

The point at issue here is precisely how to accomplish the task of translating myself from inner language into the language of outward expressedness and of weaving all of myself totally into the unitary plastic and pictorial fabric of life and as a human being among other human beings, as a hero among other heroes.¹

I.

I don't cook very much. It's a source of pride, actually. I like to think that it suggests I'm way too busy to cook. I generally eat what is considered to be "junk food" and am known as a connoisseur of french fries. I like to pretend that I'm too busy to be bothered with cooking or eating healthy. Plus, it adds to the romantic notion of being a graduate student. So, when one evening one of my classmates called me and asked, "Judy, how do I make stir-fry?" well, it was hard to dismiss it by telling myself that he made that call because I am a good cook.

II.

Your college friends are your closest friends. You live through your formative years with them – experiencing many of your firsts together, fighting and loving each other, they become your closest of friends. They know you like no others will know you. One of my best friends from college is from Antigua. His name is Fitzgerald. We call him Jerry. He is black, and I've noticed that when my white friends introduce Jerry to their family or other friends, they always add that Fitzgerald is from Antigua.

He's more than just another African-American. I grew up in the Southeast where there are not many Asians. Other than Jerry and a couple of Korean-Americans, the rest of my friends are white. One of my other best friends from college, Wendy, and Jerry were having dinner one night. They were talking about a mutual friend who had gone to Germany for a job, ended up falling in love with a German man, and married him. The couple returned to the United States recently. Unfortunately, the German husband is having a difficult time finding employment although he is a skilled computer programmer. Money is getting tight. Jerry vented his frustration by rhetorically asking Wendy, "Why doesn't he just get a job? He's an immigrant – they need money. He should get a job where he can for the time being." Wendy replied, "Jerry, but he's German."

III.

Sharon, a fourth generation Japanese-American woman, used to work in a small firm where she and an African-American receptionist were the only people of color in the office. It was a small operation – the kind of place where everyone is on first name basis, and people offer to bring up a cup of coffee for you when they are running downstairs to the local deli. One day the receptionist transferred a call to Sharon. When Sharon picked up the phone, she realized that it was simply a wrong number. But the caller on the other end of the line had a thick Chinese accent.

IV.

¹Mikhail Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" in *Art and Answerability*.

During my senior year in college, I decided that I would be able to manage my time better if I had more “structure.” Instead of practicing some self-discipline, I got a part-time job at Chapel Hill’s only gourmet grocery store, The Southern Season. The running joke among the largely gay staff at the store was that all of the conservative professors and wealthy retired shoppers there did not know that the store is owned and managed by gay men – if they knew, they would probably stop patronizing the store. One afternoon, I was minding one of the check-out stations when an elderly Caucasian couple came up with a couple of over-priced dessert items. The man was busy exchanging pleasantries with another customer, but the lady, apparently in a jolly mood, said to me, “Oh, dear, did you just run over here from Panda to help us?” Needless to say, I was completely confused. I asked, “I’m sorry?” and she repeated herself. When I still did not understand – or could not believe – what she was referring to, she finally said, “Oh, we just had lunch at the Panda Chinese restaurant, and I asked you if you just ran over here to finish helping us.” By this time her husband had made his way over to us, and he apparently agreed with her that this was rather clever of her. They were obviously nice people. They were pleasant enough. My friends have parents and grandparents like them. They obviously did not mean any harm by it. The old lady was just making conversation. I realized that the intention was not bad, but it still infuriated me. When I did not crack a smile but just stared at her without giving her back her change, she seemed concerned. In that nice and concerned grandmotherly way, and still chuckling with her husband, she asked, “What’s the matter?” I told her that it

was not funny. She insisted that it was just a joke – and explained it to me again. I told her that it's not funny but racist. She seemed genuinely shocked and even hurt that I thought what she had said was even racial. Because she is sure that she is not a racist. After all, she has lunch at Chinese restaurants. She lets them touch her food – how much more can she trust them? I think they could see that I was not going to laugh after all because her husband started to guide her away from me. I asked them, "If I were black and you had just had lunch at Kentucky Fried Chicken, would you have asked me if I had just run over from KFC to finish helping you?" Neither one answered me. She kept murmuring, "It was a joke. It was just a joke."

V.

Some of the second year students at CCS were confused after meeting me my first semester here because I'm Korean – but could speak English so well.

VI.

A well-educated and respected architect flew in from Berlin for a day to work with the second year CCS students to help them think about installing their upcoming thesis exhibitions. Upon her request, each student briefed her on his or her respective exhibition idea, and she responded to each person succinctly and quickly offering creative, visual, and generally helpful comments. When it came my turn, I started describing my idea to her when suddenly she stopped me and told me that when she hears the word "Asian" she immediately thinks "Frank Lloyd Wright" and "Whistler and Sargent." I think I must have looked like a deer caught in headlights

because she told me that she feels sorry for my pain. Actually sorry that I think there is racial prejudice and that I think I see it. Seeing the disbelief in my eyes (I had only gotten four hours of sleep and did not have my usual energy to engage in a verbal dispute) she told me that when she saw the movie, "Raise the Red Lantern," it – Asia – all clicked for her.

These are all true stories. The characters and the situations vary, but they all illustrate misconceptions and our stereotypical notions about Asians. The point to these stories is not that people are ignorant, wrong, or bad. The point is simply that we all perpetuate and live with notions about others and each other. Stereotypes serve as short cuts in communication. And most of the time, with most people, the intent is not malicious. We do it unknowingly and sometimes without thinking and sometimes with the best of intentions.

I. Identification and Projection

Maciej Toporowicz is a Polish born artist residing in New York. *Lure* is a series of twenty-one copper tinted black and white photographs of female sex workers in Bangkok, Thailand. Each photograph is 16" x 20" and has a red stylized biohazard sign with the words "Lure" and "Magik" silk-screened on them. In the advertisement series he has produced in the past – *Obsession*, *Prozac*, or *Shiseido* – the photographs referred to existing products and advertisement campaigns, but for the *Lure* series, the artist created his own product – a perfume by the same name. A perfume was created in a perfumery in France, guided by the artist's memory of the scent of the sex worker's hair and his other memories.² In *Lure*, Toporowicz is not only the producer of these images but also a consumer. These images in the series lure a customer. The beautiful girls and the beautiful images are equal to sophisticated or "tasteful" advertisements that use sex to sell products.

These prostitutes were photographed in various hotel rooms and massage parlors – applying lipstick, sitting on a bed, looking at the camera smiling, and so on. A sense of playfulness seeps through some girls who are looking or smiling straight into the camera. Innocence and humanness are in their faces. Other girls seem tired, and the weightiness in their small bodies settles in the photographs. None of the prostitutes in these rooms are naked although there are some photographs in *Lure* of naked female dancers at sex clubs. Most of the girls look like they are having a good

time. They are young and pretty. These girls are real, not staged. Knowing that these are not posed models but actual sex workers makes the viewing experience a bit too real – almost too raw and too personal.

The biohazard sign can be read as referring to the high rate of AIDS related deaths among sex workers in Thailand. It can also be read as a warning to those who purchase the perfume – a warning before smelling the perfume and becoming lured. Despite this, the girls photographed seem innocent, welcoming, and even happy. They smile as if they are in a hotel room with their boyfriends. It is an easy trap. Both words “Magik” and “Lure” have been stylized to look like Chinese calligraphy. “Lure” is the name of the perfume. “Magik” is a name that the artist uses to refer to himself. The artist’s first name, Maciej, is pronounced like “Magik,” which means magician in Polish. It functions like a brand name. It stays longer than his real first name. It is easy to say, easy to remember, and lends an air of mystery.

One wonders about the proximity of the artist to his subjects in the *Lure* series because of their easy smiles and poses. The fact that the fragrance is based on the scent that he smelled in these girls’ hair eliminates the distance between him and his subjects. The uncomfortable feeling one gets from *Lure* is partly due to our reluctance to acknowledge or be reminded that this is real. The logos might provide one layer of distance for a viewer, but it is not enough. These images are not hyperreal enough to be meaningless – to be mere images. One stands literally face to face with the artist’s obsession and the real possibility that some of these beautiful young women might be dead today from AIDS.

²The perfume was made and bottled in an edition of 200 at a perfumery and was for sale

You can imagine the scent – cigarettes, baby powder, white orchids, the humidity, that hotel room ... pungent, invoking sex. Who is this made for? A white man goes to Thailand to do a series about sex and death. Why not realize the project in New York City, Miami, or San Francisco? Why Bangkok? He then takes photographs of these women before or after perhaps sleeping with them. Then he comes back to New York City, develops and prints the film, has a perfume made after the scent he remembers smelling from their hair, and puts logos on each of the photographs. The first time this series was exhibited at Lombard-Freid Fine Arts Gallery in New York City, he included self-portraits taken in the same hotel rooms. Why has he placed himself in the series? Was he the one who got lured? Did he lure them? Are we lured by the sweet, come-hither smiles of these Asian beauties? And, again, who is looking at these photographs? These images are commodified by their presence in a commercial SOHO gallery. They mimic commercial print advertisements. Does that mean that they cannot be offensive? Beyond reproach? What about Asian women who see these photographs and identify with these women whose images are not only selling a perfume but also being sold themselves? Who is this made for?

The logo is a mark of possession and ownership of Toporowicz's own personal experiences and memory. He is the producer of these images and also a consumer of these girls. He will literally let you have a sniff of it. These are not models hired to stand in a hotel room half undressed to pretend to look sexy and

along with the photographs when they were exhibited in an art gallery for \$200.00.

innocent: they are prostitutes paid for by the artist. What did he do to convince them to let him take rolls of photographs of them? In a couple of the photographs where he is seen by a reflection in a mirror, he is also unclothed. He inserts himself into the series by the names and his own image. The entire ad campaign is selling his experience, his lived out fantasy. He warns others with the red biohazard symbol, but what are the consequences? After all, he is still alive and producing more work despite the fact that he himself was lured. He survived. Then what lesson was learned? What is the lesson?

In *Lure*, the women are looking at you, the spectator. A male viewer could identify with the person behind the camera. He is privy to the experiences of the man sitting in the room with the girls. He identifies with Maciej Toporowicz. A woman can identify with a mirror image of herself. As an Asian female viewer, she is my mirror image. I am the whore.

Looking at this series of half undressed Asian girls makes me feel uncomfortable. Standing in front of them, I become self-conscious of the other people in the room looking at me looking at these images. Are they seeing the photographs, then seeing me standing in front of them and picturing me in their minds half undressed too? I am afraid they might be identifying me with them. Do I become a part of the exhibit? Are they wondering what I might be like on those beds? Are they wondering if my hair smells like *Lure*? Then I wonder if people I know who have seen these images will remember them each time they see me. ‘Which one do I look like the most?’ I wonder myself. ‘Which one is the prettiest?’ It is a rare opportunity to see so many Asian women and be able to compare myself

to them. After all, it is hard to find images of Asian women in fashion magazines, TV programs, or movies in America. I measure my own physical appearance against theirs. My thoughts oscillate between ‘I’m not like them at all because they are prostitutes, and I don’t wear my hair like that’ to ‘maybe I should wear my hair like that because she’s Asian and that looks pretty on her.’ I study their smiles, their eyes, and their poses. But I do not ask others what they think of me compared to these women in *Lure*. I do not want other people to associate me with these Asian sex workers. I am afraid the color of my skin and my hair and my other physical traits lump me with these girls in *Lure*. After all, that is how I identify with them – their skin tone and facial features. As unacceptable as this thought might be, I want to be the prettiest one of them all.

Sharon Mizota’s *Silkscreens* offer a different dilemma. They consist of a five page fashion spread titled, “China Syndrome,” from a 1995 issue of W Magazine, a monthly fashion magazine published by Women’s Wear Daily. In this fashion spread, a Caucasian model is made up to look Oriental – long straight black hair with short straight bangs and accentuated almond shaped black-lined eyes. She is dressed in updated Chinese style items of clothing. Mizota has altered the images by silkscreening them in a larger format of 20” x 30” and adding a quote from various sources of popular culture in each of the images in a cartoon bubble.

The first image is called “Hiroshima, mon amour...” The model is standing with her bare back to us and her head turned to gaze over her shoulder. She is wearing a long-sleeved dress with a bare back and a flower in her hair. Across her back, and the width of the page are the words, “China Syndrome.” “Hiroshima, mon

amour” is from a Marguerite Duras novel. In the second image, the model, who is wearing a short embroidered sleeveless top with a pair of short shorts and a pair of spiky leather heels, is bending over with her head turned up to face the camera. Her right hand is on the floor while her left hand is on her left buttock. The quote says, “Me so horny...” This quote is from a movie, *Full Metal Jacket*. The third image is a profile of the model. She is standing in front of a fish bowl, which contains one gold fish. Her hand is reaching into the bowl. The quote is from Disney’s *Lady and the Tramp*. “We are Siamese if you please. We are Siamese if you don’t please. We are former residents of Siam. There are no finer cats than we am...” The broken English is a nice touch. In the fourth image, the model is wearing a short-sleeved Mandarin collar pin striped dress. She is seated, holding a folded fan. We cannot see where she is sitting, but the split in the dress exposes her upper inner thigh. The quote says, “I love to come to the U.S.A. but I need some citizen to come and take me there. Anyone interested? I’ll fuck you for free and give you blowjobs with ice cubes in my mouth.” In the last image, the model is sitting on a stylized Chinese chair with a wind machine blowing open her dress, which is skin tight and has a split in the front that goes up just above her crotch area. Fortunately, she is wearing a fashionable pair of metal studded underwear. The quote reads, “I can open Coke bottles with my pussy...” Both of these quotes come from *Asian Beauties*, a pornographic magazine featuring ... Asian beauties. According to the magazine these are actual quotes from the models.

Looking at this non-Asian model who represents Asian females, I am faced with another set of questions. Is that what I am supposed to look like? Aside from

the fact that no model ever featured in fashion magazines looks like a real person, I am burdened by the additional issue of comparing myself to the super-unrealistic image of an Asian woman. I cannot even begin to compete with this lanky creature who to me looks like a super Euro-Asian beauty. Add the quotes by Mizota and the comfort level drops several more notches. “I will give you a blow job with ice cubes in my mouth”? This worries me yet again. Will people who see these images of a faux Asian, read the quotes, and expect me to be the same? Will they expect me to open a Coke bottle with my pussy?

What are these images by Mizota accomplishing? She is a fourth generation Japanese-American who is sensitive to the issues of Asians. Are these images supposed to be less offensive because their maker is also Asian-American? How many people know who the artist is or what her background is other than by her first name, “Sharon,” which tells you that she is a female and her last name, “Mizota,” which tells you that she is Japanese?

I am just as uncomfortable seeing these images as I am looking at *Lure*. With *Lure*, the identification is direct. The faces are familiar. The *Lure* symbol and the presence of the perfume bottles do not mitigate. There is no safe distance. The discomfort is in the space between me and the women in the photographs. With the *Silkscreen* series, the identification is not direct. It is mitigated by the grainy quality of the enlarged silkscreens, the not quite Asian model, and the cartoon like bubbles. In a way, I am more offended by *Silkscreen* than by *Lure*. At least in *Lure*, the words are not there to fix the meaning – Mizota’s captions leave little room for excuses. The words, “Lure,” and “Magik” relate to the experience of the artist. In

this case, a white man, who refers to himself as “Magik,” was lured. I relegate those words to him. The text in *Silkscreen* are words that supposedly come out of an Asian woman. However, they are caricatures of Asian women; I recognize the signs and codes that make this model look *Asian*. These silkscreens force me to face the stereotype of overly and overtly sexed Asian women. In *Lure*, the women are objectified but look sweet enough and seem enough like advertisements. In *Silkscreen*, there is no room for pretending that they are just fashion photos that could be dismissed. *Lure* is about its maker. I identify with the photographed women, but I can keep my uncomfortable thoughts to myself. *Silkscreen* does not allow me to keep them hidden. The captions confront their viewers directly in spite of the images of a faux Asian woman.

Lure is a man’s fantasy: different girls all to himself in hotel rooms in Bangkok. It is not a woman’s fantasy because the girls do not seem quite glamorous enough even though they are all either pretty or sexy. But the women themselves are not wearing anything that you would envy or desire. The rooms themselves are not lavish or luxurious either. *Lure* is the women themselves. It is not even the image of these women that is being sold – it is literally their bodies that are supposed to be desirable.

Silkscreen is both a man’s and a woman’s fantasy. For men, here is this beautiful woman. It does not matter whether she is Asian or not – she looks Asian enough and Caucasian enough to fulfill anyone’s preference in either direction. She is every man’s woman. And the images have the suggestive quotes – the revealing clothing is not enough – they say that she is so horny. For women, this is a

professional model. Desire on all levels shoots up. She is wearing expensive clothes. She looks fabulous. Her skin is flawless. And Mizota has left the magazine's own captions so you can see how expensive each item shown is. As an Asian woman looking at these photographs, at first I might dismiss it and say that it is absurd. However, there is a huge plastic surgery industry in Asia where women get their eyelids cut and re sewn to give themselves more western eyes. Breast augmentations, which were traditionally frowned upon, are now becoming more common. There is a desire to look more western. Taller and thinner. These images are closer to the look many Asian women are striving for than the editors of W Magazine might realize. Looking at blond models in fashion magazines offers more distance. However, Asianized beauties reduce that distance and push the identification process in a more specific and narrow way. *Silkscreen*, with the insertion of the quotes, keeps the uncomfortable feeling of being the stereotyped object of sexual fantasies just like in *Lure*. In addition, the issues of misrecognition and impossible misidentification are introduced. With *Silkscreen*, I am forced to struggle with an unfair comparison. Not only the model versus average woman comparison, but also the Asianness versus the Americanness of my identity, topped off by the aspect of overtly sexual stereotypes of Asian women. Perhaps Toporowicz's *Lure* will not make an Asian woman viewer go out and become a sex worker in Thailand. But it does make her aware of the fact that some Asian women are perceived this way and that affects the way she perceives herself through the eyes of others. She identifies herself, or forms her self-identity, via the reactions,

responses, and actions of others who see her and identify her with the depicted subject.

The issue of the male gaze versus the female gaze and the process of identification can be more easily extrapolated by examining Hanspeter Ammann's video, *Couple*. Whereas Mizota and Toporowicz are conscious and deliberate in their treatment of their subject matter, Ammann is not interested in the Asianness of his subject. A practicing psychoanalyst in Switzerland, Ammann is more interested in the gaze and the projection of emotions and meaning by a viewer. He plays a game of clues where he gives the viewers controlled bits of information so that they could piece together their own stories.

What is central in *Couple* is the role of the gaze, both within the work and between a viewer and the video. In the frame of the monitor, we see two people – an Asian woman and a Caucasian man.³ She has long straight hair and is wearing a suit. She is wearing makeup and a necklace. He has a short clean haircut and is wearing a dark suit as well. There are no visual distractions in the room. The speed of the videotape has been slowed down, and the sound track is a melodic yet melancholy and sentimental song, "You Don't Know What Love Is," by Chet Baker.

The video consists of two parts: in the first part the slowed down sequence runs through the entire length of the Chet Baker song. Then the second part starts, except this time it is only a fragment of the first portion, again, to the entire Baker song. Therefore, it is much slower. The second part accents, or reiterates, a portion of the first. Throughout the entire video, the camera angle remains the same. A

³*Couple* is Ammann's only video with an Asian character.

slight move of the camera to the left or the right, or higher or lower, will change the way these two people are framed. The woman is presumably sitting at a conference table. The man is sitting further behind the table. But the way the camera angle is fixed, it looks like he is sitting just behind her. When he sits with his right arm stretched out to his side, because of the camera angle, it looks like his arm is around her – as if it is an embrace. But she has no response. She leans back, leans forward, but does not turn around to look at him but once. He stares at her sometimes but without a facial expression. The female character in *Couple* knows that she is being looked at or at least that she is in the view of the man behind her. She performs for his eyes. She is conscious of his gaze. She is a passive object of his gaze, as well as ours, the viewers. She could let him know that she is aware of his gaze, but the one time she turns around far enough to meet his gaze with her own, his face is expressionless. He aborts her attempt to de-objectify herself.

Ammann controls every camera angle, the pace, the editing, and the sound. Even though the figures in *Couple* were not staged, Ammann stages them during the editing and producing phases. He seems to be building a drama, but it is clear that the drama is something he has created. However, even though we are aware of Ammann's fabrication, we anticipate and project our emotions and meanings. It is perhaps Ammann's prolonged attention, his intent gaze with the unmoving camera and the slow speed of the videotape, in addition to the second half, which singles out a portion of the tape for even a more careful look, which exposes the real subject of the video: the gaze. We, as viewers, become aware of our own gaze. We watch the

video with more attention. The music lulls us. Ammann has hooked us, our eyes, with his images and sound. We watch intently gazing not only at the woman in the video but the man as well. He is now an object of our eyes. Still, she becomes doubly objectified.

Positioned outside the frame and facing the monitor, with whom do we identify? And does our own understanding of our identity determine how we read this work? Our attempt at a topical reading of the video might differ depending on our own identity. Aided by the title of the video, *Couple*, and the mournful rendition of “You Don’t Know What Love Is” by Chet Baker, I imagine myself in a broken interracial relationship. I project my own very personal narrative to the scenes before me. An Asian woman who has dated non-Caucasian men might project yet another narrative. A non-Asian viewer might project either a different or similar narrative. The two faces on the television monitor, the sound track, and the title all prompt us to try to give it meaning. As an Asian female, I identify with the woman in the video. I see the man staring at her from behind and I feel her vulnerability as well as anger and resentment towards him. At the same time, I am frustrated that I cannot tell her to watch out. Watch out for what... I am not sure. She is aware of his stare, but she is uncertain for she cannot see him. She is performing for someone who might or might not be watching. She has no eyes in the back of her head. This is an unfair equation. He holds the court. He has the advantage of holding her in his gaze. Every time she leans forward and her head

covers his head – and blocks our view of him – there is a sense of identification between the two of them. He and she are one, a couple.⁴

What if the viewer is a white male? Would he identify with the Asian woman in the video or the white man in the video? The viewer would hold her in his gaze, too, sandwiching her between himself and the man in the video. The male viewer has an added advantage because not only is he holding her in his gaze, he is able to see her face – her expressions, her features, her reactions – as well as the man's face and his expressions, features, and reactions. The male viewer is the most privileged in this transaction. What if the viewer is a non-Asian female? She could probably relate to a similar situation – sitting in a classroom, on a bus or a subway, in a movie theatre – and recall that feeling of being watched. Therefore, even if there is not a direct identification process, she can have an indirect identification process by relating with the situation. We know this from our daily experiences. This is the way most people relate to and identify with characters in movies, television programs, or videos. Most of us do not look like the airbrushed models or coifed and labored over actresses we see on the big or small screens. However, we are able to identify with the scenarios and empathize with the characters that we know to be false. When the image you see is the same race as you, you identify immediately with the physical features. If the image is of another race, you identify with the situation or context first. The awareness of the omnipresent gaze is something all of us, Asian or not, male or female, experience from the moment we are born. We are

⁴These two people are not a romantically involved couple but two attendees in a meeting at the United Nations building.

aware of always being gazed at and we perform for others. Again, the ethnic or sexual identity of the viewer simply directs the path of identification process.

Tseng Kwong Chi's works are aware of and relate to the gaze on more than one level. He is always posed in front of the camera. He offers himself to us to be looked at. Often we could see him holding the remote shutter in his hand; he does not attempt to hide the fact that these are photographs taken with a camera. Also, in all of his photographs, he is playing the part of a tourist, a figure who by definition is travelling to see, to look at sites. He is seeing America in these photographs. And we see him at his destinations. At first glance, Tseng seems to be caricaturing his ethnic identity and perpetuating the characterization of what his image is assumed to be by his viewers. He dresses in a Mao suit and has his portrait taken next to popular signposts and monuments. He plays the role of a stereotypical Asian tourist with his camera. Standing next to Goofy or Mickey Mouse, he is the epitome of the unemotional Asian male. Tseng throws back at the viewers what is expected of Asian tourists. A Chinese male dignitary on a tour of the United States and Europe, Tseng does not try to escape or alter his image but pushes it further. On yet another level Tseng's photographs portray the experience of many minorities.

Tseng is alone in all of his photographs. Even though he is surrounded by the very signposts which define America, he is alone, alienated. Even when he is standing next to Mickey Mouse – American as apple pie – he is not interacting with it. He is merely standing next to it. Mickey Mouse seems more animated than Tseng. Mickey's perennial, permanent smile further emphasizes Tseng's

expressionless, emotionless face and rigid pose. Tseng seems alienated in this land. In these photographs, in which he is dressed always in the same outfit, he sticks out. Often he seems almost like a pasted on cutout figure in the scenery rather than an integrated part of the image. The lone figure who cannot seem to integrate or assimilate with his environment, and surroundings. In *Mount Rushmore, South Dakota*, this is even more exaggerated. Tseng is dwarfed by the faces of the forefathers of America. He is merely observing. He is not a part of America. The inner being or reality of minorities in America is symbolized in these photographs. They are living in America, but for many, they are alienated. Even though they are not wearing clothes from their native nations, as Tseng is in his work, their appearance – their skin hues and features – serves the same purpose as Tseng's uniform.

Looking at these photographs, I identify with Tseng as a fellow Asian-American. I recall my family trips to the Biltmore House in Asheville, NC, Niagara Falls, NY, Hilton Head, SC, etc. Sitting in the car with my parents and my brother, stopping at the various fast food restaurants along the highway, playing car games with my brother, fighting over the music, getting bored, and carsick. Boredom mixed with anticipation and excitement about our destination. Upon arriving at our destination, I always felt a bit uncomfortable. Outside the car I always became more aware of my racial identity, the thing that set my family apart from the other families at our tourist spots. We would take photographs with the man dressed up like an American Indian, wearing the raincoats by Niagara Falls, standing in the garden in Asheville, etc. Yet I was always conscious of the stereotype of Asians

and their cameras and wanted the photo opportunities to be quick. Being in spots that define America, I felt un-American. I knew – or felt – that other tourists there did not accept us as Americans because even though we were dressed like them and were driving a Buick, they could see that we did not look like them.

Tseng Kwong Chi's photographs capture this uneasiness. I identify with that expression. I may overcompensate and act especially gregarious and speak loudly in perfect English to prove to others that I am American just like them, but inside I wear the same frozen expression as Tseng. American, after all, in my mind, does not mean citizenship; it means people who look like the faces on Mount Rushmore.

It is not necessary for a viewer to be an Asian-American woman to view and identify with the women in the works I have described. An Asian woman will identify directly with these represented women because of the similarities in their physical ethnic features. Again, in such cases, the identification is more direct and based first on appearance rather than the situations or circumstances. The gaze of the man in Ammann's video is irritable and uncomfortable. The smiling prostitutes and pseudo-Asian models are offensive. Someone who is not Asian may recognize the alienation and aloneness captured in Tseng's photographs. Again, it is not necessary to be Asian to understand these works. The race of the viewer determines only the path of identification.

In *Touch me one more time before I dissolve in you becoming a wave from the rising sea*, Maciej Toporowicz is wearing black Chinese pajamas and lying on a red satin bed. He is pulling and lifting the sides of his face back with his hands

slanting his eyes. He is simulating the look of an Asian. Does he think that having almond shaped eyes and wearing silk determines Asianness? Is he satisfying his desire to become the Other by emulating the look of an Asian? Toporowicz is portraying his fantasy again, but this time the fantasy is about his own identity. Here, it is worth noting that his attempt at altering his identity involves his appearance. Perhaps this is because he, too, is aware that the others' gaze defines him.

Both Toporowicz's self-portraits and Tseng's photographs equate outward appearance with identity. In these works, they are treating their images self-consciously. These are fabricated and altered images: characters based on appearance. Their chosen medium is photography – a decidedly visual device. There are no texts or sounds to guide us, only the visual information. Tseng takes his looks and pushes the expectation and assumptions of others further whereas Toporowicz wants to escape by perpetuating the stereotype of his Other. Tseng takes the stereotype of Asian tourists and pushes it further, photographing himself in almost every well-known cultural signpost in the United States and Europe. Toporowicz takes the visual stereotype of an Asian and tries to escape his own reality by physically transforming himself. Mizota examines her role as a producer and a consumer of images of Asians in American popular culture. Ammann's video reminds us that we are all objects and subjects of the gaze.

All of the works mentioned here show that, as viewers, we identify with the represented images be it a photograph, a silkscreened photograph, or a videotape. One of the reasons why art is sometimes referred to as a universal language is that

everyone can have his or her own experience with it. However, the identity of the viewer, as he or she understands it, can direct the process of seeing a work of art. How one thinks of oneself affects what one projects when readings a work of art. I, as an Asian-American woman, who considers herself as an Asian-American first then woman, am more sensitive to one's race than gender. Another viewer who defines herself first by gender rather than race might identify more quickly with one's gender rather than race. Reading these works in-depth as an Asian-American who is aware of the stereotype of an overly sexualized Asian women, issues of gender naturally arise. However, my main interest for the purpose of this project is to look at how one's race determines the process of identification and projection with a given work. It is my belief that the ethnic identity of a viewer determines the identification process that occurs when encountering a work of art.

II. Identification Process Based on Ethnic Identity

Why and how does my identification with the women in Amman's *Couple*, Toporowicz's *Lure* series, and Mizota's *Silkscreens* series affect my own identity? What is behind this drive and need to equate looks with identity? I propose that the answers are twofold: one that applies to all of us, regardless of race and gender, and another that applies specifically to minorities. The first is the fact that we cannot see ourselves. Due to our anatomical limitations, ourselves are the only things in our world that we cannot see with our own two eyes. All of the images we see of ourselves are via reflected images – mirrors, photographs, or videotapes. Reflected images are visually reductive by nature. We all know from experiences – good pictures, bad pictures, dressing room mirrors, etc. – that reimagining devices deliver transcribed truths of our bodies and our worlds. Images, whether we know and live it or not, at best deliver perceptions of surfaces. Since we are the only things we cannot see and trust with our own two eyes, we rely on mimetic devices and others' eyes. Mikhail Bakhtin writes about the dialectical relationship between beings and what he refers to as “excessive seeing”: “There can be no doubt, of course, that my own exterior is not part of the concrete, actual horizon of my seeing, ...I do not encounter my own outward expressedness in being as an outwardly unitary object among other objects. I am situated on the boundary, as it were, of the world I see. In plastic and pictorial terms, I am not connatural with it. While my thought can place my body wholly into the outside world as an object among other objects, my

actual seeing cannot do the same thing; my seeing, that is, cannot come to the aid of thinking by providing it with an adequate outward image.”⁵

My claim is further supported by Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of excessive seeing between an author and a hero in literature. One needs others to get a better understanding of oneself. When two people are seated facing each other, one can see the other one’s outward appearance and the scene behind and around him. However, he cannot see what is behind himself. The relationship is reciprocal in that the other can see him and his background. The other always sees more than what I can see of myself. I am not whole without the information the other has about me, information I am not privy to unless told or otherwise shared. No one is completely known to himself.

Bakhtin’s notion is different from Jacques Lacan’s notion of the fragmented Subject but similar to Lacan’s concept of the metonymic relationship between the Subject’s inner and outer world. Lacan suggests there are fragments, several unwhole pieces of us, within ourselves. In “Agency of the letter in the unconscious,” Lacan uses Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic structure to read Freud⁶. Lacan builds on Saussure’s Signified/ signifier (S over s) and suggests an alternative, the signifying chain.⁷ Unlike Saussure’s model, which suggests a metaphorical relationship – one word for another word – between the signifier and the signified, the signifying chain

⁵Mikhail Bakhtin, “Author and hero in Aesthetic Activity” in *Art and Answerability*. trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: Univ. Of Texas, 1990), 27-28.

⁶Jacques Lacan, “Agency of the letter in the unconscious” in *●crits: A Selection*. trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton & Co., 1997), 146-178.

⁷Ibid., 155.

is like a necklace – a ring of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings. In the signifying chain, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is that of metonymy – a change of name: a part representing the whole – rather than metaphor.⁸

The metonymic relationship between a signifier and the signified is relevant. To start, the relationship between “*Innenwelt* and *Umwelt*”⁹ – a person’s inner world and outer world – is also metonymic. According to Lacan in “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I,” when a baby sees and recognizes himself for the first time during the mirror stage (any time between the ages of six to eighteen months), he perceives himself as a whole being for the first time. The image of an autonomous body shapes who we perceive ourselves to be – rational and whole. But this is a faulty recognition – “m[⊕]connaissances that constitute the ego, the illusion of autonomy to which it entrusts itself.”¹⁰ It is a fictional direction for the subject since the subject believes that he *is* this image. He misrecognizes that veil *as* the Subject. The image is just the screen – a movie screen onto which an image is projected. The baby sees in the mirror what he thinks people must see when they look at him.

Besides the mistaken self-identification, the Subject behind the veil is not whole. In other words, the image that the baby recognizes for the very first time as

⁸Ibid., 157.

⁹Jacques Lacan, “The mirror stage” in *●crits: A Selection.*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton & Co., 1977), 4.

¹⁰Ibid., 6.

himself in the mirror “manufactures for the subject [the baby], caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I [Lacan] shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development.”¹¹ Or, in other words, the body becomes a container, an armor that separates the *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt*. This notion that who we think we are is merely a shell that contains the Subject suggests a couple of points. One, that you are not who you think you are; and, two, the question of the ontological structure of our Being. This new structure is not the one Enlightenment proposed – one of Man and Reason. The Freudian Lacan suggests a split – a split in the notion of who we are. As evidenced in our daily experiences of destructive (?) and contradictory drives and impulses – daydreams, fantasies, nocturnal dreams, mental illnesses – against our rational and socialized proper images, there is an irrational side(s) to our rational side. Not only does the image screen divide the image of us from us, we are fragmented. We do not possess unified souls within us. We are fragmented within. This concept disturbs the notion of wholeness of Subject. Lacan thinks we should concentrate on the irrational – the parts of us that are hidden, repressed. Image – what we see, what others see of us – is only a layer of the Subject.

In the last couple of pages of “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I,” Lacan states that we need to look at the irrational side of society, culture,

¹¹Ibid., 4.

history and ourselves to start to know ourselves. He states that our experiences with our destructive and contradictory drives and impulses “shows that we should start ... from the *function of m* *connaissance* that characterizes the ego in all its structures...”¹² Even psychoanalysis cannot discover the entirety of a Subject, but it could bring a Subject “... to that point where the real journey begins.”¹³ In other words, the journey could begin but may never reach a destination. We may never know ourselves completely.

Bakhtin speaks of a literal mirror and its role in our identity formation:

...looking at myself in a mirror. .. We remain within ourselves and we see only our own reflection, which is not capable of becoming an immediate moment in our seeing and experiencing of the world. We see the *reflection* of our exterior but not *ourselves* in terms of our exterior. The exterior does not encompass all of me – I am in front of the mirror and not in it. The mirror can do no more than provide the material for self-objectification, and even that not in its pure form. Indeed, our position before a mirror is always somewhat spurious, for since we lack any approach to ourselves from outside, in this case, as in the other, we project ourselves into a peculiarly indeterminate possible other, with whose help we then try to find an axiological position in relation to ourselves; in this case, too, we try to vivify ourselves and give form to ourselves – out of the other. Whence that distinctive and unnatural expression of our face which we see on it in the mirror, but which we never have in our lived life. This expression of our faces as reflected in a mirror is made up of several expressions whose emotional and volitional directedness derives from entirely different planes: (1) the expressions of our actual emotional and volitional attitude which we are actualizing at a given moment and which are justified within the unitary and unique context of our life; (2) the expressions of the evaluation on the part of the possible own; and (3) the expressions of our own relationship to that evaluation on the part of the possible other, such as satisfaction or dissatisfaction, being pleased or displeased. For our own relationship to our exterior does not, after all, have an immediately aesthetic character; it

¹²Ibid., 6.

¹³Ibid., 7.

pertains only to its possible effect on others – namely, on the immediate observers. That is, we evaluate our exterior not for ourselves, but *for* others *through* others. Finally, these three kinds of expression may also be joined by an expression which we would *like* to see on our own faces – again, of course, not for ourselves, but for the other. For we almost invariably attitudinize a bit before a mirror, giving ourselves one expression or another that we deem to be essential or desirable.

All these different expressions contend with one another and can enter into a random symbiosis on our face as reflected in a mirror. In any case, what is expressed here is not a unitary and unique soul – a second participant is implicated in the event of self-contemplation, a fictitious other, a nonauthoritative and unfounded author. I am not alone when I look at myself in the mirror: I am possessed by someone else's soul. More than that. At times, this other soul may gain body to the point where it attains a certain self-sufficiency. Vexation and a certain resentment, with which our dissatisfaction about our own exterior may combine, give body to this other – the possible author of our own exterior. Distrust of him, hatred, a desire to annihilate him become possible. In trying to fight against another's potential, comprehensively formative evaluation, I consolidate it to the point of giving it self-subsistence, almost to the point where it becomes a person localized in being.¹⁴

For the other. I quote again from the above: “That is, we evaluate our exterior not for ourselves, but *for* others *through* others.” We assume roles for others, not for ourselves. We define ourselves for others, and we are defined through others' eyes.

Bakhtin also suggests that we are broken but that our bodies, physical entities that we inhabit, are boundaries or containers. Not an armor that shields us, as Lacan suggests, but a boundary that limits our perception and ability to comprehend ourselves as self-objective entities because our eyes are embedded in our heads.

... a whole series of features accessible to me from my own place will turn out to be absent from within this other's horizon. Thus, [for instance] the

¹⁴Mikhail Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” in *Art and Answerability*. trans. Vadim Liapunov (Texas: Univ. of Texas, 1990), 32-33.

person suffering does not experience the fullness of his own outward expressedness in being; he experiences this expressedness only partially, and then in the language of his inner sensations of himself. He does not see the agonizing tension of his own muscles, does not see the entire, plastically consummated posture of his own body, or the expression of suffering on his own face. He does not see the clear blue sky against the background of which his suffering outward image is delineated for me. And even if he were able to see all these features – if, for example, he were in front of a mirror – he would lack the appropriate emotional and volitional approach to these features. That is, they would not occupy the same place in his own awareness that they do in his contemplator's.¹⁵

We inhabit boundlessly, but our knowledge from perception is divided into what is inside the body and what is outside. We are limited by our eyes; they give us a certain perspective, and we are forever limited by them. Our perspective is that of our “eye-level.” We look down at our torso, hands, legs, feet, toes, etc. We have a cone of vision that radiates out into the world in a perspective perspective.

Therefore, we cannot see certain things. We cannot see our back at all unless aided by mirrors or some other reflective surfaces. And because we cannot see ourselves with our naked, unmitigated, unfiltered, unmediated eyes, see with *our own two eyes*, our visual images of ourselves are never fully trusted. “You have to see it to believe it.” We say that about almost everything else but ourselves.

We rely on others, including friends, strangers, and enemies, reflections in mirrors, and photographs, to see what we look like, who we are. And perhaps this is why we rely on images that we can identify with, or why they matter to and affect us. The only thing we cannot see with our own two eyes is ourselves. This fact is true of every individual. We can smell, hear, touch, and taste ourselves, but we cannot see ourselves. We have to trust the eyes of others. We all know that

¹⁵Ibid., 25-26.

mirrors, photographs, and videos – perhaps three of the most reliable or objective devices for looking at ourselves – lie. Most of us are squeamish about watching ourselves on video or film – usually insecure and unsure about how we will look. We usually eat it up in private, a rare chance to really scrutinize and study our looks, but in the presence of others, we are afraid of what we might see or of seeming narcissistic or vain. Another example is listening to our own voices playing back on the answering machine. We do not wince when we get home and listen to ourselves. Most people try over and over to record the perfect outgoing message on their machines. But when you get home with a friend and play that machine, or worse yet, when you go home with someone you have called that day and they play back the messages, you want to block your ears and hide. It is all because we do not know what we look like or sound like. And we are never sure. Never really sure.

I take self-portraits every year, and I examine them. I tell myself that I am prettier than the one that makes me look ten pounds heavier and not as attractive as the one that makes me look radiant. I can never seem to capture the truth. It is therefore difficult, irresistible, not to measure myself against images of other Asian women. Especially when they are still and cannot feel my gaze upon them, so I can really study every inch of them. Which part of me looks most like her? Whose eyes? Whose cheekbones? Whose mouth? Whose hair? I do not know. But they are the closest things that look like me in this culture, where most women have different skin tones, hair, and features than I. So I pay closer attention to the Asian images. And I identify with them based on similar looks. I look like them and they look like me. A simple equation.

A simple equation between myself and the photographed. But it has other ramifications. The added element is my perception or observations of how the photographed are perceived by those who do not look like me. Those who are not in my position, my skin. I am constantly looking for clues from other people as to what I look like. Others not only see me but define me. I rely on others to help me define myself. We are not as self-reliant as we would like to believe. Again, I refer to Bakhtin:

I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the world behind his back, and a whole series of objects and relations, which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him. As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes. It is possible, upon assuming an appropriate position, to reduce this difference of horizons to a minimum, but in order to annihilate this difference completely, it would be necessary to merge into one, to become one and the same person.

This ever-present *excess* of my seeing, knowing, and possessing in relation to any other human being is founded in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my place in the world. For only I – the one-and-only-I – occupy in a given set of circumstances this particular place at this particular time; all other human beings are situated outside me.¹⁶

Others always see more. From the very moment we are born into this world, we are seen by others. And we are always participants in dialectical relationships for the situation is always reciprocal in nature. As social beings, living in the world, we are always in dialogical relationships. As human beings, social beings, we cannot escape this. Even a hermit has a mother. No one starts out alone. It cannot be escaped.

¹⁶Ibid., 23.

It is a basic desire and drive to want to see ourselves. When we do not have many sources that reflect our image, we are more affected by the rare few. We crave it. That is why images such as *Silkscreens* by Mizota are complicated. We see ourselves. But they are unreal and thus unattainable beings. They are Caucasian models made up to look Asian. Unattainable. Unrealizable. We stop comparing ourselves to them because we cannot.

The second part of the answer to the set of questions concerning images as they relate to identity has to do with Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. I propose that a displaced minority has two mirror stages. The first mirror stage is one that Lacan speaks of where the Subject (mis-)recognizes herself as a whole Being for the first time. At this point, ethnic identity is not an issue since she is surrounded by her family members: those whom she resembles in appearance. A Japanese parent, for instance, does not look at her baby and say, 'Here is my yellow-faced baby.' A Japanese parent says, 'Here is my baby.' What Lacan assumed when he suggested that the mirror stage develops and is experienced by the baby as a "temporal dialectic that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history"¹⁷ was that the course of history would be a racially homogeneous one.¹⁸ Minorities have a second mirror stage when they recognize how others, the majority, perceive them – as the Other. It is this socially constructed second mirror stage that leads to the realm of culture, society, and history outside a child's limited environment. This

¹⁷Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage" in *●crits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton & Co., 1977), 4.

¹⁸It would, of course, be interesting to examine how an infant born without sight would develop according to Lacanian theory.

second stage can start at any time during childhood or adulthood. It occurs when one is taken out of her cultural context and displaced; and, then, it continues in varying pulsations. There is a revealing moment when the Subject realizes that she possesses more than one image – that who she thinks she is and who others think she is may differ. The second mirror stage is not a replication of the first mirror stage. By definition, the subject of the second mirror stage has been affected by the first mirror stage. The second mirror stage is induced by a societal and cultural change.

“For, from within myself, there is only my own inner affirmation of myself, which I am unable to project upon my outward expressedness (as detached from my inner self-sensation), and that is why it confronts me as axiologically empty, lacking any affirmed foundation. Something like a transparent screen has to be inserted between my inner self-sensation (The function of my *empty* seeing) and my outwardly expressed image: the screen of manifestations—his possible enthusiasm, love, astonishment, or compassion for me. And looking through this screen of the other’s soul (which is thus reduced to a means), I vivify my exterior and make it part of the plastic and pictorial world.”¹⁹ This quote from Lacan could pass for Bakhtin’s words. Just as a mother’s loving look or caresses affect the child’s ability to interact in certain ways with others, another’s look – others’ gazes – affects those in the position of having to form a new identity in a new culture. We define

¹⁹Ibid., 31.

ourselves through others – others function as our mirror. This process is ongoing for any dislocated or relocated person who becomes a minority.

Just as there is misrecognition in Lacan's mirror stage, there is misrecognition during this second phase. However, it is a constant series of misrecognitions. Sometimes this is in conflict with the identity we had once assumed in our native nations. The *jouissance* may or may not come. Because the body, my exterior body, can only be realized/actualized by me through experiences with the outside, I am formed by my experiences with others:

To be sure, in life, too, we do this all the time: we evaluate ourselves from the standpoint of others, and through others we try to understand and take into account what is transgredient to our own consciousness. Thus, we take into account the value of our outward appearance from the standpoint of the possible impression it may produce upon the other, although for ourselves this value does not exist in any immediate way (for our actual and pure self-consciousness). We take into account the background behind our back, that is to say, all that which in our surroundings we do not see and do not know directly and which has no direct axiological validity for us, although it is seen and known by others and has validity for others; all that, in other words, which constitutes the background, against which, as it were, others perceive us axiologically, against which we stand forth for them. ... In short, we are constantly and intently on the watch for reflections of our own life on the plane of other people's consciousness, and moreover, not just reflections of particular moments of our life, but even reflections of the whole of it. And while seeking to catch these reflections, we also take into account that perfectly distinctive value-coefficient with which our life presents itself to the other – a coefficient which is completely different from the coefficient with which we experience our own life in ourselves.²⁰

My boundaries are defined by contact and confrontation with my outer world. By words, others' actions, all levels and varieties of interactions on all

²⁰Mikhail Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" in *Art and Answerability*. trans. Vadim Liapunov (Texas: Univ. of Texas, 1990), 15-16.

sensory levels, our image of our bodies and ourselves are defined. I am defined in relation to others and through others' eyes.

III. Conclusion

“Asian-American.” How does one earn that hyphen and the word, “-American”? What does it mean to be a hyphenated American? Can anyone tell me which part of me is Asian (as opposed to Korean) and which part of me is American? And who is qualified to direct my identity in such a way? Can we agree that perhaps there are no such things? That such terms serve to perpetuate essentialism? What about conceding that there are some things that people of Asia have in common just as people of America have in common? What about the differences Americans have along regional lines? Can we admit that some things can be termed “Asian,” “American,” or “Asian-American” depending on the person terming? It is difficult for everyone to agree on the definitions and perimeters of these terms, which we use everyday to categorize and communicate with each other.

With the exhibition and the stories at the beginning of the thesis, I try to initiate a zone in which possible miscommunications can be sorted out across race and gender lines. A zone where whether by shock or an alternate presentation – and sometimes, for some, mere exposure – one could begin to grasp where and how miscommunications can arise.

It is easier to illustrate or discuss the cross-cultural differences that may give rise to a misunderstanding using the six anecdotes at the beginning of the thesis. Each story involves words and attitudes that could offend or not depending on the parties involved. Then, what about these works? These images? There are many parties to consider: the producers of the images; the depicted or represented Subject

in the image; and, the viewer. The respective race and gender of these three can bring us at least six possible scenarios. Let us leave the race and gender of the discussed artists and the depicted subjects as givens. Let us contemplate the viewers. Do the race and gender of a viewer influence the active process of looking at a work of art? As stated earlier, I do not believe that one has to be Asian to read a work that represents Asian. A non-Asian viewer will be able to imagine the response of an Asian woman when looking at images of Asian prostitutes even though the degree of that empathetic imagination will vary. I also do not deny that a male viewer could understand a work from a woman's perspective when the depicted subject is female. However, again, the empathetic imagination of the male viewer will vary. All these processes of seeing, projecting, and identifying vary from an individual to an individual. And, of course, this is true for those who fall within the same gender and race group as well. What I offer here is only one possibility among many in reading these particular works. I am an Asian woman who for this project identifies herself as an Asian first then as a woman. My experience with a single work will differ from another Asian woman's experience with the same work. However, some things remain the same for two Asian viewers. Even though the specifics of our experience and the memories or thoughts that fire off in our brains will differ, our direct identification with a represented Asian and our possession of the second mirror stage as minorities in this society remain the same. Between Asian viewers and non-Asian viewers, the common denominators are each individual's excessive seeing, a degree of identification (whether direct or situational), and, at last, the possibility of a second mirror stage – for, again, the terms *majority* and *minority* are relative and

contextual. Let me make clear here that even though I have focused this paper on ethnic difference, the ideas presented are not limited to ethnic minorities. By the word *minority*, I mean any group that is *the smaller in number of two groups constituting a whole*, as defined by Webster's Dictionary.

I am curious about how a non-Asian audience will feel in the exhibition, "Your I" surrounded by images of Asians. Will they feel the same alienation felt by minorities? Or will they take small comfort – although I assume uneasy or embarrassed – in Maciej Toporowicz's and Sharon Mizota's images of Caucasians made to look Asian? After all, the same direct identification an Asian viewer will experience looking at an Asian image will take place for any ethnic group looking at an image of those of their own group.

The alienation I identify with in Tseng's photographs can be experienced by non-Asians as well. A Caucasian friend told me recently that she went to an Asian Film Festival. She said that she and her two friends were the only non-Asians in the audience. Her voice had an incredulous and a shocked value. She had never been in the minority before, and it was apparently disorienting for her and her two friends.

I have grown used to being the only Asian in the classrooms or the only Asian at a work place. I am accustomed to being surrounded by non-Asians to the point where I am more self-conscious and self-aware of my ethnic identity when I become a member of the majority. My confusion about my Asian-Americanness is at its most tenuous at such moments. I feel ashamed and proud that I feel uncomfortable when surrounded by other Asians. I am both like them and unlike them in ways I recognize and do not, cannot, or refuse to recognize.

When the overwhelming majority surrounding me is Asian, I am forced to look deeper and define myself as an individual. I am no longer “that Asian girl.” I can no longer hide under my skin, my ethnicity. I have to stand out, define myself, by other terms. Perhaps that is why the desire to categorize by something as superficial as skin color is so prominent. One can always define oneself by a process of comparison and elimination: defining oneself by what one is not. Without race, this attempt at self-identity becomes a competitive and more finessed process. When thrown back into the pool of majority, the mirror image of my unconscious is shattered. “They see me as an Asian” turns into “What makes me different from all these other Koreans?” When in Korea, where I am a part of the overwhelming majority, I stop identifying with every Korean face: the images on billboards, magazines, television programs, and people on the streets. I start identifying with situations, clothes, locations, postures, and attitudes instead. However, Koreans in Korea think of me as ‘American.’ They notice not my skin color but my Americanized mannerisms, speech pattern, and style. Gender, class, and cultural differences come to the foreground when the race difference is neutralized.

Identity by differentiation does not have to take place only along race lines. It occurs whenever there is more than one person present. Again, as Bakhtin argues, one is constantly in a dialogical relationship, and one is defined for others through others. However, race, skin color, is the most visual and thus obvious indication of difference on a superficial level. Frantz Fanon, in Black Skin White Masks speaks

of “color prejudice.”²¹ He quotes Sir Alan Burns: “...As colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments....”²² On page 116, he writes, “...I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the “idea” that others have of me but of my own appearance.” And by appearance he means the color of his skin. Furthermore, he continues, “Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea. When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle.” What Fanon describes in his book is the frustration with the injustice of being overdetermined solely by the color of his skin. The fact that people identify him by his color. He is seen as “not a Negro but the Negro.”²³ Even though Fanon is writing about blacks, I believe it applies to everyone in a society. One can experience this overdetermined identification with any detectable difference – gender, age, class, weight, hairstyles, fashion, etc. In fact, the second mirror stage, for different people, can emphasize different components of one’s self, one’s identity. All of the components or fragments that make us whole are awakened, denied, shunned, prompted, embraced, distorted, etc. at various times in our lives and are equally influential in our identification processes at given moments. For example, the same overdeterminedness could happen with gender. Before the feminist movement,

²¹Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), 118.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., 127.

gender was the main difference marker in society. We do not have to look very far into our past when women were discriminated against purely for their sex. Certain stereotypical roles were imposed upon women by society. They defined themselves in relation to men much more so than today. Even though true equality does not exist even today, women have many more role models and roles they occupy in society. It is no accident or coincidence that minorities have looked to the feminist movement(s) of the 1960s and 1970s as precedents in attaining the ability to determine themselves. Whatever image one has of oneself is reaffirmed or denied by others. And others do this by producing and consuming their visions of the others' type. Returning to Bakhtin's notion of the dialogical relationship between social beings, and my belief that race is not the only differentiation factor, everyone in society is defined in relation to each other in a complex web of relational structure.

In summation, as Fanon emphatically argues, people are identified by race. It is only one but an immediate way that people are identified. I would add that people are identified, classified, and categorized, not only by skin tones but also by other features including physical features and personality traits. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that there are constant ongoing dialogical relationships between human beings because we are all social beings. Jacques Lacan brings us the mirror stage – that we struggle in our lives within fragmented selves because there is a basic misrecognition. From Bakhtin and Lacan, I propose that there is a second mirror stage for any people who are in the minority in number in a given cultural or social context. When minorities are challenged or forced to redefine themselves, the second mirror stage

starts. And it is a constant ongoing negotiation for reasons Bakhtin suggests. We rely on others to define ourselves because we are the only things we cannot see with our own two eyes. And, unfortunately, this seeing and being seen can lead to stereotyping and objectifying especially when there is a cross-cultural miscommunication or misunderstanding.

Cross-cultural communication is not something that can be avoided. Even when interacting with someone who is fluent in English, there are certain deeply imbedded assumptions and respective cultural differences. Perhaps it is too demanding or simply impossible to ask that everyone become hyper sensitive and hyper aware of his or her own cultural traits, habits, notions and treat and accept everyone else – or all others – with a totally open mind. Some cultural traits are even unknown to the perpetuating individual. There are different religious beliefs and philosophies that divide cultures, regions, and nations. There are even differences in constructing sentences and thoughts between East Asians and Westerners.²⁴ What further complicate the matter of categorizing are the hyphenated identities. When someone from a different culture speaks to you in fluent English, you assume he shares the same values and thoughts as you, that there is a common ground. You listen to him, his thoughts, and ideas because you are not supposed to judge someone for his last name or skin color. But there can be and sometimes are misunderstandings, for even the best-intentioned listeners can be mistaken. On the other hand, when someone does not speak fluent English, you are more apt to attribute the misunderstanding to cultural differences – even when it is simply a

language problem. When someone who does not speak English utters something in broken English you are more apt to say that that is because he is foreign. But what about someone who is in your world? Someone who speaks, writes, reads English just as well as you? It is easy to forget that there might be fundamental cultural differences, which might lead to misunderstandings. This is a reciprocal situation. Again, the differences are so deeply imbedded it is difficult recognize them sometimes.

Too often, we take for granted the images that are familiar to us and surround us. Because we are socio-cultural interactive beings whose understanding of identities is influenced by constant and multifarious interrelations, the images we produce and consume have a deep impact on our understanding of each other and ourselves. Even though this project concentrates on the collective image and identity formation of Asian/-Americans in America, I hope it hints at the relevance and possible impact of seeing and the visual judgements made therein.

²⁴Linda Young, *Crosstalk and culture in Sino-American communication*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), 1-27.