, the fraught logic of such a rhetoric emerges. By neither representing a “threat” nor an assimilative tendency exclusively towards whiteness, Lee’s work re-inscribes Asianness/Asian Americanness as flexible and malleable, mimicking all kinds of identity categories.

Lee also does not hesitate to affirm such “postidentity” views that ultimately regard identity categories as fluid, ascribing it to her own individualism: “Changing myself is a part of my identity. That's never changed.” Here a slight contradiction surfaces between Lee affirming her own individual ability to “pass” and the critics’ universalization of her ability as a reflection of a “postidentity” society. In either case, how the flexibility and malleability not of Lee as an individual but of the Asian/Asian American body within U.S. racial discourse plays a fundamental role in the achievement and reception of her work remains un-discussed.

In this context, I read her works as dealing with the question of traveling rather than belonging in order to grapple with the ambiguity of identity categorization that Lee generates. If we shift our focus from “Does Lee fit in?” to “How does Lee travel within and between each series?” the crux of her project of deploying the trope of the Asian/Asian American body’s flexibility and malleability emerges. The irony of the project lies in that Lee’s attempt to

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masquerade and transform herself into others is always based on her marked identity as an Asian/Asian American female figure. This utopian identity travel, then, always must have an identity from which to depart that undercuts the notion of freedom to become whoever wherever one desires. Within this utopian identity traveling, the person’s identity grounds the subject within the existing social hierarchies of race, class, gender and sexuality, which always already creates a gap between those who have the privilege and access to experience “passing” and those who do not. What is distinct about Lee’s case is that this Projects series encapsulates the particular privilege of the flexibility and malleability of the Asian/Asian American figure. For example, how would the project appear if Lee were a white American woman? She would most likely stir a controversy, being accused of performing blackface in *The Hip Hop Project* and yellowface in *The Schoolgirls Project*. The position of Asian/Asian American as especially ambiguous, situated between whiteness and color, model minority and bad subjects, domestic and foreign, influences the images greatly on the performative level as well as the interpretive. Here I turn to examining formal and aesthetic qualities of Lee’s images that contextualize her images as representing utopian identity traveling than belonging.

Reading Lee’s interview comments together with her aesthetic approach reveals the ironic way in which she diverts from the documentary and street photography lineage. Although Lee explicitly mentions how her Korean cuteness allows her access and privilege to “passing,” she veers away from further
discussion of racial politics. She admits, “I’m a cute Asian girl, so guys want to help me,”\textsuperscript{103} while also stating, “I don’t think about race or nationality.”\textsuperscript{104} This statement then is ambiguously followed by: “I don’t need to bring up that issue because other people will.”\textsuperscript{105} These perplexing series of comments illuminate the irony of her re-appropriating the documentary photography aesthetic, which is largely associated with politically driven photographers. As Smith notes, the street photography aesthetic, which Lee plays on, traces its roots back to documentary photography of the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{106} American photographers such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine established this genre by photographing marginalized communities, whether those of tenement residents in New York City or child laborers in Southern Cotton Mills, to call for social change.\textsuperscript{107} By creating images of utopian identity traveling and using the realist and political aesthetic of documentary and street photography yet denying political intentions, Lee maintains her inconsequential and non-hierarchical traveling from one community to another.

Lee not only re-appropriates the documentary and street photography aesthetic but also distinguishes herself from other performance photographers by focusing on banality to emphasize her apolitical and inconsequential traveling. While Lee is often compared to other contemporary female photographers such

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{103} Nikki S. Lee, “Conversation with Nikki S. Lee.”
\bibitem{104} Ferguson, \textit{Projects}, 13.
\bibitem{105} Ibid.
\bibitem{106} Smith, 213.
\bibitem{107} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
as Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin, her distinct staging of the images in the public sphere set her apart. As Kaplan notes, “[w]hile Sherman’s photo parodies are studio-based and her solo self-portrait images (which deny the self) are staged under precisely controlled circumstances, Lee’s work (and performance) in public is under much less controlled conditions and almost always occurs in conjunction with the members of the group that she mimes.” This blend of staging and improvisation allows for Lee to obtain “boring” snapshots that avoid looking overly artistically constructed, furthering a sense of inconsequential identity traveling.

Another characteristic that reveals her interest in traveling rather than belonging to these communities lies in Lee’s deliberate avoidance of intimate and emotional images. In often being compared to Nan Goldin, whose works are most known for their evocative intimacy in capturing the Lower East Side bohemian artist scene in the 80s, Lee contests their similarities: “But it’s not about Nan Goldin’s work, you know, going from bathroom to bathroom.” Here she explains herself against the frequent question of why she does not “go deeper.” She continues:

What does it mean to go deeper? Taking pictures when you’re more emotional or sorrowful, or having sex? I just want to have really boring snapshots--people just standing in front of a camera taking pictures with a smile. If people think its boring, that’s fine. But

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108 Kaplan, American Exposures, 175.
somehow it is emotional, because I do have an attachment with those people, although I never force it. I don’t usually get really close to anyone’s personal issues, but I don’t consciously maintain a distance.¹⁰⁹

In the same interview, she also reveals that she has more private photographs with some of the groups, such as when she invited the people involved in The Punk Project for a party at her house, yet refuses to select them “because somehow they’re too personal.”¹¹⁰ This avoidance of intimacy and evocative moments connect to Lee’s larger goal of creating images of inconsequential identity traveling rather than belonging. Indeed, Amelia Jones notes that she finds Lee’s work “extremely powerful on a political level, but cold on a more emotional level.”¹¹¹ By remaining largely in the public sphere with the communities in the photographs, Lee stays true to the street photography aesthetic she draws from. Rather than depict herself at “home” with these groups, then, Lee appears much more interested in the performative elements of a group that come into play when on public display. Like the tourist who goes to all of the major tourist sights to take typical photographs, Lee strives for photogenic instances of banality over developing a close relationship to her subjects. These various comparisons often made between Lee and other artists further underscore Lee’s distinct approach.

¹⁰⁹ Vicario, “Conversation with Nikki S. Lee,” 103.
¹¹⁰ Ibid.
¹¹¹ Jones, Self/Image, 66.
that avoids intimacy and emotion, striving for identity traveling rather than belonging in these communities.\textsuperscript{112}

The lack of intimacy and emotion in Lee’s work derives from the abundance of group shots in which the various communities display awareness of the camera’s presence. In each series Lee includes a definitive “group shot” in which Lee and the group pose in a typical horizontal alignment and smile towards the camera. With the exception of The Lesbian Project, most series include multiple group shots, which create another jarring effect for the viewer seeking to categorize Lee’s work within a binary of staging and improvisation. The group shots not only remind the viewer of the awareness with which these groups posed for the camera, but also deny access to more candid images. Here, again, Lee does not focus on depth and emotion but rather on emphasizing the presence of the camera. Joan Kee’s observation may prove useful here:

Lee’s gaze, positioned at the approximate eye level of the anticipated viewer, immediately draws the viewer’s attention into the realm within the work—the specific context in which she finds her subjects, whether it be in San Francisco (The Skateboarders Project) or various sightseeing locales around New York City (The Tourist Project). At the same time, however, the frontal gaze induces

\textsuperscript{112} Smith also writes on Lee as separate from many conceptual artists that use photographs to document their performances, such as Adrian Piper, namely for her emphasis on the end result over the performance as well as her acceptance in the mainstream art world: “[T]hat the artist is an art-world darling who received institutional funding to produce The Hip Hop Project and whose work, in ten short years of being exhibited, has been collected and shown at important venues, [...] suggests little or no critical distance from the gallery-museum complex” (216).
the eye to consider Lee as part of the material, physical world of the viewer. The barrier between the world of the viewer and that within the photograph gradually dissolves, causing the viewer to conflate the image of the artist with the artist in the flesh.\textsuperscript{113}

Here one may view the breaking of the fourth wall occurring simultaneously as the barrier between the viewer and the image dissolves, which appears contradictory. As the group actively poses for the camera and thus for the future viewer, the viewer recognizes the constructed nature of the image while also conflating his/her own world with that of the image. Indeed Lee lures the viewer into the world within the photograph only to remind them of the simulation. In Jean Baudrillard’s words, Lee presents these images as “signs of the real for the real itself,” toying with the binary between the staged and improvised but ultimately reinstating these images as constituting utopian identity travel rather than belonging to these communities.\textsuperscript{114}

Lee’s insistence on posing reveals her deep interest in representing multiple versions of herself in relation to others. In \textit{Camera Lucida}, Roland Barthes writes, “Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing,’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image.”\textsuperscript{115} Barthes here explores a doubling effect that posing in front of a camera induces onto the subject. In


Lee’s case, she probes into how this doubling effect occurs for the group as well as for herself in relation to the group posing. As she proclaims the importance of herself in her works, Lee seems interested in these groups mainly in relation to how they affect her own doubling through posing with them. Barthes’ insight on the doubling that occurs upon posing is insightful in the case of Lee’s images precisely because she is already self-manipulating “to make another body” for herself. As if creating an extended visual metaphor of this process through the self-manipulation prior to taking the photographs, Lee poses, creating multiple bodies and signifiers both figuratively and literally.

An additional characteristic that enhances the aesthetic of traveling is the time-stamps included in the corner of each image. These dates not only legitimize Lee’s presence with the communities but also personalize the images, taking the viewer on a visible time travel. For example, one may infer from looking at the images from The Yuppie Project that Lee spent approximately two months working on the series which span dates from November 1st, 1998 to the end of December of that year. Through this indication, the viewer experiences multiple senses of the time spent within each group, the time in-between series as well as the overall years that Lee spent on Projects from 1997-2001. The time-stamps also encourage viewers to not focus on one image or series but to view the series as a whole. In fact Lee notes in an interview: “When I show the work, I prefer putting a lot of photographs together. If I show just one project or one photograph, people probably don’t get what I’m doing. You can’t have one without the others—
they’re all connected.” Her emphasis on the interconnectivity of the series further affirms her interest in traveling between rather than belonging to the communities, as the time-stamps mark a kind of temporary ephemerality that archives these travels as an event that occurred in the past instead of promoting a sense of continuity and permanence of belonging.

Besides the group shot and time-stamp format, the single most important element that ties the series together is Nikki S. Lee’s omnipresence in every photograph, which serves as the entry point into this utopian identity traveling for the viewer. Lee appears the most aware of the camera, directly gazing at the apparatus in the majority of the images. This entry point that she provides to the viewer through her own body often gets read as a “tour guide” function. Indeed Hyun Joo Lee notes the connecting function that Lee achieves: "In Lee's work, the Asian figure is depicted as a sign of crossing the boundaries between the audience's physical world and the photographic images." Echoing Kee’s earlier statement, Hyun Joo Lee argues that Lee’s body becomes the bridge that leads the viewer inside the photographic image. Indeed, without Lee’s constant presence within each photograph, the project would turn into a bizarre quasi-ethnographic series of images with no focal point. Lee’s body then functions as a nexus and bridge to lead the audience into the image as well as across the series.

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Seeing Lee’s body as both the connector that invites the viewer into the image as well as the malleable identity traveler elucidate the multiple identity categories that she evokes. In continuing with the metaphor of the “tour guide,” *The Tourist Project* reads as emblematic of the larger *Projects* and provides a key to reading Lee’s body as representative of the flexible and malleable Asian/Asian American figure. In this particular series, Lee’s body prompts the identification categories of Asian/Asian American, Asian/Asian American/white, as well as foreign/domestic, residing ambiguously between these categories. By mixing images of herself alone and with a group of white women presumably from the Midwest, Lee toys with how the viewer contextualizes her figure in relation to others. Further, as her identity as a Korean artist working in the United States most closely approximates the tourist that she attempts to mimic out of all the different series, *The Tourist Project* epitomizes a reading of the larger project as one of utopian identity traveling rather than belonging in communities.

In the first image of the series, Lee appears as an Asian or Asian American tourist, standing next to a tourist viewfinder at the rooftop of the Empire State building (Fig. 3.4). She stands confidently with her right hand on her hip, staring directly at the camera. Wearing a pair of sunglasses, a white T-shirt with a “New York” logo, a fanny pack and draping a camera on her neck, she masquerades as a tourist. However, the question of whether she is Asian or Asian American lingers ambiguously since she shows no explicit indicator of being American, which serves as a metaphor for Lee herself who gets categorized between Korean and
Korean American. This standalone photograph contrasts with another image in the series in which she poses in a group shot with three white women in front of the Rockefeller Center’s iconic arena (Fig. 3.5). All four, including Lee, wear t-shirts, high-waisted shorts, white sneakers and white socks. Compared with the first photograph in which Lee poses alone, here her Asian/Asian American body can appear as either highlighted or subdued depending on the viewer. On one hand, the similarity in fashion style between the four women makes Lee appear to belong with them. On the other, the fact that she is the only non-white figure in the group stands out even more with the grouping of white women. The woman on the far right wears a shirt that reads “South Dakota,” which helps the viewer to infer that the group is traveling from the Midwest. This subtle clue then opens up another possibility of reading Lee as a Midwestern Asian American among white women. These multiplicities of identity categories that Lee’s body evokes signify in tension with one another, as she does not provide a clear indicator that allows a single reading of her figure.

The Tourist Project not only elicits multiple readings of Lee’s identity depending on her grouping with other people but also evokes the ironic question of whether this series serves as a visual metaphor for Lee’s overall project as a utopian identity travel. I read this image (Fig. 3.6) as particularly ironic since it prompts a question of how Lee’s Projects as a whole is any different than the tourist’s attempt to identify with a symbol by posing with it. The image then

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119 According to her gallery representative, Nikki Lee does not have a U.S. citizenship, though often categorized as Korean American.
epitomizes Lee’s effort to produce a sense of utopian traveling by deploying her referent identity as a Korean immigrant at the forefront. That is, while in the other projects (with the exception of The Schoolgirl Project) she goes through extensive self-manipulation to her physical appearance to perform “passing,” this particular series relies heavily on the viewer reading Lee’s body as that of an already foreign Korean immigrant. In the third image of the series, Lee stands in front of the Statue of Liberty, mimicking its pose as a national icon by raising her right arm in a fist and placing her left by her hip. The photograph frames both Lee and the Statue in the background in such a way that together they configure the whole body. That is, the Statue’s head and Lee’s lower body are cut off of the top and bottom of the frame respectively. The merging of the two bodies prompts a multiplicity of contradictory readings of Lee’s presence, of whether she is attempting to assimilate by embodying the symbol of freedom or mocking such an idealized unattainable value. Louis Kaplan reads this image as also having two sides but those of her “affirmation of the liberty and the self-determination that allow her to try out so many different roles,” as well as embodying “the insecurity and the fear of the immigrant who has not yet been fully included or politically enfranchised.” However, her triumphant smile and confident posture in the image as well as in the series do not align with the second half of Kaplan’s reading. As the title Projects suggests, the ambiguity of Lee’s body invites multiple readings that are more of the viewer’s projections of the type of body she represents.

120 Kaplan, American Exposures, 188.
in these American communities than providing definitive answers to the question of where she appears to belong.\textsuperscript{121} After one views \textit{The Tourist Project}, the inevitable metacritical question emerges—is Lee not also simply touring around and posing with different communities? Her disinterest in spending extensive time with them and avoiding images of intimacy further support this notion of Lee as the utopian identity traveler, hopping from one community to the next once the photographs are taken to “make evidence.”\textsuperscript{122}

While \textit{The Tourist Project} serves as a prime example of the multiplicity of identifications that Lee’s body may prompt, one of the most controversial images in the entire \textit{Projects} also confirms the particularities of Lee’s identity as crucial to the success of the images. In \textit{The Ohio Project}, Lee bleaches her hair blonde and wears denim overalls and rugged tube tops to take photographs with white Americans living in trailer parks and mobile homes. \textit{The Ohio Project} (7) depicts Lee sitting on the arm of an armchair next to a white man holding a gun across his knees. Lee stares directly at the camera in a monotone expression while the man’s gaze intently remains on the gunpoint (Fig. 3.7). A Confederate Flag with the caption “I AIN’T COMING DOWN” hangs on the wall on their right, constructing an ironic image that cannot escape the question of inclusion and exclusion. Although the viewer does not have access to the specific context in which this was shot and how much time Lee spent with this man, the image brings up a question of whether such a composition would have been possible if

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 189.
\textsuperscript{122} Vicario, “Conversation with Nikki S. Lee,” 100, referencing John Berger.
Lee were black. As Kaplan describes the man as “someone with all the earmarks of a card-carrying member of the KKK,” the traveling taking place in this series cannot fulfill an entirely utopian purpose. The ability to capture such an image serves to highlight the privilege that Lee embodies through her ambiguous social position as an Asian/Asian American female who stands in a liminal position between whiteness and blackness, which grants her access into what appears to be this man’s home to take a picture with him.

Finally, the discrepancy between Lee’s body as infinitely malleable and flexible, performing inconsequential identity traveling, and using the existing environment filled with social hierarchies of identity create another layer of fissure within her work. By equalizing all the projects, she further distorts any notion of existing social hierarchies of identity. That is, by lining up *The Hispanic Project* alongside *The Exotic Dancer Project* or *The Punk Project* and asking the viewer to see the Projects as a whole, Lee collapses distinctions between race, profession and subcultures as if they exist upon similar terrains of histories, cultures and communities. In many ways, *The Schoolgirl Project* (Fig. 3.8) appears to be an anomaly to the rest of the series but provides a key framework to witness Lee’s equalizing of projects. It is the only series shot in South Korea, Lee’s home country. However, as Kaplan notes, “[o]ne might say the Project shows us that ‘there is no place like home.’ This is the only Project in which Lee’s ethnic identity and nationality are congruent with the community at large. But one has a sense

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124 Smith, 199.
that after all the other roles Lee has tried on in the United States, this one is not
going to be somehow outside the performance of community.”

Lee confirms Kaplan’s insight in an interview:

> When I did The Schoolgirls Project in Korea, it didn’t seem any
different from the other projects. I didn’t go to a uniformed girls’
high school in my youth—I went to a co-ed school. I never wore a
uniform in my life. [...] The main thing is that for the first time it
was easy to work using my own language, but actually, it was not as
easy as I thought. Even though I was speaking my own language
and it was my own culture, I had to explain more because Korean
people don’t expose themselves to the camera very readily.

Expressing the unexpected struggles of making the teenage girls comfortable in
front of the camera, Lee does not distinguish this project from the others. If
anything, Lee’s attitude towards *The Schoolgirls Project* reveals how the projects are
no less challenging even if Lee does not experience a drastic transformation in
physical appearance.

By equalizing the transformation she experiences in *The Schoolgirl Project*
with that of other projects, Lee appears to do away with any implications of
herself as an Asian/Asian American female traveling between disparate markers
of social identity. In fact, this equalizing occurs because Lee primarily treats these
communities as kinds of stage props for her utopian identity traveling. Indeed,


\[126\] Vicario, “Conversation with Nikki S. Lee,” 105.
Kaplan argues: “...this disclosure does not change the nature of the cumulative viewing experience of the Projects, which makes these stage extras often appear as props that serve Lee’s self-staging or, better phrased, that serve her own self-staging in the guise and disguise of these others.”127 This community as prop once again grounds Lee’s images as traveling rather than conveying a sense of belonging—in the end, it seems, she is interested not in understanding her material relationship to these various communities but rather in her physical and situational transformation with a series of identity props.

In Projects, Lee flaunts the capacity with which she can “pass” within disparate communities, figuring ambiguously between not only whiteness and color but also between Asian and Asian American and foreign and domestic. However, the ways in which she describes her work as well as the critics appraise it denote a lack of awareness towards the essentiality of the flexibility and malleability of the Asian/Asian American figure for the success of this project. In this chapter, I have tried to highlight how Lee’s self-described “fake documentary” images manifest a site of utopian identity traveling in which opportunities for identity transformation abound. Many of her formal and aesthetic qualities, such as the group shot style or the re-appropriation of the documentary and street photography genres, emphasize ephemeral, inconsequential and apolitical traveling through and between the communities rather than a sense of belonging. This utopian identity traveling suggests that

127 Kaplan, American Exposures, 173.
differences are malleable, when in fact the very achievement and success of this project depends on the flexibility and malleability of the Asian/Asian American body in U.S. racial discourse. In fact, her identity travel within Asian, Latino, black and white communities seems to visually confirm David Palumbo-Liu’s notion that “the nature of Asian American social subjectivity now vacillates between whiteness and color.”

Lee’s utopian identity traveling premised on ephemerality stands in stark contrast to Cha’s exile figure’s unattainable search for a singular name and home--she targets a community, travels within it, then moves to the next without a sense of a permanent loss like the exile. Although at first glance it appears similar to the utopian notion of belonging that YHCHI precisely critiques, her visual identity traveling does not hinge on assimilation towards whiteness as witnessed in the previously discussed “Digital God” piece. Instead, Lee equalizes the different kinds of communities all as stage props to capture her touristic images. Nikki S. Lee’s Projects visualizes the distinct and ambiguous privileges that the flexible and malleable Asian/Asian American body signifies, always wavering between the dichotomies of Asian/Asian American, whiteness/color, foreign/domestic and bad subject/model minority. Her traveling does not long for a sense of home and belonging within these divergent communities-- rather, she promptly leaves for the next destination as soon as she

captures the photogenic moments. She continues her inconsequential identity traveling, only leaving ephemeral photographic evidence as marking.
Fig. 3.1. Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppies Project* (17), 1998, Fujiflex print, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co.

Fig. 3.2. Nikki S. Lee, *The Hip Hop Project* (1), 2001, Fujiflex print, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co.
Fig. 3.3. *The Hispanic Project* (18), 1998, Fujiflex print, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co.

Fig. 3.4. *The Tourist Project* (10), 1997, Fujiflex print, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co.
Fig. 3.5. *The Tourist Project* (9), 1997, Fujiflex print, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co.

Fig. 3.6. *The Tourist Project* (13), 1997, Fujiflex print, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co.
Fig. 3.7. *The Ohio Project* (7), 1999, Fujiflex print, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co.

Fig. 3.8. *The Schoolgirl Project* (13), 2000, Fujiflex print, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co.
Conclusion:

Traveling to Utopia? : A Brief History of Desires

In closing, I hope to reflect on the vibrant visual travels through which these artists led me, each unfolding their own representations pertaining to home and belonging, traveling and displacement. By examining the treatment of these themes through Cha, YHCHI and Lee’s artistic productions, I have come to recognize the differences established between these concepts as more tenuous, malleable, and contradictory than when I embarked on this project.

For example, language serves as the key medium in Cha’s various works, but in Exilée she explores the ambivalent relationship the exile has with its mode for mobility—as language replaces the desire for a singular name and home and induces the exile to repeat “over and over” again, language simultaneously enables and entraps the exile.

A resonant dilemma ensues in YHCHI’s Traveling to Utopia, in which the woman in the main narrative at first finds technological development captivating yet quickly discovers that increased connectivity produces a forceful demand to always be available for technology. Ultimately she finds herself entrapped in her own body by the Samsung GPS chip, unable to pass metal detectors due to the machine registering her as a technological object. As GPS tracking chips usually navigate one’s way home, her body’s metamorphosis into a prison through this device develops into a strikingly ironic tale. This narrative portrays the precariousness of belonging quickly mutating into coercive displacement.
YHCHI’s subtle references to the utopian rhetoric of the Internet in their narratives on geographical migration, then, disclose a metacritical mode in which they critique the very medium that “houses” their existence.

Grappling with YHCHI’s flash video artworks unexpectedly led to the decision to include Nikki S. Lee as my final artist. While Cha’s *Exilée* offers poetic insight into the liminal tension and painful repetition that the female exile experiences, I also felt compelled by Lee’s overt representations of “passing.” Just as I have argued how the flexibility and malleability of the Asian/Asian American body in U.S. racial discourse allows for the multiple ways in which to read her identity traveling, the more one attempts to enter or exit her seemingly utopian photographs, the more one feels disoriented in the multiplicity of identifications she offers. Unlike Cha’s exile, who restlessly yearns for a singular name and home, and the characters within YHCHI’s narratives, who wind up trapped in coercive modes of belonging, Lee appears as the confident “tourist” figure who travels between communities with full agency and a sense of belonging within her constant mobility. Her equalization of identity categories strikes a chord with the utopian notion of belonging on the Internet that YHCHI criticize, which prompted me to grapple with the politics of “passing” and the privilege that comes from the distinct ambiguity of the Asian/Asian American body.

My project then offers a trajectory of tracing desires and their fruition—of Cha’s displaced and abject exile figure desiring to obtain a singular belonging, of YHCHI’s disoriented characters struggling to freely mobilize or belong, and of
Lee’s vision to portray herself in a utopian identity travel, deploying the flexibility and malleability of the Asian/Asian American figure to her full advantage. In simple terms, while Cha’s exile figure echoes Said’s wistful yearning for an unattainable sense of belonging, Lee offers a more triumphant agency in enacting these utopian identity travels, however predicated on her privilege. By bringing into conversation these seemingly divergent artists together, I hope to have offered some perspective on the inexhaustible possibilities of connecting various representations of locality and belonging. The contours and borders between home and belonging, traveling and displacement always remain in tension to one another. Visuality and artistic production capture this tension residing within and among these categories, in which a unitary meaning of home may displace subjects and traveling may, in fact, provide a new sense of belonging. As Luther Vandross sings, “a house is not a home,” the issue of belonging refuses to reside within the strictly legible, tangible and quantifiable modes of understanding one’s “home.” Rather, home and belonging, traveling and displacement together dwell ambiguously, perhaps awaiting the next artist to visualize their interdependency.
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