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**Imagining Somewheres:  
Obstruction as a Productive Force in Decolonial Visuality,  
Solidarities, and Asian American Futures**

**A Master's Thesis for the Degree of Arts (Two Years) in Visual Culture**

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## **Abstract**

Thesis: Imagining Somewheres: Obstruction as a Positive Force in Decolonial Visuality

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Through a decolonial lens, visual culture can offer a variety of methods for solidarity-, community-, and future-building among people of color and other marginalized identities through applied imagination. However, a common impulse in these community-building endeavors is to explain as much as possible or to direct the image to the white gaze—a colonial ideology—which can further marginalize and unintentionally other the depicted subjects. My empirical materials span fine art, social media, e-zines, and historical images depicting people of color in the U.S. and Canada, with a particular focus on Asian (North) American embodiment in visual culture. I chose to concentrate on the simultaneous visibility (raced) and invisibility (under-/misrepresentation) of Asian (North) Americans, as this area remains under-researched.

In this thesis, I explore whether and how obstruction of the gaze (visual refusal) functions as a possible intervention for this problem. As interpretations of obstruction, I have analyzed codification, physical obstructions, and visual disruptions (e.g. pixelation, text) as protective visual aspects. Drawing from decoloniality (Walter D. Mignolo, Anibal Quijano), intersectional feminism (Audre Lorde), literary criticism (Monica Chiu, Eleanor Ty), and critical race studies (George Yancy), I apply an interdisciplinary perspective to a late Foucauldian discourse analysis. In addition, I have created a visual chapter—a Virtual Reality 360 piece—exploring the materiality of the theories, my own analyses of the empirical materials, and obstruction as applied to an immersive virtual space. As an applied practice, obstruction offers protective functions, as well as creative and future-building ones (through support). Although obstruction is technically one intervention, its iterations are many and should continue to be explored.

## **Keywords**

decoloniality, obstruction, radical hope, Asian American embodiment, virtual reality

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## Introduction

Decolonial resistance imagery has become an increasingly trendy topic in both academia and popular culture, but with such open access and close scrutiny from the white gaze, producing images for gazes of color can become a complex, fraught process. The question arises of who these images are for. Codification, partly through refusal (obstruction, as applied visually) and partly through use of symbols/imagery/patterns, can help bypass untargeted scrutiny by generating syntaxes geared towards specific gazes of color. This way, everyone can view the image, but not everyone can decode it.

Creating coded images like this can provide a degree of protection from the epistemic violence of the white gaze while using methods that allow image creators to focus on their target audience(s) without having to do even more work do not require a privileging of the white gaze. This method acknowledges the impossibility of escaping the white gaze but allows for protective methods that do not accidentally privilege it. The white gaze does not refer to any individual but to an ideology. This particular ideology forms the scopic drive of the colonial matrix of power, which is a multi-structure system of oppression that stratifies people through race and prioritizes whiteness and Eurocentrism.

Though not exclusive to the any one country, the U.S. is deeply sedimented with the white gaze and its many effects throughout history and culture, such as colorism, racism, epistemic violence, control of gender and sexuality, and systemic oppression of the poor and working classes. This ideology draws particular power from its own assumed neutrality, objectivity, and universality, silencing perspectives that do not confirm it. As every individual is comprised of many intersections, the oppression of the white gaze is present in all lives, not just in the lives of people of color. Countering this ideology, then, requires more than a simple refutation but the construction of solidarities across all types of difference within and between groups.

Decolonial visuality—or visuality that delinks from the colonial matrix of power—can be a potent method and vehicle for such construction. Decolonial visuality functions as a way of seeing and a way of coding images that not only resists the white gaze but recenters perspectives of color (and other marginalized identities) and builds (abstract and physical) spaces. The point, then, is not only to dismantle what exists but to create communities and solidarities and to move toward futures that “are not yet intelligible,” regardless of the uncertainty.<sup>1</sup> In other words, decolonial visuality requires radical hope.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 95.

To clarify, decolonial images are not comprised of some system of interchangeable signals or criteria. Rather, decoloniality in images may have many forms, expressions, and methods, because it is not underpinned by a strict aesthetic but by an ideology that *guides* the aesthetic. One common theme with decolonial visuality, however, is the ability to think and create without relying on the tools of the white gaze. While any resulting work may still have effect, even subversive use of colonial tools reinscribes said tools' power through use and reference; further, this action can legitimize and confirm the imaginative limitation imposed by the white gaze. Another function of decolonial visuality, then, is not just resisting the white gaze but rendering it irrelevant.

In this thesis, I explore a few common methods of decolonial visuality, I focus on the application of refusal in images—obstruction—in a selection of images from a wide range of sources and in a VR 360 piece that accompanies this thesis as a visual chapter. Particularly in my VR 360 piece, I explore the dynamics of obstruction in an immersive virtual space, as well as the materiality of selected literary, feminist, decolonial, and critical race theories that I use as support here and that I used to shape the piece from the beginning. While adjacent to artistic research, the VR 360 piece as a visual chapter stays within the parameters of visual culture. Rather than use a medium with settled norms, such as film or photography, VR 360 does not yet have an expected set of aesthetics or norms and is not even settled in any industry or methodology. Beyond immersion and perceived interaction, VR 360 as a tool allows me to engage Audre Lorde's theory on the Master's House, which states that the tools of an oppressive structure will only reinscribe that structure's power; and, in order to make sustainable changes, new tools and methods must be used. This thesis actually grew from the VR piece, rather than the other way around, as I felt better equipped to explore more of the intricacies of decolonial resistance and Monica Chiu's and Eleanor Ty's theories around inscrutability, visibility, and invisibility through practice in VR 360.

In this thesis, I interpret obstruction not as a strict category but more as a set of possible methods, including codification, visual disruptions (e.g. pixelation), physical obstruction, and restriction of access. I saw in obstruction a productive way to form new codes and pathways for communication that privilege gazes of color without reinforcing the position of the white gaze. I also saw obstruction as protection, as well as a way to move toward new ways of reaching out (between marginalized groups especially), an action directed toward expanding discourse and inclusive future-building.

As a specific point of focus for this thesis, I observe the applications of obstruction to visuality around Asian American subjects. Given the history of Asian American identity—including but

not limited to Yellow Peril, stereotypes of inscrutability, and the particular brand of simultaneous hypervisibility (as raced subjects) and invisibility (as underrepresented subjects deemed irrelevant due to perceived perpetual foreignness)—obstruction presents a fascinating but complicated set of challenges and considerations, many of which I explore through this text and through my VR 360 piece as a method for bridging the gap between theory and materiality in research.

### ***Research question***

Decolonial visibility is as complicated as the structures that it resists. Representation and resistance are difficult, intricate subjects, and at times, some solutions can even present further problems. Obstruction can be a useful intervention, but its dynamics change as it is applied to different subjects in different ways. Given the complex, fraught relationship between Asian American identity expression, the stereotype of inscrutability, and the lack of representation in mainstream U.S. visual culture, how can selective obstruction be applied as a positive force for decolonial resistance in visibility depicting Asian American identity/ies? Moreover, how can obstruction be applied to forming images and visual codes that move toward solidarities and futures that resist the white gaze while in ways that do not center it?

### ***Background and Relevance***

In recent years, a new wave of young Asian American artists and creatives has emerged, exploring humor, identities, community, history, politics, and resistance more intersectionally,

inclusively through visuality.<sup>2</sup> Crucially, this most recent wave focuses on addressing each other and rather than centering the white gaze or respectability politics, the resulting work centers the gazes of Asian America. Social media—Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter, in particular—seem to have buoyed this resurgence of Asian American community-building, facilitating connections between individuals and groups who would otherwise never meet or even enter the other’s awareness. In this wave, or at least parts of it, femme and queer voices appear to have solid space, and what makes this special is the lack of focus on the white gaze.

Asian American identity (now better known as Asian American Pacific Islander or AAPI identity) is still expanding. Though it currently connotes people of East Asian descent, it includes much more than that. This umbrella term is a recent development that began in the 1960s and 1970s and grew from a need for solidarity and support.<sup>3</sup> As musician Charlie Chin explained to Karen Ishizuka in an interview for her book *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties*:

Currently when you say Asian American, all it means is that you are of Asian descent. But originally, it was a loaded word, an explosive phrase that defined a position, a very important position: I am not a marginalized person. I don’t apologize for being Asian. I start with the premise that we have a long and involved history here of participation and contribution and I have a right to be here.<sup>4</sup>

As a statement of identity and politics in the U.S., Asian American has become a normalized marker. Regardless of past solidarities, many of which have been historiographically suppressed

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<sup>2</sup> I have added their Instagram usernames for ease of tracking, as Instagram is often the primary platform. I list creatives of East Asian descent, since that is the focus of this thesis, although Asian American includes people of South Asian descent. This is not an exhaustive list.

For acting, writing, and comedy, see Constance Wu, Jenny Yang, Awkwafina (Nora Lum), Randall Park, Ronny Chieng, Alan Yang, Kelvin Yu, Ali Wong, Eugene Lee Yang, Ashly Perez.

For magazines and news outlets, see Banana Mag, Hyphen, Mochi Mag, YOMYOMF, NextShark.

For fashion, beauty, and lifestyle, see Chinatown Pretty, Michelle Phan, Scarlett Hao (@scarletthalo\_), Song of Style, The Chriselle Factor, @i\_am\_blushing (no name stated).

For creative collectives, see Bubble T (@bubble\_\_t), Yellow Jackets Collective (@yellowjacketscollective).

For art and design, see Hailun Ma, David Choe, Elizabeth Wirija (@elizabethwirija), Jenny Chang (@jennychangdraws), Monica Ram (@moniiqwa), Joanna Yi (@joannaayi), Hyorim Kim (@yentl\_kim\_hyorim).

For expressly queer perspectives, see Kim Chi, Soju (@shotwithsoju), 小波 (@shaobohan), Ylang Ylang (@latentsexualdesire), Chella Man, Pat Xi (@tigermomdragonlady), Bailey Skye (@zah)

For expressly political perspectives, see @bitchy.asian.raisin, @asian.empress, @asias.feminist, @pocasians\_, @notyourasianfetish. (These accounts have multiple owners and do not list full names.)

For Instagram-based comedy, see Tim O (@timmeroh), Luyi Bennet (@luyidraws), Dami Lee (@dami\_lee), Dream Barbie (@iamdreambarbie).

<sup>3</sup> K.L. Ishizuka, *Serve the People*, Verso, 2016, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> K.L. Ishizuka, *Serve the People*, Verso, 2016, p. 3.

by the white gaze, the term's most prevalent connotation of East Asian also feels inextricably linked to colorism and, at times, anti-Black racism. However, this is a complex topic that, while affected by U.S. history, is also affected by histories and specific values from some Asian countries, including but not limited to China, India, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, where lighter skin also connotes wealth, a "good" job indoors, and, by extension, beauty. Around the topic of Asian American identity, colorism is a large aspect in the discourse around who gets to be included in this group. Moreover, immigrant labels also depend, somewhat, on the historicizing and erasure of contemporary Indigeneity in the U.S. Currently, the discourse seems to be expanding and becoming more inclusive, as evidenced by this newest wave of decolonial creatives. For this thesis, however, I have focused on the East Asian diasporic perspective within Asian America.

The concept of whiteness, on the other hand, dominates discourse so thoroughly that it appears ahistorical and universal. For centuries, its definitions continued to expand in order to include more people, who would then join in on the continued oppression of (ethnically) non-European people in the U.S.<sup>5</sup> By stratifying power according to race, and assigning specific values to each race as biological and inherent, whiteness and the topic of race form(ed) a self-sustaining divisive measure to keep groups in tension with each other. The U.S.'s long, sordid history with slavery, the ongoing genocide of the indigenous people, systemic oppression, and the definition(s) of Blackness resulted in a strange system, where the relative privileges and higher status to ethnic and racial minority groups are constantly defined by proximity to whiteness and distance from blackness.

Decoloniality defines itself by the delinking from these structures and, in so doing, offers a suitable space and set of tools for these necessary, complicated conversations between people of color across difference. Through coding and specific types of distribution, epistemological and literal access to these conversations protects people of color and provides spaces and methods while also declaring the white gaze's irrelevance here. While decoloniality has become an increasingly trendy topic in both academia and popular culture, it is important to remember that this refers to active separation from colonial ideology. As such, decoloniality should not be conflated with decolonization, which denotes a specific political and economic process of independence from a colonizing force.<sup>6</sup> A field grounded in North and, especially, South America, decoloniality is not a form of postcolonialism, which is based on South Asian

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<sup>5</sup> K.L. Ishizuka, *Serve the People*, Verso, , p. 17–19.

<sup>6</sup> E. Tuck and K.W. Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–40. Available from: The Decolonizer, (accessed 8 March 2018).

scholarship. These areas of the world have drastically different histories, and the difference of these theories reflect that.

Notably, decoloniality in visuality can appear in many forms, some of which include expressing painful personal narratives to highlight political, socio-economic, and/or historical circumstance(s). Pain, too, is a part of resistance and life in general. As Monica Chiu states, the combatting of stereotypes and oppressive structures will almost automatically allude to them.<sup>7</sup> For many Asian Americans, the prevalence of not just a perceived perpetual foreignness but of a hypersexualization and infantilization of women and a neutering of men all affect discourse, personal safety, life experiences, legislation, mental health, job opportunities, and so on. To better understand the current discourse around Asian Americans, specifically women and femmes, the history of the imago must be understood. While this imago has changed since the arrival of Asians in the Americas in the 17th century, the overarching theme is a mysterious woman whose sexual availability is mediated by orientalist perceptions of threat of violence (Yellow Peril), deceitfulness, or a childlike innocence and subservience. The Asian American femme imago is defined as much by positive definition (what it is) as by negative definition (what it is not). The imago has undergone cycles of change, but the formula follows the colonial imaginary where racism, sexism and classism converge in one mysterious figure who exists in a servant-dominatrix dialectic. Often, the dominatrix is expressed as a dragon lady, a trope that dates back to the early 1900s. The earliest example in visual culture that I found dates back to 1917 as Fu Manchu's daughter Fah Lo Suee, who appears in the comic book "The Hand of Fu Manchu." The dragon lady role has existed in comic books and TV shows since then and has been forced on acting legends throughout U.S. history from Anna May Wong (1905–1961) to Lucy Liu (1968–).<sup>8</sup>

However, the difference with a decolonial approach to tackling these difficult narratives is that, instead of stopping there and delineating the realm from the personal from that of the political, it looks to the structures that cause them. Decolonial visual and narrative spaces do not focus on pain or humiliation as ends or experiences for white consumption either; rather, these expressions are directed toward building communities and support through reflections on everyday lives, possible futures, and hopeful somewheres that do not yet exist except in abstract forms (or as temporary spaces). Furthermore, the coding in decolonial visuality allows for some protection through coding and blocking gazes, which communicates the in-group(s).

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<sup>7</sup> M. Chiu, "The Cultural Production of Asian American Young Adults in the Novels of Marie G. Lee, An Na, and Doris Jones Yang," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2006, p. 172. Available from: Project MUSE, (accessed 5 March 2018).

<sup>8</sup> *Appendix Now!*, [website], 2013, <http://www.marvunapp.com/Appendix/fahlosue.htm>, (accessed 10 May 2018).

My VR 360 piece for this thesis—which examines the materiality of decolonial visual resistance, refusal/obstruction, scrutiny, invisibility/visibility of Asian Americans—is based on artistic research, a field that has grown and developed since its inception in the 1990s. As technology has advanced, combining artistic research with virtual reality has become increasingly common. For example, Stanford University’s Virtual Human Interaction Lab (VHIL) explore different aspects of human interactions through the lens of narrative, art, design, visuality, psychology, neuroscience, and physiology. Currently, VHIL has one project studying the physiological and psychological processes involved in racism and racial justice.

### ***Empirical Material and Delimitations***

I have chosen a wide variety of empirical materials in tandem with my methodology, spanning 1800s news sketches to 20th century protests to contemporary fine art to zines and blogs to Instagram posts. My VR 360 piece, which I discuss in Chapter 4, is not an empirical material but a form of applied research. A common critique of visual culture studies is a lack of connection between theory and the world being theorized about. Artistic research has boundaries, too, in that it is tied up in specific institutions and occupy a space between academia and fine art, which can leave rigor unstable. Connecting theory to materiality can create new types of knowledge for visual culture.

While I discuss decoloniality and certain theories about indigenous, Black, and Latinx identities, I do not draw direct equivalencies to Asian American identities. Instead, I highlight these theories for their underlying logic, which speaks to the white gaze and the coloniality of power, and so they can still be applied to people of color more broadly in that sense. I focus on images of Asian Americans, because they are under-researched. This topic also concerns me on a personal level, and I wanted to apply my experience and perspective to this aspect of visual culture. In my analysis, I refer to the Asian diasporic communities in Canada and the U.S. as Asian North Americans where applicable due to structural, historical, and discursive similarities.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Theory and Method***

During the analysis, I use a variety of complementary theories in order to examine the supporting visual materials. This consists of an interdisciplinary combination of decolonial,

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<sup>9</sup> “The United States and Canada mirrored each other in the way their governments and communities both made use of and yet discriminated against Asians in this period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”

E. Ty, *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, p. 14.

feminist, literary, and critical race studies. Within this mixed theoretical framework, my primary theorists are *epistemic disobedience* and *the colonial matrix of power* (Walter D. Mignolo), *refusal* (Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang), *the white gaze* (George Yancy), and *radical hope* (Jonathan Lear).

For further grounding, I refer to the *visible/invisible* paradox of Asian American identity (Eleanor Ty), *inscrutability* (Monica Chiu), *hubris of the zero point* (Santiago Castro-Gómez), *coloniality of power* (Aníbal Quijano), bell hooks' perspectives on community and theory as a healing practice, and Audre Lorde's perspectives on intersectional feminism and the materiality of theory.

I chose to make this thesis a two-part project, involving a combination of written and visual analytic research methods. The written portion of my thesis uses late Foucauldian discourse analysis in the styles of philosopher George Yancy, literary scholar David Palumbo-Liu, and critical feminist Trinh T. Minh-Ha. The visual portion, my VR 360 piece, is a material application of the text. The VR 360 piece is an integral part of the thesis that researches the theories and methods that I apply in the written analyses. I have tried to apply the theory in a way that should be considered closer to artistic research and applied visual culture.

### ***Previous Research***

It appears that research in this area is either deeply scarce or difficult to locate. I have not yet found previous research in obstruction, decolonial visibility, and immersive virtual spaces. This may be due, in part, to the relative newness of the Asian American Pacific Islander identity, critical race theory, and decoloniality, which all developed during the last century, though I do not suggest that the “newness” is the only reason. I have found very little scholarship on obstruction/refusal in visibility, and I have found no scholarship at all on the subject as applied to Asian American identity expressions. As of this spring, I found one dissertation (“Sonic Overlook: Blackness between Sound and Image” by Charles P. Linscott in 2015) and one journal article (“Defining the Aesthetic(s) of Negation in El Techo de la Ballena” by Sean Nesselrode in 2014) that address refusal in visibility. Coincidentally, both Linscott and Nesselrode refer to refusal as a starting point and as a productive tool, and both delve into history, abstraction, resistance, and identities in the Americas. However, I have not yet found any articles or dissertations focusing on obstruction/refusal in visibility through an explicitly decolonial perspective.

Overall, Asian American perspectives and embodiment in visual culture, immersive visibility, and decolonial visibility remains under-researched, or at least difficult to find, in academia at large. The sheer effort required to find such materials speaks to the level of erasure, suppression, and

perceived irrelevance of Asian American perspectives in North American academia. Most of the scholarship I found that focuses on Asian American identity expressions—especially gendered and/or queer—concentrates on the desire to be seen by a mainstream audience, on boosting visibility in mainstream discourse, and on finding ways to assert selfhood and community to the white gaze. Many of the topics are vital ones that I also address here, such as the Model Minority myth, perceived perpetual foreignness, monoliths, and invisibility/visibility. Many of these texts are also written for Asian American readers, which feels like a step in an interesting direction. However, I experienced difficulty finding work that focuses on decolonial obstruction/refusal in visibility and its potential application in forming inter-group (cross-racial, cross-ethnic, etc.) solidarities, research, and conversations. The confrontations in the texts that I *did* find perform an important function, and I do not mean to suggest that we instead focus only on obstruction. Rather, I would argue for a multiplicity of approaches, and for the time being, I cannot seem to locate more than a handful.

Admittedly, much scholarship happens in specialized circles and at events that I cannot participate in, since I no longer live in the U.S. For example, at the Association for Asian American Studies' 2018 annual conference, a panel discussion took place: "Centering Legacies of Resistance: Asian American Visual Culture Strategies." While one speaker, Laura Kina, touched on virtual reality, historiography, and Asian American identity ("Collaborative Scholarship in Digital Humanities: Creating the Virtual Asian American Art Museum"), I cannot say for certain what methods were discussed.

Currently, Courtney Cogburn, PhD at Columbia University, is conducting a study focusing on physiological functions (e.g. physical panic responses), psychological processes, empathy, racism, and racial justice in virtual reality at Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab (VHIL). At Mounth Holyoke College in Massachusetts, John Tawa researches race relations (between and among minority groups, between minority groups and whites) and virtuality.

In terms of more foundational arguments and ideologies about Asian American embodiment in culture and history/historiography, this area is and has been analyzed by literary and critical race scholars Eleanor Ty, Monica Chiu, David Palumbo-Liu, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Donald Goellnicht, Iyko Day, Rachel C. Lee, Laura Hyun Yi Kang, Dorinne Kondo, Karen Ishizuka, and Grace Lee Boggs. These perspectives and many others that focus on people of color or other marginalized identities often build on the foundations laid by vital Black feminist scholarship, particularly of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. In terms of the dialogical dynamics between intersections, Mikhail M. Bakhtin offers a proto-intersectional logic with his theories about the polyphonic novel and heteroglossia.

The concept of refusal, however, is something I took from Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's articles on qualitative research methods in regards to indigeneity in the U.S., though I have translated the underlying logic of it into methods for visual application and shifted the focus demographic(s) from indigenous people to people of East Asian descent in the U.S.

Decolonial theory draws from North and South American scholarship and should be seen as separate from postcolonial theory, which is rooted in South Asia. Walter D. Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, Emma Perez, and John Muthyala explore decoloniality from a North and South American historiographical perspective. José David Saldívar, Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, Paula M.L. Moya, Glenda Carpio, Arlene Davila, Lyn Dilorio, Ylce Irizarry, Claudia Milian, Julie Avril Minich, Sarah Quesada, Ramón Saldívar, and Silvio Torres-Saillant have all explored decolonial imagination in their work, particularly in relation to Afro-Latinidad (the intersection of Black and Latinx identities in history, culture, and selfhood), historiography, the Dominican Republic, and the literary works of Junot Díaz.

### *Disposition of the Thesis*

In Chapter 1, I analyze the ideology of the white gaze, the sedimentation of experience, discourse(s), and histories inherent to perspectives, as well as some problems and limits of visual representation as a sole method of resistance to the white gaze. In Chapter 2, I discuss some common interventions for resisting the white gaze and expanding visual culture; specifically, I look at exhumation of historical images, humor, documentation and archiving (effects), and collage/bricolage as an expression of decolonial imagination.

In Chapter 3, I analyze obstruction as a form of refusal in visuality, and go on to examine its dynamics, power relations, and functions on two visually driven platforms: zines and Instagram. In Chapter 4, I explore the use of obstruction as a generative force (via codification, physical obstructions, and aspects inherent in to the medium itself), as well as expand on the creative and production processes in relation to the decolonial, literary, and critical race theories applied to my empirical materials. Here, I also discuss my working methodology for the VR 360 piece.

In Chapter 5 (the VR 360 piece), I connect the theories more materially to decolonial resistance in visuality, specifically in an immersive medium. In this chapter, I also analyze my use of obstruction via codification, technology, and set design, as well as the relationship between the theoretical aspects to the piece's power dynamics, potential problems, and production process.

## Chapter 1. Sedimentation, Problems and Limits of Representation in Visual Culture

In both academia and U.S. culture at large, whiteness is often considered a neutral standpoint, and this affirms the fallacy that an unembodied, objective experience is possible. In his book, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, George Yancy describes the intricacies of theory from a raced, bodied perspective. Here, Yancy delves into how the white gaze, as an ideology, oppresses and gaslights academics of color, especially Black academics, into feeling less intelligent or legitimate for including embodied (and sometimes emotional) perspectives in the “neutral” environment of academia:

I theorize from a place of lived embodied experience, as a site of exposure. In fact, it is a double exposure. I am exposed because I am also raced [...] The embodied self is bracketed and deemed irrelevant to theory, superfluous and cumbersome in one’s search for truth. It is best, or so we are told, to reason from *nowhere*. I can’t afford to philosophize from “nowhere.” The white racist world confronts me from a *somewhere*, from a *here*. The white male philosopher/author presumes to speak for *all* of “us” without the slightest mention of his raced (or gendered) identity.<sup>10</sup>

Whiteness, sedimented with complicated history, becomes an unmarked force that moves freely in its domination, and it is against this backdrop—which I explain in further detail in the following section—that I write this thesis. Though the term *the white gaze* comes from critical race theory and *the colonial matrix of power* stems from decolonial theory, I see the white gaze as the scopopic drive of the latter. These schools of thought, though housed in different disciplines, are deeply related, as they both address the same overarching structures.

In this chapter, I will examine coloniality, historiography, and sedimentation in the white gaze; the limits and problems of visual representation as a sole resistance method; and some common methods of decolonial resistance in visual culture. As I mentioned in the introduction, decoloniality refers to the unlinking from the ideology behind colonization—coloniality—and not to the process of decolonization. In accordance with Walter D. Mignolo’s definition of decoloniality, decolonial resistance is the act of unlinking from the colonial matrix of power, “a racial system of social classification that invented Occidentalism [and] created the conditions for Orientalism[,]”<sup>11</sup> which dominates through the control of knowledge, institutions, female or femme bodies and sexuality, and economics.

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<sup>10</sup> G. Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> W. Mignolo, ‘Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7-8, 2009, pp. 2-3. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 3 January 2018).

Eurocentered colonialism, in the sense of a formal system of political domination by Western European societies over others seems a question of the past. Its successor, Western imperialism, is an association of social interests between the dominant groups ('social classes' and/or 'ethnies') of countries with unequally articulated power, rather than an imposition from the outside.

However, that specific colonial structure of power produced the specific social discriminations which later were codified as 'racial', 'ethnic', 'anthropological' or 'national', according to the times, agents, and populations involved. These intersubjective constructions, product of Eurocentered colonial domination were even assumed to be 'objective', 'scientific', categories, then of a historical significance. That is, as natural phenomena, not referring to the history of power. This power structure was, and still is, the framework within which operate the other social relations of classes or estates.<sup>12</sup>

Over time, these interconnected structures and methods sedimented into discourse and sites of power. As a complementary set of structures formed and steeped in the ideologies of colonialism (i.e. coloniality), they form a self-sustaining larger power structure, the colonial matrix of power. The white gaze, then, functions as its "scopic drive."<sup>13</sup> This set of structures—the colonial matrix of power—is so entangled that subversion requires consideration of all aspects at once—an intersectional approach—rather than just one at a time.<sup>14</sup> For example, addressing problems of poverty in Flushing, Queens, New York (a majority Chinese and Korean neighborhood) would require an understanding of not just economics but class, race, ethnicities, gender, sexuality, disability, and age. Due to the complexities and interconnectedness of the structures that oppress (the colonial matrix of power, iterated at the white gaze in the U.S., among other countries), intersectional approaches must be applied to problem solving and analysis.

I selected the images in this chapter and in Chapter 2 for their engagement with gazes of color and to help elucidate the power dynamics and inner workings of the common resistance methods in the final section of this chapter. At the base of my analyses here is Walter D. Mignolo's theory of epistemic disobedience, which denotes a "radical re-framing (e.g. de-colonizing) of [...] the modern/colonial foundation of the control of knowledge [...] and] assumptions that sustain" them.<sup>15</sup> Through analyzing these images, I will touch on epistemic disobedience, audience and

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<sup>12</sup> A. Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2–3, 2007, p. 168. Available from: The University of Warwick, (accessed 3 January 2018).

<sup>13</sup> "[T]he construction of categories and ordering of things is still predominantly appearance or the scopic drive." E. Ty, *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> W. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7-8, 2009, pp. 1-4. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 3 January 2018).

<sup>15</sup> W. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7-8, 2009, p. 4. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 3 January 2018).

power, hope as visual practice, and the decolonial imaginary. I will also address issues around monolithic identity, its context(s), and its real world ramifications.

### *Sedimentation in The White Gaze, Hubris of the Zero Point*

People of color—our bodies, lands, resources, and histories—have long been dominated by white Western colonialism and imperialism both in discourse, in legislation, and in our physical realities. Inevitably, this coloniality has sedimented in our collective and individual unconsciouss, bleeding into each individuals’s understanding of their position(s) in the world. This is a historiographic, epistemic domination; it is a form of violence that allows white people to place themselves—especially white Europeans—at the center of knowledge-making, knowledge-having, and knowledge-validating. Decoloniality scholar Walter Mignolo refers to this as one of the four interconnected spheres of the colonial matrix of power.<sup>16</sup>

Through this lens, it bases itself upon the hubris of the zero point. As Santiago Castro-Gómez describes in his book *The Hubris of the Zero Point: Science, Race and Illustration in New Granada (1750–1816)*<sup>17</sup>, perceived objectivity is crucial to the power underpinning this type of vision. “This pretense, which calls to mind the theological image of *Deus absconditus* (which observes without being observed) but also the Foucauldian panopticon, exemplifies with clarity the hubris of such thinking.”<sup>18</sup> In short, the white gaze enacts the colonial matrix of power by defining everything else, and by installing itself as the default perspective and authority. Through control of knowledge and ways of knowing, through institutional control, through control of sexuality and gender discourse, through control of nationhood, the white gaze structures itself into the fabric of our everyday lives.<sup>19</sup> These structures, so imbued with whiteness as default, then prevent others from defining it or even marking its existence. The power of the white gaze, then, is in its unmarked status.

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<sup>16</sup> W. Mignolo, ‘Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7-8, 2009, p. 5. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 3 January 2018).

<sup>17</sup> S. Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero: ciencia, raza e ilustración en la Nueva Granada (1750–1816)*, Bogotá, Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> “Esta pretensión, que recuerda la imagen teológica del *Deus absconditus* (que observa sin ser observado), pero también del panóptico foucaultiano, ejemplifica con claridad la *hybris* del pensamiento ilustrado.”

S. Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero: ciencia, raza e ilustración en la Nueva Granada (1750–1816)*, Bogotá, Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2005, p.18. Translation by the author.

<sup>19</sup> A. Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’, *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2-3, 2007, p. 169. Available from: The University of Warwick, (accessed 3 January 2018).

In other words, the white gaze is always the definer and never the defined, because to define it is to refute its default status. As literary and feminist scholar Trinh T. Minh-Ha explains, epistemic violence and the white gaze are intertwined.

[T]heory threatens, for it can upset rooted ideologies by exposing the mechanics of their workings. It shakes the established canons and questions every norm validated as 'natural' or 'human.' [...] Theory oppresses [...] when it presents itself as a means to exert authority—the Voice of Knowledge.<sup>20</sup>

However constructed the white gaze—an iteration of the colonial matrix of power—may be, the inherent epistemic violence and its consequences are very real. As philosopher George Yancy explains, “white discursive practices are inextricably linked to forms of political and social power.”<sup>21</sup> Often in some combination with masculinity, heterosexism, classism, and/or non-disabledness, the white gaze frames discourse around people of color with unfavorable and monolithic perceptions. These perceptions can and do affect judgment to varying degrees of harm.<sup>22</sup> This can mean, for example, internalized hatred for the self or crimes against Asian Americans due to the stereotype of perpetual foreignness and assumed lack of English language comprehension, right of residence, and/or assertiveness.<sup>23</sup> This stereotype of perpetual foreignness, like many others, contributes to coloniality through discourse, continued scrutiny by the white gaze, and multiple levels of othering, as well as the normalization of these practices. By extension, acceptance of this stereotype as fact normalizes any resulting physical, institutional, and psychic violence.<sup>24</sup> This kind of discourse tells Asian Americans about themselves and silences them when they object or when they do not comply with preconceived notions from the white gaze. Discourse, steeped in the white gaze, becomes a tool of coloniality, a way to police identities without active effort.

The white gaze, then, is a practice of imposing a dominating vision onto the world and, by extension, the people in it. This practice of worlding, as Gayatri Spivak calls it, forces the

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<sup>20</sup> T. T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcolonialism and Feminism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989, pp. 41-42.

<sup>21</sup> G. Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, p. xxxiii.

<sup>22</sup> A. Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’, *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2-3, 2007, p. 169-171. Available from: The University of Warwick, (accessed 3 January 2018).

<sup>23</sup> E.T. Creef, ‘Model Minorities and Monstrous Selves: The Winter Olympic Showdown of Kristi Yamaguchi and Midori Ito; or: ‘How to Tell Your Friends Apart from the Japs’ 1992-Style’, *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, March 1993, pp. 144-145, Available from: AnthroSource, (accessed 10 March 2018).

<sup>24</sup> M. Wei, P.P. Heppner, T.-Y. Ku and K. Y.-H. Liao, ‘Racial Discrimination Stress, Coping, and Depressive Symptoms Among Asian Americans: A Moderation Analysis’, *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2010, pp. 136-150. Available from: American Psychological Association, (accessed 10 April 2018).

colonizers' vision of the world—the colonial imaginary—into a dominant position. The white gaze is based on the perception of white dominance as normal and on that perception being fact. Within the logic of the white gaze, whiteness is neutral and objective—or default, as I mentioned above—and in the zero sum logic of the white gaze, people of color are then marked and subjective.

Enacting this colonial imaginary, the white gaze imposes a value system—coloniality—with realworld ramifications, such as the erasure of histories and communities, fewer employment and education opportunities for people of color, immigration quotas, and unprosecuted extrajudicial police killings of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people. These processes become normalized and corroborated through the flood of supporting images in the news. On an epistemological level, for institutions within visual culture, this value system also subsumes and operates through institutions like museums, archives, and universities get to “decide” what is culture and what is worth knowing. For example, graffiti on the F train is vandalism, but in the MoMA, it's art. In short, the white gaze is an ideology.<sup>25</sup>

### *Institutions as Sites of Epistemic Violence in Visual Culture*

Another form of obstruction in presentation (which I discuss in further detail in Chapter 3) is to deliberately control the exposure (in terms of quantified viewership) of the image through refusal of more well-established channels. This may manifest as refusal to show in an institution with questionable practices in regards to the community around it or to the community/ies that the work concerns. While exhibiting in such a space offers the opportunity to speak directly to those in power at the institution and to those who may not otherwise (know to) seek understanding on the subject(s) at hand, it also comes with the complicated problem facing resistance art in institutional spaces.

For example, indigenous American artist Edgar Heap of Birds' mixed media piece *Relocate Destroy, In Memory of Native Americans, In Memory of Jews, 1987, From American Policy* (1987) is another piece currently in the Whitney's protest art exhibition (fig. 1). The textual piece openly tackles the removal and genocide of Indigenous Americans and that of the Jews during the Holocaust. The curation and hosting of this multimedia historical exhibition suggests political alignment.

However, the Whitney had a different response to those protesting their own removal, a struggle

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<sup>25</sup> To clarify, my point here is not to neatly equate the struggles of different ethnic and racial groups or subject matters. I reference examples of physical violence and of epistemic violence in museums to illustrate the scope of the colonial matrix of power and its many expressions, and how the ideology of the white gaze lays the groundwork for violence against people of color more broadly.

intertwined with race and class, on November 8, 2017 at Laura Owens' opening night.<sup>26</sup> Defend Boyle Heights, a Los Angeles-based cross-community organization (and member of Boyle Heights Against Artwashing and Displacement [BHAAD]) came to protest gallerist Gavin Brown and artist Laura Owens for their artwashing of neighborhoods in New York and Los Angeles, which have pushed out long-time Latinx, Black, and Asian American residents who cannot afford the resulting rent prices.<sup>27</sup> The Defend Boyle Heights protest banners could easily fit in with the Whitney's ongoing exhibition "An Incomplete History of Protest Art" (fig. 2). Inherent in both images is the radical hope that underpins all resistance.<sup>28</sup> Even though both images contain text-based directives with similar narratives against racially motivated removals, one crucial difference is that Edgar Heap of Birds' work turns it into an artifact through historicization rather than a critique or a call to action. The environment that implies that the problem is part of the past and requires no further action, whereas the Defend Boyle Heights banners demand attention, action, and change. As Audre Lorde points out in her essay "Learning From the 60s," "[w]e lose our history so easily, what is not predigested for us[.]"<sup>29</sup> Another difference is that here, the institution is openly complicit and must act. More than whether or not the institutional environment undercuts the artwork, the artist, or its method of resistance is whether such involvement allows for institutional and personal complacency with the appearance of sympathy and action.

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<sup>26</sup> B. Sutton, 'Anti-Gentrification Activists Protest Laura Owens Exhibition at the Whitney Museum', *Hyperallergic*, 10 November 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/411134/anti-gentrification-activists-protest-laura-owens-exhibition-at-the-whitney-museum/>, (accessed 16 February 2018).

<sup>27</sup> "We [...] want to communicate to you [Laura Owens] that together with other mothers from our Boyle Heights community we have fought for decades to eliminate violence and bring peace to our neighborhood. [...] Meanwhile, the police treated us and our children as enemies. [...] It was many years with fear throwing ourselves to the floor because of the bullets, asking the police to respect us and looking for programs and improvements for our community.

What comes now are not the improvements we asked for. What has come are forced improvements imposed on us by people who do not know us or understand our history. Now that our community has improved, artists arrive with their galleries and their coffee shops, close our businesses, raise our rents, and offer us everything they never gave us when we were alone fighting. That's why we ask the galleries to leave. Because they are part of a change that instead of benefiting us is hurting us.

Our community of Pico Aliso is a couple of blocks from the Laura Owens gallery, 356 Mission. The people who live in that community have been fighting against the eviction for 20 years. First, they removed more than 900 families from our neighborhood. Later, they wanted to privatize our homes, now they raise the rents to immigrant families. When we spoke with Laura Owens and asked her to close her gallery, she told us that her employees were going to lose their jobs but she did not say anything about the hundreds of families whose housing is in danger. She said she was going to come back to talk to us, but never came back and we're still waiting for her to come talk to us."

D. Gonzales and A. Hernandez, 'Letter to Laura Owens from the Women of Pico Gardens & Aliso Village', [website], 2017, <http://alianzacontraartwashing.org/en/letter-to-laura-owens-from-the-women-of-pico-gardens-aliso-village/>, (accessed 25 April 2018).

<sup>28</sup> J. Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 148.

<sup>29</sup> A. Lorde, 'Learning from the 60s', *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*, New York, Crossing Press, 2007, p. 138.

### *Limits of Visual Representation as Sole Resistance Metric*

One intervention for the problem of the white gaze and coloniality in discourse is to increase the number of images that depict people of color. Given the dominance of whiteness and the white gaze in U.S. culture, this increased representation (of people of color) is certainly part of countering coloniality in discourse. Within this context of erasure and suppression, it is a natural response to produce as much visual material as possible. While visual representation, in terms of quantity, counteracts the narrative of people of color's cultural nonexistence or non-participation in mainstream U.S. society, depictions alone as a method fail to address the coloniality behind the original lack of representation. Being seen or acknowledged as people who exist in society is not enough to counter the colonial discourse, especially if these images are refuting an ideology based on a violent gaze. This also begs the question: who are these images requesting acknowledgment, value, or validation from? The act of the request (via the image) also suggests that the depicted person(s) of color do not yet exist or have value or legitimacy.

Many images aiming to represent whole groups of people of color still center the white gaze and seek validation from white institutions, although it does have the effect of reaching out to otherwise scattered communities, forcing our histories into the presently accepted one. However, this brings up another problem: with using visual representation as proof is that it attempts to communicate solely with the white gaze by requesting permission, value, and acknowledgment from the very structure that denigrated them in the first place. Quite often, the problems of respectability politics, funding, and creative control become closely integrated into the pursuit of creating images as proof/request. To produce this type of representative imagery only reinforces the hierarchy of the white gaze and its dominance over people of color. Additionally, the sole goal of increasing visual representation can lead to monolithic representations of groups, often at the expense of queer, disabled, working class, and other non-normative people of color. This can happen with projects developed and managed by people of color, applying the white gaze and its associated values to bodies of color in order to be seen as (equally) valuable (to white people).

These images invalidate themselves by collapsing whole ethnic and racial groups into a single, easily represented narrative (a monolith) that the white gaze can consume in one sitting. For example, TIME Magazine had a famous cover on August 31, 1987 shot by Ted Thai for a story about Asian American children (fig. 3).<sup>30</sup> The cover featured six relatively light-skinned Asian American children under a bold white headline: "Those Asian-American WHIZ KIDS." While I

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<sup>30</sup> T. Thai, "Those Asian-American WHIZ Kids", [magazine cover], 1987, <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19870831,00.html>, (accessed 3 January 2018).

cannot know whether the creative direction came from someone within TIME Magazine, or whether Ted Thai created it all himself, the image equates each child with the next and, under that headline, the image equates them with Asian American children everywhere. The mainstream conversation around Asian American identity in the 1980s was, admittedly, more focused on respectability politics and increased inclusion into mainstream society and visual culture. Regardless, the image flattens its subjects and, with the addition of the headline, Asian American youth culture in general. These images also imply that whole cultures (and all associated individuals) can be consumed in totality as flattened, knowable objects—even if the people are depicted as inscrutable, the group becomes knowable under the banner of the mysterious other. Inscrutability has highly charged connotations for people of East Asian descent, as this quality is often cited as a reason for both our dehumanization and categorization as monoliths, sometimes involving open denigration, other times erasure.<sup>31</sup> The concept of Asianness—which is a fairly recent invention that often erases South Asians—as an inscrutable monolith is so pervasive that Asian characters in film and television are routinely whitewashed on the basis that people of Asian descent are “not very expressive.”<sup>32</sup> More than a few casting directors actually cite inscrutability as a reason for not casting Asian American actors and instead putting white actors in yellowface. At their cores, monolithic images treat people of color and their bodies as if they are not sites of their own knowledge—and sources of their own agency and legitimacy—but rather objects waiting to be discovered, categorized, and known by the white gaze.

The underlying issue is the setup: bodies of color offered up to the white gaze for scrutiny and judgment, or as Yancy puts it: “The white gazer assumes the position of *knowing* subject. The Black naked body becomes the gazed upon *known* object.”<sup>33</sup> (Though Yancy deals with Blackness here, the general power structure remains the same in the case of Asian Americans’ relationship to the white gaze as objects to be known, or more accurately: conquered through inquiry.<sup>34</sup>) This is also precisely why so many visually-focused diversity initiatives fail: their purpose is not integration, pluralism, or inclusion but the marking of difference through a white lens. In effect, the image of change (here: diversity) serves as the change itself, as the goal is to portray an image, particularly to the public. For this reason, quantifiable depiction alone is insufficient to address

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<sup>31</sup> E. K. Andres, ‘Scrutinized! Surveillance in Asian North American Literature by Monica Chiu (review)’, *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2015, pp. 376-377. Available from: Project MUSE, (accessed 5 March 2018).

<sup>32</sup> E. Wang, ‘Casting Director Allegedly Calls Asian Actors “Not Very Expressive”’, *Teen Vogue*, 11 September 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/casting-director-asian-actors-not-very-expressive>, (accessed 3 January 2018).

<sup>33</sup> G. Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 133-134.

<sup>34</sup> E. Tuck & K. W. Yang, ‘Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 6, p. 813. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 8 March 2018).

the power and prevalence of discursive coloniality, especially in regards to historiography and stereotypes. If the quantity of depictions (regardless of intent) were enough as a sole method for normalization (i.e. absorbing the idea that Asian America exists), the racist imagery of the 18th through 21st centuries would have already countered the white gaze's control of discourse. The issue is that the bulk of these images speak from a white perspective to the white gaze and are codified as such. Resistance in visual culture, then, must be methodically diversified and think beyond the literality of *what* bodies are shown but *how* they are shown, *by* whom (behind the scenes), *for* whom.

## Chapter 2. Some Common Interventions for Resisting the White Gaze: Methods of Decolonial Visuality

In the previous chapter, I discussed epistemic domination as a form of violence. Many of the images in this section exist (or are repurposed) to counter the erasure of the white gaze and colonial historiography. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, resisting a system as complex and deep-rooted as the colonial matrix of power requires an equally complex approach. As such, visual representation of ethnic and racial groups among people of color is only a part of the issue. Resistance, if the goal is future-making, construction of self, and community building, must encompass more goals than simply being seen as a person of color or the (problematic) request to be validated by the white gaze. Historian John Muthyala's own answer to this phenomenon, *reworlding*, deals with this very issue by focusing on the undoing of the colonial imaginary by decentralizing whiteness and recentralizing people of color, particularly from a historiographical perspective.<sup>35</sup>

While my main focus is the application of obstruction as a productive force, I feel it is important to highlight a few other decolonial methods in visuality so as to give a wider, more nuanced context. Numerous styles and methods of resistance exist in visuality to combat epistemic violence and erasure, complete with individual aims, nuances, and motivations. To be clear, I do not aim to define or analyze every example, type, or nuance in existence. Such an undertaking feels both impossible and pointless, as it would likely flatten its own subjects. Instead, I chose to analyze certain images for their engagement with community-building, solidarities, and nourishment as resistance—and for operating in ways that do not privilege the white gaze. In themselves, communities that build on solidarities undermine the epistemic control of the white gaze, as well as its authoritative position as source of value and validator of sites of meaning. In effect, solidarities across difference draw strength from those differences by “commit[ting] [...] to [...] future[s] that can include each other and [...] the particular strengths of our individual identities [...] [where we] allow each other our differences [...] as we recognize our sameness.”<sup>36</sup> Solidarities across difference, then, pose the greatest threat to the assumed authority of the white gaze, as it threatens its status as default and shows other ways of living, organizing, and functioning together.

In particular, I have chosen the images in this chapter for their nuanced relationship(s) to the Asian North American past and present. These images engage decoloniality, in that they attempt

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<sup>35</sup> J. Muthyala, *Reworlding America: Myth, History, and Narrative*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2006, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> A. Lorde, 'Learning from the 60s', *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*, New York, Crossing Press, 2007, p. 142.

to delink from the colonial matrix of power.<sup>37</sup> When I talk about decolonial images, I am not referring to an interchangeable system of visual codes or a rigid set of criteria that add up to successful resistance in whatever configuration. Decoloniality in images may take many forms and expressions, as it is not a style or set of symbols but an ideology that guides the aesthetic, particularly in ways that veer away from the tools of the white gaze.<sup>38</sup> The images engage decoloniality differently, highlighting different areas within the subject. Some factors may be the approach to production (who made the image and how), what and how does it depict its contents, who is it made for, and where it is exhibited and/or published.

As with all visual culture, the viewer brings their own sedimentation to their readings of images, and it is impossible to account for this in every way. Every image is different, and there is no exact guide. There is also no way to control all context(s) in which these decolonial images are shown. For example, a naked body positivity selfie has very different impact on a feminist of color Instagram account than it does on a porn site. And while the surface values or individual components of the image do not determine decoloniality by way of rigid formula, images can be coded with certain elements that have a high probability of only being understood or even noticed by the target audience (here: Asian Americans).

In many images that attempt to portray resistance (or that at least have that projected onto them), the privileged audience is arguably white. They are the ones for whom the image is made. The images I chose (or, in one case, its context) privilege Asian American viewers. Within that basic identity marker, the examples each engage differently with age, class, gender, and/or sexuality. Categorization can be a reductive practice, but due to the constraints of the thesis format (namely: length), I have divided some popular visual methods of resistance into the following four categories: exhuming existing images, humor, documentation/archiving effects, and collage/bricolage.

### ***Exhuming existing images***

This approach, unlike the others below, concerns itself solely with refuting colonial historiography. As effective as acts of physical violence, systemic gaslighting, and erasure disappears human beings from the accepted account of history, which affects the way in which

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<sup>37</sup> W. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7-8, 2009, p. 5. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 3 January 2018).

<sup>38</sup> A. Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*, New York, Crossing Press, 2007, pp. 110-111.

we understand our world. For example, the myth of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners is easily debunked by research into early Chinese-Filipinx settlements in Louisiana (admittedly, prior to the Louisiana Purchase of 1850), Chinese settlements in the Mississippi Delta from the 1800s onward, as well as the long history of Chinese, Filipinx, and Indian settlements in Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America.<sup>39</sup> To erase something (or someone) from the record indicates either a perceived lack of value or the desire to destroy value (which, in this context, is perceived as threat). When historiography comes into question, so does the gaze that shaped it along with the institutions controlled by the colonial matrix of power.

This approach explores historiographical gaps—eras that the white gaze treats as unworthy of knowing or dangerous to know—by tracking down and presenting missing, forgotten, or suppressed images. As archaeologist Carrie C. Heitman puts it, “as [we] increasingly (re)turn to historic or legacy collections, we need to continually engage with the complex layers of formation processes, selection, and exclusion that characterize the life histories of these collections in order to better understand their contexts and biases.”<sup>40</sup> Often, these images conflict with accepted (colonial) historiography, forcing the viewer to either accept the new information and rethink the contexts of history, identity, and self; or reject it, so that the accepted historiography remains undisturbed—and by extension, the power structures and definitions that come with it.

Equally important to this approach is the acknowledgment of destroyed images, lost images, or images that were never captured. (This particular subject I will elaborate further in Chapter 2.) Additionally, a crucial flaw that can happen when trying to correct, flesh out, and/or complicate historiography is the question of whether this action still treats the white gaze as ultimate legitimizer. Particularly with arguments around nativism and who belongs in the U.S., it can seem like these images are speaking to whiteness. However, it does something to a person to see history-based (e.g. the perpetual foreigner myth) discrimination (e.g. having homes and businesses vandalized, constantly being told to get out of the country, constantly being asked whether they speak English) questioned, if not corrected.

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<sup>39</sup> C.N. Le, ‘The First Asian Americans’, *Asian Nation: Asian American History, Demographics, & Issues*, [website], (no year stated), <http://www.asian-nation.org/first.shtml#sthash.75Divuls.dpbs>, (accessed 8 March 2018).

L. Ding, ‘Ancestors in the Americas: Asian American History Timeline’, *Center for Educational Telecommunications*, [website], 2009, <http://www.cctel.org/timeline.html>, (accessed 8 March 2018).

<sup>40</sup> C.C. Heitman, ‘The Creation of Gender Bias in Museum Collections: Recontextualizing Archaeological and Archival Collections from Chaco Canyon, New Mexico’, *Museum Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2017, p. 128. Available from: AnthroSource, (accessed 7 February 2018).

More besides, these histories should not be forgotten. Understanding history and, by extension, our current context(s) is a vital part of creating a better world, in that it can give us a lens through which we might see something to aim for, however abstract. Just as imaginative excellence fuels radical hope directed toward building better futures, exhuming histories helps expand our understanding of the present. Finding precedents—particularly in histories where the white gaze was either irrelevant or not yet dominant—disrupts the colonial matrix of power by highlighting its violence and subjectivity and the violence and subjectivity of the discourse that it has created. Additionally, historiographical investigation may yield information that can be put toward future-building, as well as warning signs for things that may yet come again. In itself, historiographical investigation from a decolonial perspective may also just provide encouragement and personal fulfillment. In light of all this, research methods and fact-checking are still important, but academic rigor is also deeply entrenched in institutions, which are very much part of the colonial matrix of power. This is a deeply complex issue, but perhaps for now, a fair suggestion is to ask readers to try to think critically and talk to each other. Whatever the solution may be, at present, finding accurate information about history on the internet can be difficult, even in spaces sympathetic or even dedicated to decolonial resistance.

In researching my image for this section, a depiction of an anti-Chinese riot in the 1800s (fig. 4), I began my own strange historiographic investigation. This image appears to have been widely circulated on the internet. Blogs, social media, and even news sites, such as Asian American news sites NextShark<sup>41</sup> and AsAmNews<sup>42</sup>, many Asian American writers attribute the image to the worst mass lynchings in U.S. history: The Chinese Massacre of 1871 in Los Angeles. These articles and posts often use the image to contextualize a conversation about and analysis of erasure in U.S. history. The violence and chaos of the depicted event bleed into the style as the figures pull in every direction and the houses themselves are torn asunder by white perpetrators left undisturbed by the notably absent law enforcement. (Police later came and arrested the remaining Chinese people at the scene.<sup>43</sup>) As we read it now, the image depicts a struggle between a large number of white men and a much smaller number of Chinese men. Though the sketch cannot fully depict the scale of the event, roughly 500 were present at the massacre. In this

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<sup>41</sup> H. J. Yu, 'How America Forgot the Chinese Massacre of 1871, One of the Worst Mass Lynchings in U.S. History', *NextShark*, October 2017, <https://nextshark.com/chinese-massacre-1871-los-angeles/>, (accessed 3 January 2018).

<sup>42</sup> K. Chan, 'Impact of Chinese Massacre Still Felt 145 Years After', *AsAmNews*, 27 October 2016, <https://asam-news.com/2016/10/27/impact-of-chinese-massacre-still-felt-145-years-later/>, (accessed 3 January 2018).

<sup>43</sup> C. P. Dorland, 'The 1871 Chinese Massacre', Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California, Los Angeles, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1894, pp. 22-26. Available from: University of California Press on behalf of the Historical Society of Southern California, (accessed 3 January 2018).

image, all figures become anonymous and interchangeable within each side. On both sides, many of the figures wear similar clothing and display a limited range of hairstyles.

As a strategy, this works to convey the intensity and scope of the chaos and violence rather than accurate depictions of each individual there. The individual figures themselves are secondary and actually begin to disappear about halfway up the image, slowly devolving into small circles, shadows, and then nothing. The large white mob consumes the Chinese figures until there is nothing left. Ultimately, this is what happened: the Chinese residents were dragged out of their homes, tied up, shot, dragged, bludgeoned, mangled, hanged, mutilated, and executed. Every room in every house was ransacked, and buildings were set on fire. 18 or more Chinese men and boys were hung from hastily constructed gallows. One of the mob cut off one of Dr. Gene Tung's fingers in order to steal his diamond ring. Besides anti-Chinese sentiment, the event was also financially motivated; collectively, the Chinese residents' financial loss is estimated to be \$30,000–70,000. Of the 500 or more mob members present, only 8 were convicted, and those convictions were overturned.<sup>44</sup>

The sketch does not convey the thorough looting but rather focuses on a sanitized, theatrical portrayal of physical violence. Notably, not all of the attackers were white. The mob was actually a makeshift coalition between white and mestizo<sup>45</sup> settlers, a fact that has major implications for how we think of race and solidarities. For one, this highlights the fragility of relationships between different races and ethnicities. Additionally, this detail supports the narrative that race-related problems are isolated to the relationship between white communities and individual communities of color, flattening the complexities of alliances, animosities, and local conditions. Finally, this detail also conveys the complicity that people of color have in the oppression of other people of color.

The NextShark article about the massacre by Heather Johnson Yu is titled “How America Forgot the Chinese Massacre of 1871, One of the Worst Mass Lynchings in U.S. History.” In it, the old sketch appears side by side with a film still from Po-Chih Leong's *The Jade Pendant* (2017)—a romance set against the backdrop of this massacre—followed by corroborating images, such as old photographs and maps, as well as an image of a plaque commemorating the event and lives lost in both English and Chinese. Yu details her analysis of the event's erasure in the article.

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<sup>44</sup> C. P. Dorland, ‘The 1871 Chinese Massacre’, Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California, Los Angeles, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1894, pp. 22-26. Available from: University of California Press on behalf of the Historical Society of Southern California, (accessed 3 January 2018).

<sup>45</sup> An ethnic group in Latin America. The term refers to people of mixed European and American Indigenous ancestry. The term is also used in the Philippines, which Spain colonized for almost 400 years.

Although the gory event was so shocking that it bumped the Chicago Fire off front page news, so notorious that it horrified readers worldwide, and so condemned that it was once labeled the biggest mass lynching in U.S. history, the massacre has been all but forgotten, passed over in history lessons and largely omitted from books of both fact and historical non-fiction alike. Even the site of the massacre, once called the Calle de los Negros — Negro Alley — has simply vanished, a parking lot now in its stead.

How could a massacre, touted as one of the bloodiest acts of violence in Los Angeles, be swept under the rug so efficiently?

Part of the violence of erasure is that it supports the status quo as something that should remain unchallenged by virtue of lack of precedent. The latter aspect suggests a fundamental unchangeability that discourages present and future resistance. Erasure also allows us to ignore the importance of context by presenting the current reality of race in the U.S. is not a given but a result of a long history in which ethnic and racial groups fall in and out of favor with the white gaze, create solidarities and tear them apart.

In contrast to the wealth of information and analyses readily available (if searched for) about The Chinese Massacre of 1871 in Los Angeles, tracking down the image's creator(s) proved nearly impossible. The news articles, blogs, and social media posts refer to each other or to no one at all. The accuracy of this detail appears to have less importance than the dialogues about erasure and historiography. After countless Google searches, I gave up on the internet. Having seen that the AsAmNews article lists the Chinese American Museum in Los Angeles as the source, I contacted their Exhibition Coordinator and Collections Manager, Kimberly Zarate. As it turned out, the image was not at all what I thought it was.

Kimberly Zarate wrote back with an explanation. The image was a sketch from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*—and it depicts The Anti-Chinese Riot in Denver on October 31, 1880. This riot in Denver, Colorado occurred nine years after and 1000 miles away from The Chinese Massacre of 1871. The articles and posts, the ones that relied on feeling an emotional connection to the image, discussed inaccurate and suppressed historiography—and yet they used an image depicting another event nearly halfway across the country. It is as if the image itself held such an aura that it became a marker of authenticity (by virtue of its age and general subject) rather than an object to be authenticated. The framing and intensity of the sketch also mimics contemporary photojournalism of violent events, which may account for its wide use in contemporary articles. These types of images transport the reader emotionally while the text provides (ideally) precise information about the event.

Even more importantly, the articles use the image as a way to provoke sympathy and connection, because they convey living beings in the situation as it happened (unlike the actual photographs that show the aftermath and the corpses). This web of misinformation exemplifies how ideological alignment is not enough to guarantee accuracy, which should be a vital part of disrupting and filling gaps in accepted historiography.

### *Humor*

Another common approach to resistance in visuality is humor. Across the political spectrum, humor serves as a common vehicle for larger messages, especially those intended to reach as wide audiences as possible, if only for the simple fact that humor is entertainment. Though entertaining, humor has a powerful social function. Humor defines the in-group, the privileged audience.<sup>46</sup> One of those social functions is to establish the in-group and the bonds therein.<sup>47</sup> Here, the members of the in-group are in agreement, and their status as members is another identity. In short, it demarcates an “us” from a “them.” In this way, visuals using humor resist the white gaze by not prioritizing it, by signaling belonging through comedic imagery coded for the understanding of young Asian American femmes, for example, providing both confirmation (that their experiences are real and shared despite the gaslighting of the white gaze) and affection (community support) for those in the know.

Like the example in the previous section, this next image applies to the wider Asian American community and does not prioritize the femmes among them. However, its format exemplifies the power dynamics of humor in visuality and resistance. I chose the cover of second issue of *Banana Mag* (fig. 5–6). The playfulness and choice of subject (two anthropomorphic cartoon bananas against a colorful backdrop) within the image indicate a shared understanding of what is funny and what is known.

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<sup>46</sup> J. P. Steed, *Joke-Making Jews / Jokes Making Jews: Essays on Humor and Identity in American Jewish Fiction*, PhD Thesis, 2003, p.8.

<sup>47</sup> “Regardless of whether we attempt to explain the humor that is derived from the girl’s unique hat via superiority, relief, or incongruity theory, the fact remains that in this instance a social negotiation is taking place, with regard to individual and group identities. The group that laughs at the girl and her hat is involved in a complex act of assimilation and alienation. Assuming their laughter is, in fact, the laughter of ridicule, then clearly we can say that the members are, through their humor, actively alienating the girl from their social group—and thus they are constructing the girl’s individual identity as ‘not one of us,’ and the group’s identity as ‘one that does not include that girl’ (or, implicitly, others like her). The members of the group are also simultaneously assimilating one with another; that is, their humor also works to bind the group members more closely together. This is most readily noticeable in the fringe members of the group, who are able to solidify their membership by joining in the laughter and thereby benefiting from its assimilating function.”

J. P. Steed, *Joke-Making Jews / Jokes Making Jews: Essays on Humor and Identity in American Jewish Fiction*, PhD Thesis, 2003, p. 9.

The symbol of the banana is deeply charged in (East) Asian diasporic communities. (The term “coconut” also gets thrown around in South Asian and African diasporic communities as a derogatory phrase for ethnic inauthenticity.) Used as a pejorative to ridicule “bad” Asians who assimilate too much (i.e. yellow on the outside, white on the inside), this term creates an unwinnable social competition by implementing colonial standards of authenticity (around what it means to be [East] Asian and diasporic) by which we should judge and alienate one another. Stigmatizing unintended or gradual (degrees of) assimilation in diasporic communities assumes the existence of an ultimate, authentic ethnic and/or racial identity expression, which is a reductive and colonial assumption that flattens people of color. The pejorative use of terms like “banana” and its counterpart F.O.B. (“fresh off the boat”) supports a fragile social structure powered by insecurities around (how we construct) collective identity, community, and selfhood in relation to that—and the fear of not being able to exist in that community. In short, using the term banana as an insult is coloniality—alienation, division, and conquest—enacted by the colonized.

However, the term banana has undergone some reappropriation in recent years, and the image reflects that change. The bananas appear silly, cute, and cheeky; the depiction appears lovingly self-deprecating while simultaneously pointing to the history of the word, the inanity of rigidly defining ethnic and racial identities, and the silliness of equating humans with fruit. As you open the cover, which has cutout sections over parts of the bananas, you reveal the surprise image beneath. In this motion, the conjoined bananas transition from an inanimate backdrop for information (issue number, magazine title) to animated beings emoting joy (“rock on” gesture, smile) and irreverence (middle finger, tongue out). It reads as a playful visual equivalent of “sorry not sorry.” The colors themselves are subdued: millennial pink transitioning into a powdery shade of aquamarine. From palette to subject(s), the image conveys a lightness of touch in both its humor and imagination. The bananas are as sarcastic as they are earnest, and the image—through its playfulness—invites readers who identify with the bananas to not judge (this aspect of) themselves so rigidly.

Underlying all this humor is its clear target audience of young Asian American readers and disregard for the white gaze. The image is coded so that the laughs that do occur are appreciated and those that do not are a non-issue. Another key aspect of the humor is that it does not come at the expense of anyone else, not even the white gaze (who, again, is not a priority here). The image and the magazine do not benefit from division, because the act of speaking to an “Asian America” inherently requires communication across complex difference (at the very least, this means the many ethnicities that have fraught histories with each other). The magazine itself

offers a safe space based on a community forged through solidarities that cross ethnicity, class, gender, and geography. Along these lines, the image does not position the laughs *at* an additional individual but instead suggests that its readers (lovingly) laugh at themselves.

Additionally, forming solidarities based on the oppression of other marginalized groups or individuals does not create sustainable communities, let alone progress. A productive solidarity—one that moves toward future-building—cannot afford to denigrate other marginalized groups, because that undermines its own stability. Furthermore, those jabs would be based on value systems of the colonial matrix of power, so it would be supporting the white gaze's position of power rather than dismantling or disrupting it. It is impossible to build a decolonial future while reinscribing the white gaze and its position of power. Solidarity and liberation, if using colonial methods, becomes a self-defeating enterprise.

The image only offers the format, two cartoon bananas, and a backdrop as elements for interpretation. With so few elements, decoding relies heavily on the viewer's understanding of the bananas in this context. A partial interpretation is always possible, and the sense of whimsical, rebellious humor is evident without that particular knowledge about the bananas' meaning, but the comedic impact is dated and diminished if the bananas are only perceived as a random choice chosen purely for randomness. Ultimately, the viewers either know or they don't, but if they don't, then it becomes clear that the image is not aimed at them.

### ***Documentation and Archiving Effects***

Another common visual intervention is photodocumentation, acquisition of visual materials, and arrangement of images with archiving effects. These images may go into public archives, such as the Museum of Chinese in America in New York,<sup>48</sup> but more common efforts happen on the internet in places such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, or other blogging sites. In their essay "Everywhere Archives," U.S. Gender and Women's Studies professor at U.C. Berkeley, Mel Y. Chen discusses the formation of archiving effects on social media and their potential impact on history and discourse.

Leaving aside the complex questions of digital historicity, this is precisely why the internet must be acknowledged as a potent archiving resource; even as it is understood to be transient, "non-credible," "unreputable," "unofficial," and "disordered," its unique architectures must be understood.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> This archive actually began as a small public project in Chinatown. It was never subsumed into a larger institution and is therefore free to conduct itself as it wishes. It has remained an institution by the people, for the people.

<sup>49</sup> M. Y. Chen, 'Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, Trans Asians, and the Internet', in R. Gossett et al. (eds.), *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2017, p. 151.

Unofficial archiving seems especially vital in the face of national institutions—schools, museums, archives, and so on—that routinely reduce, erase, or ignore histories, as to do otherwise would call into question the fundamentals of our society’s structure. For example, widely acknowledging the past and ongoing genocide—not just general injustice—of the indigenous people of the U.S. debunks the national narratives of democracy, freedom, and fairness that form the cornerstones of U.S. national identity.

In terms of decoloniality, digital platforms can be powerful tools for decolonial resistance. These platforms allow users to bypass the need for institutional validation and financial approval required for most publicly accessible archives. While we may dissect the intricacies of who funds which platforms, use does not require an ideological connection to those financiers or even those financiers’ direct approval of users’ ideologies. However, users may make a conscious choice, so for example, if a platform is funded by right wing anti-immigration figures, a person who does not agree with those views may choose *not* to use their service. This is especially meaningful in the context of marginalized voices, such as Asian American women, femmes, and queers. This open access setup creates spaces for people of color and others of marginalized identity/ies to resist the epistemic violence and control that the white gaze enforces on not just bodies of color but all knowledge about them, especially the knowledge they hold or access about themselves.

*Chinatown Pretty*, a blog and Instagram account (fig. 7) created by Andrea Lo and Valerie Luu, “celebrates the street style of seniors living (and grocery shopping) in San Francisco’s Chinatown.”<sup>50</sup> The blog functions as an archive and style blog of Asian American senior citizens, their outfits, and their stories. Photographs and personal accounts offer perspectives on parts of history suppressed by the white gaze. This blog also counters some of the ageism in popular culture by treating their subjects with dignity. Unfortunately, many Asian American senior citizens live at or below the poverty line. In 2003, for example, nearly one in four Asian American elders in New York lived in poverty.<sup>51</sup> Finding more current data is a tall order, as the pervasive myths about Asian American success have also prevented both interest and funding of research into this area. Alongside the need for more current quantitative, visual decolonial resistance can provide accompanying qualitative information about *why* and *who* this research helps.

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<sup>50</sup> A. Lo and V. Luu, *Chinatown Pretty*, [website], <http://chinatownpretty.com>, (accessed 1 March 2018).

<sup>51</sup> A. S. Ryan, A. Mui and P. Cross, ‘Asian American Elders in New York City: A Study of Health, Social Needs, Quality of Life and Quality of Care’, 2003, <http://www.aafny.org/doc/AsianAmericanEldersInNYC.pdf>, (accessed 1 March 2018).

While discourse around archives and documentation is complicated and steeped in some very valid arguments around coloniality of form and authority, photographing and digital public assemblage do help to resist erasure. Digital platforms also have greater potential for a wider viewership, especially across socio-economic and geographic difference. But, with greater independence comes other challenges. These digital platforms do not require fact-checking and accounts are routinely hacked, threatened, and/or insulted. Reliability of information becomes unstable, as users are wholly responsible for their own content. As evidenced by the first example of the 1880 sketch of the anti-Chinese riot in Denver that was misattributed to The (anti) Chinese Massacre of 1871, well-intentioned users can still misinform. However, the internet has been around for long enough that many, if not most, of its users understand that potential inaccuracy is part of the trade-off of democratized information and platforms. The successful aspect of the visual decolonial resistance of documentation and platforms with archiving effects is that users have control over what is remembered and *how* it is remembered, which destabilizes the white gaze's epistemic control.

### *Collage/Bricolage*

Collage and bricolage as a category offer composite images of possible futures, alternate presents, or just abstracted somewheres governed by structures different from our own. Collage/bricolage works involving installation add an immersive dynamic, which I explore further in Chapter 4. The use of existing materials acknowledges, if not declares, the inescapability of discourse. Inevitably, any attempt to imagine and/or depict liberated futures will point back to the time and place of their making, because the available tools for expression are products of historiography, power, and discourse. Even the minds that create these images have been affected, if not structured by the colonial matrix of power, by virtue of simply living in the world in which coloniality has shaped (and continues to shape) so much of the structures and discourse in it. This awareness is nothing new. A horrifically apt example from literary history is the death of Edmond Laforest. In 1915, Edmond Laforest—a turn of the century Haitian professor, poet, literary critic, and writer—committed suicide by drowning with a Larousse dictionary tied around his neck; he was 39. In life, the French controlled his language and modes of expression, as they occurred in that language. Laforest brought this dictionary, a symbol of French colonial power and epistemic violence, into death, drowning it along with him. There is a particular despair and psychic asphyxiation in knowing that anything you create is already (at least somewhat) colonized from the conception of the idea by virtue of your mother tongue.

The method of collage and bricolage, then, can apply radical hope to decolonial historiographical investigation by remembering, acknowledging the gaps, and still moving toward new visions through reimagining anyway. This method acknowledges the violence of coloniality without succumbing to hopelessness, because a work's very existence already declares that interventions are possible, conveying expanded views of past, present, and future, and providing (at least feelings) about futures to move towards. Collage and bricolage are, at their core, works based on reimagining and recontextualization. By using existing materials, collage and bricolage reference current structures while still conveying abstract futures and presents that subvert the white gaze via reconfiguration. Collage, with its inherent functions of juxtaposition and dialogic imagination, lends itself to diasporic expressions and decolonial methodologies in visual culture. For example, Heidi Cho, Korean Canadian queer femme artist, created a mixed media immersive piece, "Gay Magic, Gay Grief" (2018), critiquing historiography and erasure of queer East and Southeast Asian histories in Toronto, Canada (fig. 8–9).<sup>52</sup>

Heidi Cho's installation presents an abstracted historiographical exhumation of Toronto's Queer East and Southeast Asian community, and this work was part of "Invisible Footprints 0.1," an exhibition exploring Queer Asian histories in Toronto.<sup>53</sup> The installation consists of a series of her own collages, illustrations, painted text, and a few objects specific to Korean contemporary and traditional cultures. Collage offers a suitable vehicle for examining fragmented and suppressed histories, because it does not just acknowledge gaps but dwells in them, forging new visions through marrying images of what has been recorded, lost images, images that were not recorded and must be interpreted visually, and the creator's own vision of how to join these elements into a unified space. In short, collage relies on fragmentation and imagination to create something new—here, it is the spaces between that are essential to the whole. In embracing what is left behind, fragments can be joined together and put toward envisioning a different present, as well. This exemplifies the imaginative excellence central to radical hope: the ability to retrain the inner eye to reevaluate what has been, and to reimagine the world (however abstractly)

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<sup>52</sup> I include this Canadian example, as many scholars (and non-scholars) see Asian diasporic discourse and histories mirrored in the U.S. and Canada. North American scholars Eleanor Ty (film), Donald Goellnicht (literature), and Iyko Day (literature and visual culture) all refer to it as such.

<sup>53</sup> "The vibrancy of Queer Asian life is [...] repeatedly sidelined or rendered invisible within the greater queer Toronto story. [...] [Q]ueer Asian life in Toronto has always occupied shapes and circumstances beyond what is documentable. [...] Much of our histories are recorded only in collective memories, experiences, and in what they have made possible. [...] Seven artists were invited to reflect on and respond to these nebulous ideas of Toronto's 'queer Asian history'. Through creative interpretation and intervention, they wrestle with what existed and exists, what was documented and undocumented, what could have been and what could be. [...] [T]hese artists play with the real and the imaginary. Tasked with both documenting and visioning, they give shape to the past and then complicate those shapes. Invisible Footprints 0.1 is '0.1' because it is one of many layers of interpretation, just like how any snapshot of history is but one of many."

"Invisible Footprints 0.1", [exhibition booklet], *Open Space Gallery, OCAD University*, 20-29 October 2017.

based on that new perception, despite the many uncertainties. Still, in Heidi Cho's collage work, the fragments reference more than oppression of Queer Asian North American history.

Her work offers a visual interpretation of efforts to forge new from old in unique configurations without suppressing context. By re-envisioning them as parts of a whole history, Cho's collage has a resistance function. It is a powerful thing to understand the shattering of a history and still try to piece it back together, knowing that every time, yet more shattering may follow. Cho's work, then, does more than lament gaps and pieces. Sadness, too, has meaning for resistance, solidarity, and community-building, but sadness without acknowledging the underlying causes only serves to leave the offending structure unquestioned. Such practices treat the symptoms rather than the disease, allowing the disease to cause further damage, so to speak. Through her reimagining, her collage work highlights the structures that fragmented these histories in the first place while disrupting accepted historiography and the status quo with her own imaginative excellence. Through her own lens, Cho expands the images' original context(s), adding an additional layer and grounding the piece with with her own perspective and experiences as an Asian North American queer femme artist. Taking this a step further, Cho added immersion to her collage work and some of her own illustrations by arranging them as an installation, so that viewers literally enter her reimagining, a space with norms that *she* dictates.

Importantly, the collage's privileged audience is not only the white gaze and those institutions that have suppressed history but rather, Cho speaks directly to Asian diasporic viewers. In the closeup photograph of her installation (fig. 9), Cho even surrounds a figure with the text "I see myself in you" on one of the collages. The figure, a woman of Asian descent, stares back, though not directly at the viewer but at the space next to them. With the addition of glitter, a zig zag backdrop, xeroxed photographs of couples, this element feels celebratory amidst loss and remembrance. This aspect feels especially vital, as the discourse around queer histories is so dominated by tragedy. The tragic gay romance is such a pervasive idea that novels and films that do not kill off or re-closet coupled up gay characters often defy audience expectations. Additionally, this aspect of Cho's work conveys "[a]nalytic practices of refusal involv[ing] an active resistance to trading in pain and humiliation."<sup>54</sup> Along with the title, "Gay Magic, Gay Grief," Cho's collage work also draws power from her nuanced blending of celebration and remembrance, both of which imply community. As the work references the historical and discursive suppression of the Queer Asian North American community, this aspect is deeply significant.

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<sup>54</sup> E. Tuck & K. W. Yang, 'Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 6, p. 812. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 8 March 2018).

Further, Cho's collage works speaks to marginalized communities (around gender and sexuality) within other marginalized communities (around race and ethnicity) and so is not about the white gaze directly. Moving toward this kind of dialogue addresses some of the complexities of communities of color that, again, do not involve the white gaze directly. In that way, Cho makes the white gaze a secondary priority here, which further disrupts it by undermining its assumed universality. The work's existence alone resists the concept of monolithic Asian North American identity, and especially the Model Minority myth. While the Model Minority Myth of "Asian" excellence may sound positive on the surface, applying the success of a few to the whole community—and even assuming that some kind of homogenized community exists—dehumanizes Asian North Americans as a wholly knowable mass (as a collective object of inquiry that has been figured out) and erases many groups within Asian North America who do not fit the model, particularly people struggling with mental illness, poor and working class people, those who are not of East Asian descent, and queer people.<sup>55,56</sup> In an interview with the Huffington Post, Chhay Choum, executive director of *Mekong NYC*, a Bronx-based group that helps Southeast Asians in the city, stated:

We are invisibles and [are] living in many intersections of oppression [...] To address this problem, it is vital to address not only the consistent collection of disaggregated data, but also its reporting and accessibility.<sup>57</sup>

Standardizing narratives about wealth and American Dream Stories, then, causes active harm within Asian North American communities by erasing people in need and making allocation of resources seem unnecessary or even ridiculous. This myth assumes a racial homogeneity that does not exist. For example, poverty rates within Hmong communities are drastically different

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<sup>55</sup> The Model Minority Myth is the idea that all (East) Asian (North) Americans are lawyers, doctors, math geniuses, good citizens—intelligent, quiet, and obedient to a fault. It is a contemporary form of orientalism. Strangely, this myth exists alongside the perpetual foreigner myth that stipulates that all Asian North Americans do not speak or understand English (well or at all), and that we are all work in delis, restaurants, nail salons, laundromats, and dry cleaners. The remnants of Yellow Peril still continues more openly in discourse around immigration, food safety, travel safety, and quality of goods. Essentially, these are labels of division that keep the white gaze as the guardian of success and keeps minority groups in competition with one another.

<sup>56</sup> "In turn, the condensation of anti-Asian racism into the singular image of the model minority reveals the liberal individualist investment in masculinity, whiteness, and capital as a model for post-racist Asian American 'success.'"

s.s.h. chong, "'Look, an asian!': The Politics of Racial Interpellation in the Wake of the Virginia Tech Shootings", *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2008, p. 30. Available from: Project MUSE, (accessed 3 May 2018).

<sup>57</sup> K. Yam, 'Asian-Americans Have Highest Poverty Rate In NYC, But Stereotypes Make The Issue Invisible', *The Huffington Post*, 8 May 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/asian-american-poverty-nyc\\_us\\_58f-f7f40e4b0c46f0782a5b6](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/asian-american-poverty-nyc_us_58f-f7f40e4b0c46f0782a5b6), (accessed 3 January 2018).

from Japanese communities.<sup>58</sup> Within Chinese communities, poverty rates—especially among the elderly—remains staggeringly high.<sup>59</sup> This myth collapses our differences into a knowable, reductive image while proposing a biology-based racism, hearkening back to patterns around the Yellow Peril of the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>60</sup> The Model Minority myth also furthers the idea that people of color require, or even crave, the validation of the White gaze in order to live “successfully” in the U.S. Most of all, this myth is frequently used to denigrate Black and Latinx communities, to divide Asian communities from them, and to force competition between ethnically and racially marginalized groups more broadly.

In addition to being an oppressive tool to divide people of color in general, the Model Minority myth is also deeply heteronormative. This myth enforces an even more rigid model of success (as defined by the white gaze) not just as a norm but as a condition required to be considered respectable—and thus, human—in white-dominated North American society. Solidarities and community-building across difference undermine the authority of the white gaze and its zero sum logic, where each person’s gain must be offset by someone else’s loss. But, as Audre Lorde observes, even in spaces where people know that the white gaze does not help them, solidarity across difference within raced communities is not always a given. “The move to render the presence of lesbians and gay men invisible in the intricate fabric of Black existence [...] contributes to fragmentation and weakness in the Black community.”<sup>61</sup> Cho not only addresses this issue in relation to Asian North America, but she also explores femme identity within Queer Asian North American history. The space is strewn not just with images but with text revealing her own thoughts and experiences. Her collage installation, by addressing multiple meta-communities also addresses the complicated natures of complicity and marginalization. Cho’s assertion of femme identity within this framework exists in both content (historical photographs, illustrated depictions of femmes) but style (glitter, hairstyles, makeup). These nuanced layers speak to the complexities within queer circles and the femme erasure and denigration that can

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<sup>58</sup> K. Majahan, ‘The Two Asian Americas’, *The New Yorker*, 21 October 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-two-asian-americas>, (accessed 3 January 2018).

<sup>59</sup> A. S. Ryan, A. Mui and P. Cross, ‘Asian American Elders in New York City: A Study of Health, Social Needs, Quality of Life and Quality of Care’, 2003, <http://www.aafny.org/doc/AsianAmericanEldersInNYC.pdf>, (accessed 1 March 2018).

<sup>60</sup> K.R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2005.

<sup>61</sup> A. Lorde, ‘Learning from the 60s’, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*, New York, Crossing Press, 2007, p. 143.

happen there.<sup>62</sup> Cho's collage work, "Gay Magic, Gay Grief," is a prime example of vulnerability, experience, and imagination as sites of power and resistance.

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<sup>62</sup> C. W. Han, "The Fireceness of 'Femme, Fat, and Asian'," *The Atlantic*, 19 May 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/05/kim-chi-rupauls-drag-race-femme-fat-asian-c-winter-han-interview-middlebury/483527/>, (accessed 2 January 2018).

### **Chapter 3. Obstruction as a Positive Force: Radical Hope and Creating for Each Other/Ourselves**

In the previous chapter, I outlined four common methods of decolonial resistance using visuality. I have devoted the entirety of this chapter to the use of obstruction in visual decolonial resistance, as this is the method that I chose to explore with my virtual reality piece. While collage/bricolage may share some similarities with obstruction (e.g. reconfiguration, selection of only parts of images), in this chapter, I refer to images that are wholly constructed and authored from start to finish by the same person(s). Obstruction tends to suggest the hindering or stopping of a thing. Here, I refer to the resulting redirect and the possibilities that are able to exist afterward.

Applied to visual culture, I interpret obstruction in a few ways. On a basic level, obstruction can be applied to an image's presentation and/or to the image itself. With presentation, creators (and/or distributors) can exercise obstruction of the white gaze, for example, by using platforms geared specifically towards other people of color, such as (specific) social media accounts, websites, and print magazines, as well as physical and electronic zines. These practices are already geared towards their target audience(s). With the image itself, creators can demonstrate obstruction in a multitude of ways, such as abstraction, persona, visual disruptions (e.g. pixelation, glitches, text, etc.), or something that literally blocks the view of something else in the frame.

In selectively obstructing something from view, the question arises of whose view is being blocked. The images in this chapter use obstruction to block the white gaze, which is an iteration of Walter Mignolo's colonial matrix of power.<sup>63</sup> Creators crafted these images for gazes of color and placed corresponding codes for them. In doing so, the images circumvent the need for expending extra time and energy or for taking up more space to address the white gaze—and, at that, only to say that it isn't for them. The obstruction of the white gaze, then, is built into the image and reduces the potential need for further emotional and creative labor. Generally, if the images are arranged in such a way that communicates a target audience, those outside may still approach the image but with a (knowingly) outsider perspective.

The images engage decoloniality by centering gazes of color and treating the target audience and visual content as normalized. This move exercises a fundamental principal of epistemic disobedience and overlaps with Audre Lorde's theory of the Master's tools: the strength and

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<sup>63</sup> W. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7-8, 2009, pp. 2-5. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 3 January 2018).

sustainability of resistance lives in the recentering of definitions, values, and systems. In visual culture, this applies just as much to practices of *what* is seen as to *how* it is seen—and by whom. Medium, platform (if applicable), and venue (if applicable) all affect an image’s reception, and especially if the image attempts a decolonial resistance, these factors must be taken into consideration. For example, Dread Scott’s flag art *A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday* (2015) (fig. 10) has vastly different effects depending on where it is shown. As part of The Whitney Museum’s 2017 exhibition “An Incomplete History of Protest,” Scott’s flag receives tacit approval by a white institution; it becomes sanitized and contained, less threatening to the white gaze, and—due to the nature of the exhibition—historical rather than topical (fig. 11). As a flag hung from the side of a building, it functions as a statement about our current situation. The piece is inspired by the original flag from c. 1936, which hung outside the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) headquarters at 69 Fifth Avenue.<sup>64</sup> Showing Scott’s flag in a prestigious museum is not a wholesale bad idea, as it could also be construed as stating an important message about systemic anti-Black racism in a white, privileged space. This example highlights the importance of the relationship between the elements outside of the work and what the artist wants to say (and to whom).

If the goal is to move away from the white gaze and create solidarities in a new way, relying on the institutions, tools, codes, and language of the white gaze will only allow that system to reinscribe its power. “[W]hen the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy[,] [...] only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.”<sup>65</sup> In the images in this chapter, there is no announcement of supplanting the white gaze, as that reinforces the white gaze’s position of power further, particularly as something that demands acknowledgment at all times, even in matters that do not concern it. In effect, these images block the white gaze by deliberately not privileging its understanding of them; this understanding (or lack thereof) applies not just to the surface visuals but also to the systems of knowledge, ways of seeing, and people behind all of these. The image itself is the announcement.

### *Obstruction as Protection: Hope and Love as Visual Practice*

An argument could be made as to whether it is even possible to function outside of our current discourse, which is dominated by the white gaze. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, sedimentation

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<sup>64</sup> *The Library of Congress*, [website], (no year specific), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2015647092/>, (accessed 10 April 2018).

<sup>65</sup> A. Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*, New York, Crossing Press, 2007, pp. 110-111.

makes total disconnection impossible. However, the whole basis of decoloniality and resistances that move toward it is the radical hope for a future that we do not yet have the tools to create or even imagine. In *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Jonathan Lear explains the radical function(s) of hope and its relationship to future-building.

I recognize that in an important sense we do not know what to hope for or what to aim for. Things are going to change in ways beyond which we can currently imagine. We certainly do know that we cannot face the future in the same way that we have been doing [...] We must do what we can to open our imaginations up to a radically different set of future possibilities. [...] We shall get the good back, though at the moment we can have no more than a glimmer of what that might mean. [...]

This reasoning acknowledges that one is at some kind of practical horizon *without* thereby trying to peek over it. It is willing to reason into the future while at the same time admitting that it has no real conception of goods to work with. It is committed to the bare idea *that something good will emerge*. [...] It thereby manifests a commitment to the idea that the [future] transcends one's limited and vulnerable attempts to understand it. There is no implication that one can glimpse what lies beyond the horizons of one's historically situated understanding. There is no claim to ineffable truths. Indeed, this form of commitment is impressive in part because it acknowledges that no such grasp is possible.<sup>66</sup>

Part of decolonial resistance—developing, executing, and sustaining it—requires radical hope. These endeavors are parts of a larger whole and cannot be defined by whether or not they liberate all people in every way within a specified timeframe. It is crucial that we try, and in that trying, radical hope becomes practice. It doesn't matter if it “works” or not, and definitions vary widely as to what that even means. What matters is whether the lives of those involved and concerned are bettered over time, and by repeating these actions, these practices—and all associated people, imagery, and so on—become normalized to both themselves and, as a side effect, visual culture at large.

Obstruction, applied to the context of visual decolonial resistance, suggests the protection of something/someone from something/someone else. Additionally, scrutiny is a complicated subject for many ethnic minorities in the U.S. This touches on one of the central aspects of literary scholars Eleanor Ty's and Monica Chiu's work on “the raced Asian North American subject [which] has been imagined around a figure of visibility/invisibility: hypervisible for their physical and cultural difference, but invisible both politically and legally (3).”<sup>67</sup> Selective

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<sup>66</sup> J. Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 93–95

<sup>67</sup> E. K. Andres, ‘Scrutinized! Surveillance in Asian North American Literature by Monica Chiu (review)’, *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2015, pp. 376. Available from: Project MUSE, (accessed 5 March 2018).

Eleanor Ty, *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, p. 4.

obstruction, then, allows for people of marginalized identities to select who can see what and how. Obstruction, then, becomes an expression of love made functional in a decolonial resistance context, whose center is as much hope as it is refusal. Refusal, however, is larger than a simple no. It occupies a central position in relation to decolonial love, even if it is not directly stated—even if the tone is filled with anger. Anger, too, has a loving function as protector of something or someone worth protecting.<sup>68</sup> In their paper “Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang apply refusal to qualitative research about indigenous subjects, but the basic logic still applies to non-indigenous people of color in the U.S and other white-dominated settler colonial societies.

Refusal is not just a no, but a generative stance, situated in a critical understanding of settler colonialism and its regimes of representation. Refusals are needed to counter narratives and images arising (becoming claims) [...] that diminish personhood or sovereignty, or rehumiliate when circulated. Refusal [...] refers to [...] an approach to [analysis] within a matrix of commitments, histories, allegiances, and resonances that inform what can be known within settler colonial research frames and what must be kept out of reach.<sup>69</sup>

As I described in Chapter 1, a common temptation in countering lack of representation or misrepresentation is the impulse to put everything on display in order to debunk incorrect preconceptions. As potent as images are, we can also exercise agency through refusal, through *not* granting access. Especially when handling vulnerable or marginalized positions, when we restrict access, we restrict the coloniality of power via inquiry, or knowledge-mining as domination.<sup>70</sup> I will not dismiss all of the images that spring from this impulse wholesale, as that is equally ineffective and illogical. However, in sharing every detail, marginalized groups run the risk of creating images of themselves solely for white consumption. In applying refusal, image creators bypass the complicated, potentially unresolvable navigation around whether they seek validation from the white gaze by trying to explain (earn) their humanity rather than treat it as a given.

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<sup>68</sup> “[A]nger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies. Anger is loaded with information and energy. [...] Anger is an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes, as is fury when the actions arising do not change.”

A. Lorde, ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*, New York, Crossing Press, 2007, pp. 127-129.

<sup>69</sup> E. Tuck & K. W. Yang, ‘Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 6, p. 811. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 8 March 2018).

<sup>70</sup> E. Tuck & K. W. Yang, ‘Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 6, p. 811. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 8 March 2018).

As such, the act of blocking or refusing is more than a “no” followed by the end of an action, after which nothing waits. For images of decolonial resistance to function, their fundament must be more than a negative definition, as in: what the creator or the image does *not* want. Instead, visual decolonial resistance offers images of futures, parallel spaces, or somewheres that we *could* want. This use of imagination conveys visions of our own and images ourselves and our somewheres into being. Regardless of how abstract or outlandish, the effort disrupts the colonial matrix of power by attempting to create futures that do not contain it. In effect, by using positive definition (i.e. what someone *does* want), these images become more than responses to current oppression but take it a step further and move towards future-building.

Hope, as Lear mentions, forms a cornerstone of this effort. Without a vision to move toward, dissent may remain restricted by current constraints. The creation and dissemination of images of decolonial resistance implies a community or communities at large. This is another key aspect: that hope is shared. Without community or solidarities, without love of self or those around you, resistance becomes more abstract and can lose its material, bodied, everyday significance. As bell hooks writes in *All About Love*, “Communities sustain life—not nuclear families or the ‘couple,’ [...] not the rugged individualist. [...] ‘In and through community lies the salvation of the world.’”<sup>71</sup> In short, by using imagination to move toward future-building, these images round out resistance by creating not just refusal—protection of vulnerable groups while trying to dismantle what currently exists—but possible futures to build and people to build them for.

Nothing threatens the colonial matrix of power more than the idea of its own irrelevance. Self-love, love for our communities, agency—even just as concepts, they disrupt the colonial social order. When we consider our own experiences and emotions as valuable sites of meaning and power, the white gaze loses its power to dictate our value to us. Using such tools as radical hope and love of self and community, solidarities and future-building can become more sustainable. As Sarah Ahmed states in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, “The personal is complicated, and mediated by relations that make any person embody more than the personal, and the personal embody more than the person.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, the internal matters of feelings have serious implications for the world around us and our position(s) in it. By speaking to other people of color across difference, images of decolonial resistance let us figure out meaning in relation to each other and ourselves instead. The “imaginative excellence” of visual decolonial resistance,

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<sup>71</sup> b. hooks, *All About Love*, New York, HarperCollins, 2001, p. 129.

<sup>72</sup> S. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 198.

then, is a large part of the resistance's sustainability.<sup>73</sup> As Junot Díaz writes in his open letter to a loved one:

Colonial power, patriarchal power, capitalist power must always and everywhere be battled, because they never, ever quit. We have to keep fighting, because otherwise there will be no future—all will be consumed. Those of us whose ancestors were owned and bred like animals know that future all too well, because it is, in part, our past. [...] But all the fighting in the world will not help us if we do not also hope. What I'm trying to cultivate is not blind optimism or inane positivity but [...] hope [...] directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope is [...] something you practice; it demands flexibility, openness [...] Radical hope is our best weapon against despair, even when despair seems justifiable; it makes the survival of the end of your world possible. [...] I believe that it will help us create a better, more loving future.<sup>74</sup>

Hope and love, then, become both fundament and driver as liberating forces that build as they dismantle. To clarify, this fundamental hope may appear as a concept in an image, while the image's tone itself may be abrasive and confrontational, or strong and funny, or vulnerable, and so on. Decolonial resistance is complicated, as our identities are intersections of so many things. We are all complicit in oppressions in some way, and the images often convey this difficulty. Hope and love also perform a necessary nourishing function, because as the name implies, resistance is difficult; it can be psychically and physically draining, and, as we have seen, it can be lethal. Love alongside “imaginative excellence” provides strength and direction, by turning abstractions into solid goals.

### ***Obstruction through Presentation***

I chose the images in this chapter for their types of online dissemination in addition to their engagement with imagining decolonial spaces, privileging Asian Americans as viewers—especially women and femmes—and their use of obstruction. As an aspect of obstruction, I looked for the interplay between obstruction/invisibility and reveal/hypervisibility, which I will explain in the next section, “Obstruction in Images.”

### *Social Media*

The use of specific channels within widespread platforms can be used as a form of obstruction. For example, the Instagram page *Sad Asian Girls Club* (@sadasiangirls) posted images for their campaign in support of black high school students in Johns Creek, Georgia (fig. 12). The image

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<sup>73</sup> J. Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 117.

<sup>74</sup> Junot Díaz, ‘Radical Hope’, in C. de Robertis (ed.), *Radical Hope: Letters of Love and Dissent in Dangerous Times*, New York, Penguin Random House, 2017, p. 12-13.

features the account's co-founder Olivia Park wearing one of their T-shirts with the slogan in bolded capital letters: YELLOW PERIL SUPPORTS BLACK POWER.<sup>75</sup> The slogan itself dates back to Asian American protesters in support of Black Panthers co-founder Huey Newton in 1969. The slogan is so evocative of 1960s and 1970s solidarity-focused Asian American dissent that it has become something of a pop symbol. Dan Truong of *The Huffington Post* even created a diptych, placing the famous 1969 photograph of a young Asian American man making a Black Power fist while holding the sign at the Huey Newton rally in Oakland, California next to a 2014 cell phone photo of a young Asian American woman with a bandana tied around her nose and mouth, holding up a sign with the same slogan (fig. 13).<sup>76</sup> The diptych contextualizes the slogan and Asian American dissent as part of a larger history. Similarly, the post calls out to Asian Americans, then, not just as a social justice fundraising campaign but as reminder a that part of a history of Asian-Black solidarity; and, by posting on the *Sad Asian Girls Club* account, the call especially reaches out to the femmes to which the account is dedicated.

The account's visual content, name, co-founders, and bio ("we made art projects about being E[ast]Asian girls/femmes in Western spaces") all prime visitors to understand the target audience and the co-founders' relationship to them. With this particular image, the declarative T-shirts, exchanged for financial support of another marginalized group, make the most sense when worn by Asian Americans. Worn by a white person, the message becomes an offensive, white supremacist declaration of paranoia. "Yellow peril" is used ironically here, but that irony only becomes obvious when the T-shirt is worn by a person of Asian descent.

The nature of the account creates a context for all posted images and information that circumvents the white gaze without having to expend unnecessary time and energy making disclaimers (and accidentally speaking to white gaze anyway). This image illustrates the complicated relationships between identity, experience, and humor in visuality—the balance of which depends on the person(s) participating—and the ways in which obstruction can be applied in ways that create space.

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<sup>75</sup> The original post reads: "YELLOW POWER SUPPORTS BLACK POWER TSHIRT: Profits go to black students showing interest in taking art courses in the fine art department at Northview High School (Olivia's old high school) in Johns Creek, GA. This contribution will be made through Blick gift cards for art supplies and by paying off studio fees."

SadAsianGirls, 'YELLOW POWER SUPPORTS BLACK POWER TSHIRT', [Instagram], 16 February 2017, [https://www.instagram.com/p/BQli\\_nlgQv/?taken-by=sadasiangirls](https://www.instagram.com/p/BQli_nlgQv/?taken-by=sadasiangirls), (accessed 17 February 2018).

<sup>76</sup> D. Truong, 'Yellow Peril Supports Black Power', *The Huffington Post*, 15 July 2015, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/dan-truong/yellow-peril-supports-bla\\_b\\_7781586.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/dan-truong/yellow-peril-supports-bla_b_7781586.html), (accessed 3 January 2018).

## Zines

Another method of obstruction through presentation is zine publications. This medium carries a history of counterculture and punk identity. Lower circulation can be seen as a merit, and publication comes with the understanding that the desired target audience is kept small on purpose. Limiting the quantity of and access to copies enforces epistemic control—creators decide who gets to know about not just its contents but its existence. This practice of scarcity applies especially to physical zines, dictating further how readers/viewers get to know about or find them (e.g. if the zines are passed between friends, if they are left only in specific shops, etc.).

A particularly complicated example of this method is *The Call Out Queen Zine* (2012), arranged and published by Juana Peralta and Roy Pérez in memory of Mark Aguhar, a Filipinx American queer trans femme artist (fig. 14–15). In honor of her work and in light of her recent death, the zine features a selection of Aguhar’s written and visual work from her Tumblr account. Peralta and Pérez arrange the zine’s contents thematically, making the original dates of publication on Aguhar’s Tumblr. The multi-platform online zine performs obstruction through extensive selectivity and limited circulation (in that its exposure relies heavily on viewers who already know it exists or already know about Mark Aguhar’s work). *The Call Out Queen Zine* is free, which allows access for people who could not otherwise afford it. This choice demonstrates an important aspect of decolonial resistance: if decolonial efforts are not made accessible, they can exclude the very people they purport to help. Making access possible includes more people and shows the key consideration of intersectionality. However, obstruction still exists—even in this free access model—in a type of limited accessibility on the site: it is not available for download and cannot be screenshot without obvious arrow marks.

The contents, on the other hand, do not exercise as much obstruction, if any at all. With the protections of the zine format, the images seem freer. Even the statements directed at the white gaze feel more like confessionals to friends due to the obstruction (protection) provided by the format. Within its digital pages, Aguhar’s work oscillates constantly (and often creates overlaps) between joy, vulnerability, flippancy, humor, and anger. Aguhar shares her thoughts about “being brown in a queer space” and her rage at the injustice she faces as a queer femme-identified transgender raced person (fig. 15). On the surface, rage provides some protection and indicates recognition of unfair treatment of her as a person with value. At the same time, the image to the right of it is a grid of photos that show Aguhar waving and blowing a kiss at the viewer with the caption, “BYE H8ER :3” (BYE HATER [sassily pleased emoticon]) underneath. In this image, supported by all of the others, Aguhar is her own “given” and treats herself as such. She dismisses those who attempt to denigrate her and celebrates herself openly. Here, she writes/

images herself (as she sees herself) into being. While Aguhar directs much of the text at the white gaze, the format allows Aguhar's work to become a safe space where her vulnerability may be appreciated by other queer, raced, and gendered viewers.

### *Obstruction in the Image*

The monolith of Asian American identity, the Model Minority Myth, our absence from popular culture (except as punchlines, sex objects, or villains)—these widespread concepts support the racist notion of interchangeability between whole communities, cultures, and individuals of Asian descent; these concepts also erase those to whom they do not apply.<sup>77</sup> However, the white gaze marks our bodies as other, and so we stand out, even as we are judged to be less individual or less human. As a person in a raced and gendered body, living in a majority white country, I move through the world as an oxymoron—a highly scrutinized body (by virtue of race) deemed inherently interchangeable (also by virtue of race)—a hypervisible invisibility.<sup>78</sup> The images in this section use different iterations of obstruction in relation to Asian American femme identity/ies, which reflects both individuality of the creators, as well as the need for difference within and between communities engaged in decolonial resistance.

Moreover, these images selectively obstruct visual elements as an act that blocks as it reveals. In this way, obstruction can create protection through syntax. Specifically, I mean a visual syntax that codifies the image in ways that privilege specific target audiences. These images spring from and continue to form solidarities and communities by continuing to codify for Asian American femmes, not the white gaze. Beyond protection, codification lets us conduct community-building safely in the open. In terms of visual culture more broadly, obstruction the gaze from accessing bodies of color is also an act of power, particularly in an age saturated with images and normalized constant access to people's private images via social media. Obstruction, again, is a refusal, but as the images demonstrate, it is also a point of departure.

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<sup>77</sup> Asian American Federation, 'Working But Poor: Asian American Poverty in New York City', 2008, <http://www.aafederation.org/doc/WorkingButPoor.pdf>, (accessed 1 March 2018).

A. Sakamoto, I. Takei and H. Wo, 'The Myth of the Model Minority Myth', *Sociological Spectrum*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2012, pp. 309-332. Available from: Taylor & Francis Online, (accessed 5 March 2018).

<sup>78</sup> E. Ty, *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004.

E. K. Andres, 'Scrutinized! Surveillance in Asian North American Literature by Monica Chiu (review)', *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2015, pp. 375-377. Available from: Project MUSE, (accessed 5 March 2018).

M. Chiu, 'The Cultural Production of Asian American Young Adults in the Novels of Marie G. Lee, An Na, and Doris Jones Yang,' *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2006, p. 172. Available from: Project MUSE, (accessed 5 March 2018).

### *Physical Obstructions*

In a photograph for TheCut.com, New York based artist Pat Xi poses with a painted synthetic goose in the foreground, blocking out roughly half of her face (fig. 16). This image offers the most literal form of obstruction by physically blocking the viewer's access. Additionally, the photograph is part of a features piece by Jason Chen titled "What's a 'Slaysian'? The creative minds behind Bubble\_T, New York's queer Asian dance party." So while this photograph was captured by Mamadi Doumbouya, it features Pat Xi as one of the subjects of the story and, as a result, it captures her distinct artistic voice.

While Xi does not meet the viewer's gaze, the physical obstruction sets a tone of unavailability, offsetting what might be an otherwise demure expression. Xi directs her own gaze to the space above the viewer; she literally looks beyond the viewer. Notably, the physical obstructor is a goose, which is considered to be such a silly creature in U.S. popular culture that the idiom "silly goose" is understood nationwide. The blocking mechanism becomes a strange combination of protector and punchline. However, when viewed in the context of the image's surreal composition (ultramarine blue background, alienated human form, a literal silly goose, imaginative makeup), this humorous protection makes more sense. By this, I mean that the aesthetic rules of the image do not reflect the rules of the world around us, and so we can accept its strangeness more readily. (Currently, we do not have a "correct" way to wear painted extra eyes or pose with a fake goose.)

The obstruction in Xi's use of makeup also provides a generative point. Red-orange contacts, a painted third eye (in the same red-orange), gelled hair splayed in triangles, black dots along the browline—these features all contribute to the image's worldbuilding and speak to an aesthetic that, while it does not defer to the white gaze, it does not privilege the white gaze as an antagonist. In other words, the image is codified for a queer Asian diasporic gaze. The use of the third eye and the color red both remain important signifiers in many Asian diasporic cultures and communities. In a word, the style is over the top and made specifically for Asian American queer and femme viewers; the image's value does not rely on whether the white gaze can decode it or verify its significance. Although the image also crops Xi's body, so that it appear alienated, this is something she controls. Through close cropping, Xi becomes both a series of odd shapes and a body. Nothing "makes sense," and that is ok.

There is something inherently defiant about using humor and play, especially in visual decolonial resistance. To experience joy in yourself as a person with marginalized identity/ies—especially

through imagination and play—is radical in the face of coloniality, a system of structures that draw power from your systemic and social dehumanization. As Tuck and Yang explain, “we [...] can learn from experiences of dispossessed peoples—often painful, but also wise, full of desire and dissent—without serving up pain stories on a silver platter[.]”<sup>79</sup> Use of such lightness (in tone) defies the expectation of resistance as an endless dive into “pain tourism,” which promises to satisfy the hunger of the white gaze without improving the conditions of those being gazed upon.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, pain tourism allows viewers, particularly those exercising the white gaze, to conflate inquiry-based witnessing with absolution. In pain tourism, the viewing becomes the action rather than a call to action or to introspection into their own complicity; instead, the viewers are invited to prioritize their curiosity over the dignity, wants, and needs of subjects portrayed.

A difficult aspect to interpret, not due to the whimsy but to its use as pseudo-advertising. This is the only openly promotional image among my empirical materials. While the image in the next section (a YouTube video) is also a feature from a magazine and arguably one that advertises for that magazine itself, digital content has taken priority over print format. Exposure on YouTube is often a goal in itself, is more readily accessible, and generates revenue through advertisements that appear before the video. The fantastic elements feature so prominently that they actually eclipse the expensive wool jacket and dress that the photograph advertises in the caption below. Taken together, Xi’s use of makeup, staging, and fantasy illustrate self/community celebration in an otherworldly manner. Celebratory fantasy and humor is key to the image as a work of visual decolonial resistance. By gearing obstruction for the purpose of joy, self-love, and fantasy, the image refuses to participate in pain tourism and instead works toward queer femme Asian American community building.

### *Visual Disruption(s)*

Obstruction can exist as visual disruptions, which may also be codified for specific viewers. A prime example of this practice is Yaeji’s 2017 music video for her song “last breath” (fig. 17). The style appears as an anti-music video music video, or one that attempts to reimagine the genre. The choice of YouTube does not feel like a coincidence. Apart from Youtube being the obvious platform for music videos, it also acts as kind of digital archive. As I mention in Chapter 2 in the

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<sup>79</sup> E. Tuck & K. W. Yang, ‘Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 6, p. 812. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 8 March 2018).

<sup>80</sup> E. Tuck & K. W. Yang, ‘Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 6, p. 811. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 8 March 2018).

section “Documentation and Archiving Effects,” Mel Y. Chen argues that we should more openly approach the internet’s possibilities for decentralizing sites of knowledge and ways of knowing.<sup>81</sup> Here, Chen touches on epistemic disobedience, though they do not name it.<sup>82</sup> YouTube, though not an official archive, offers a free platform with archiving effects. Without institutional ties, users can upload their own stories and material without need for approval (barring a few specific situations). Essentially, democratizing access to this platform decenters colonial methods of knowing and knowledge producing. Using style and stylized visual disruptions, Yaeji’s music video suggests a deliberate disregard for the white gaze and for the expected aesthetics associated with it, particularly in regards to music video production and both Eurocentric and Korean/Korean American beauty standards.

Similar to zines, her music video showcases a strong Do-It-Yourself aesthetic. Rather than create a glossy production, Yaeji formatted her music video to look like a YouTube commentary of a makeup tutorial, both of which she directed, filmed, and edited herself. The video is unabashedly femme and relatively low tech. Steeped in signifiers of U.S. youth culture, Korean American identity, and creative independence, Yaeji chooses an approach that gives her maximum control over her own work and representation. This choice aestheticizes open disregard for the white gaze, its structures, and aesthetics as dictated by it. Yaeji applies obstruction as visual disruption in three main ways: first, through her chosen format of a YouTube commentary video of a makeup tutorial; second, through the use of superimposed text and poetic, visually stylized subtitles; and third, through her green screen intermission.

In “last breath,” rather than use a persona, Yaeji has applied obstruction to the format instead of her body. In contrast to the creator/subject-viewer relationship in the Pat Xi photograph, the artist/character on screen watches herself alongside the viewer. The form is blatantly self-aware as evidenced by the video within the video, a conceit of YouTube videos intended as commentary on other YouTube videos. She literally disrupts her own video with her own (second) metavideo in which she watches and comments on her own makeup tutorial (and, later, with an intermission). Yaeji inscribes her own power in the video as an authority figure by presiding over herself (in the comment video) as she transforms with makeup. As the video begins, she appears unafraid before the camera with no makeup on. There are even moments

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<sup>81</sup> M. Y. Chen, ‘Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, Trans Asians, and the Internet’, in R. Gossett et al. (eds.), *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2017, p. 151.

<sup>82</sup> A. Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’, *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2-3, 2007, pp. 168-178. Available from: The University of Warwick, (accessed 3 January 2018); S. Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero: ciencia, raza e ilustración en la Nueva Granada (1750–1816)*, Bogotá, Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2005; W. Mignolo, ‘Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7-8, 2009, pp. 1-23. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 3 January 2018).

where she laughs at herself or dances in her chair, all while maintaining eye contact with the viewer/camera.

These kinds of vulnerability and unfettered access (to witnessing another person's habits) are conceits of the makeup tutorial that may seem at odds with the obstruction applied to the video. Often, the makeup tutorial is a normalizing force for Asian American YouTubers meant to convey how "regular" (unmarked) they actually are. They follow the format As Ju Yon Kim explains in her book *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday*, viewers expect to follow a person, willingly unmasked, through a transformation that both humanizes them as uniquely genuine and puts them in a particular genre.

The transformation of everyday activities into spectacles in [Youtube] videos confers on the Asian American performer the role of the "straight man" (or woman), sometimes to an alter ego or an altered image of themselves. [...] The mundane thus does double duty: it establishes the videos' concerns as commonplace, and [...] sets the Asian American performer [...] as ordinary.<sup>83</sup>

Rather than use it as a vehicle for normalization in the context of whiteness-dominated U.S. youth culture, Yaeji subverts it—partly through her edits, partly through her subtitles—and highlights the formulaic strangeness of the format. Even as it pays homage in its own way, the video's alienation of the format questions the culture from which it springs; here, it is the format (and the culture) that must answer for itself, not Yaeji (a Korean American woman). Instead, she uses the makeup tutorial format as a backdrop for something else. Ironically, the makeup in the video is the least important element and mostly offers a vehicle for her own narrative and music. We know it's not a real tutorial from the moment the page loads, which clearly shows the name of the artist and song, a record label as the publisher, credits, and song lyrics. The page information makes the joke evident and the video invites us in. In this way, Yaeji still includes us without relinquishing her control over the space in the video.

Using the stylized subtitles, Yaeji makes purposefully nonsensical suggestions, such as "put a little piece of your ego on your fingers and slowly apply it," "all your embarrassing memories can be applied to the year after next year," and "This product is called Depression and it stays on for 24 hours." Despite some of the morose subtitles, the video still expresses a playfulness. The tutorial is nonsensical, and even the palette communicates lightheartedness. In "last breath," everything becomes a form of play. However, even through play, Yaeji appears watchful. Her eyes never leave the camera, even when she spins in her chair. She watches herself watch the viewer, who

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<sup>83</sup> J. Y. Kim, 'AFTERWORD: The Everyday Asian American Online', *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday*, New York, NYU Press, 2015, pp. 231-250. Available from: JSTOR, (accessed 10 March 2018).

then watches all of the above as text emerges below (or around the screen). Even the viewer's understanding of the words—assuming they don't speak or understand the Korean lyrics—is mediated by her via the subtitles. She may be obstructing or revealing the literal meaning. Viewers who don't speak Korean understand only what she allows.

In the middle of her own music video, Yaeji inserts an intermission that features (obvious) green screen and a bold text background in Korean. She disrupts her own chosen format. The intermission collapses the imagined spaces of the makeup tutorial and commentary into an additional space with no conventions or precedents on YouTube. This portion of the video exudes humor as she waves her arms and dances around, even as the artist declares her own identity—literally, the background during the intermission is the artist's own name, Yaeji, written in Korean: 예지. The screen flashes backwards and forwards. For viewers with no knowledge of the Korean language, the characters provide a graphic pattern. For viewers with that knowledge, it has a deepened graphic effect by appearing backwards, because the backwards text will appear nonsensical. In this intermission space, Yaeji becomes a superimposed figure (against the green screen background), and a pixelated line of green appears around her body. This reduction of image quality creates a kind of distance (a manner of obstruction). The intermission itself obstructs her own form in her other video(s)—she blocks access to her body with another version of her (same) body. She inserts herself and obstructs her own video(s) at will, exercising power through joy and considered editing.

Mixed with the subtitles and her own constant interruptions via stylized subtitles, superimposed text, or intermission, it becomes clear that the makeup tutorial format (and even the commentary video format) is a source of humor and play. It is worth noting that Yaeji does not fit the expected image of a Korean American femme: pale, rail thin, surgically altered. Before she even speaks, Yaeji already says a lot with the structure of her face and body. She is equally defined by what she does and does not have. For example, the absence of a notably creased eyelid 쌍꺼풀 (lit. “double eyelid,” refers to the crease in the eyelid) is a big deal among Koreans and large parts of Korean American communities. Using the vehicle of a didactic video format, the makeup tutorial, to make tacit declarations about her own body, face, and embodiment in relation to her inner life. What I mean here is that Yaeji's music video's expressive and authoritative tone draws power from its speaker.

With the backdrop of the mundane makeup tutorial format, the fantastic elements of her piece seem to jump out. Through the videos on videos, disappearing and reappearing texts, intermission, and general playfulness, Yaeji remains the most visually stable element of the piece.

She, in fact, gives authority and substance to the format, not the other way around. As an example of visual decolonial resistance, this video demonstrates an Asian American femme figure drawing authority from herself, granting herself value, creating distance (obstructing access) through visual disruptions, and recentering her Korean diasporic identity (and Korean language) as the norm.

## Chapter 4. Embodiment in Virtual Reality 360: Exploring the Material Effects of Theory

In this chapter, I discuss the creative and production processes of my VR 360 piece (fig. 18-20), as well as formal aspects in the piece related to theory. The piece, which I have preliminarily titled after this thesis, “Imagining Somewheres,” is a work in progress and, as such, is more of an open-ended exploration. I analyze and critique my virtual reality piece as a form of artistic research into decoloniality as a visual practice. In the piece, I explore the fragility of power structures between the viewer and the figure from decolonial, literary, and critical race theory perspectives. The additional factors of embodied gazing/immersion and power relations, which become amplified with the use of virtual reality. Specifically, in this chapter, I examine the nature of inquiry and control between the figure (creator) and the user (viewer). Following this, I analyze the formal aspects of the piece—technological and aesthetic elements using abstraction, fantasy, obstruction—in relation to the theories of scrutiny and hypervisibility, refusal, radical hope, and epistemic disobedience.

This piece could have been a photoseries, installation, or film, but I chose VR 360 for the intriguing and negotiable power relationships inherent in the format. This medium allows me to simulate interaction without the emotional labor of having to face potential demands to legitimize my raced, gendered perspective. With VR 360, the viewer enters *my* space, I write the rules, and they know it. With 2D or still media, the gaze can only go one way (directed towards me). As a scrutinized person (marked by race and gender), to put myself up for yet more scrutiny in my own project would contradict the fundament of almost every theory I have used. Even with paintings like Edouard Manet’s *Olympia*, where the main subject gazes back, the brain typically understands that the interaction is one-sided.<sup>84</sup> VR 360, on the other hand, feels genuine even if the viewer knows it is artificial. As Jeremy Bailenson, the director of the Virtual Human Interaction Lab at Stanford University explains, “the brain is not yet evolved to know that a virtual experience is not real.”<sup>85</sup> This neurological loophole opens up new possibilities for visual decolonial resistances, especially those that privilege audiences of color and/or other marginalized identities.

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<sup>84</sup> E. Manet, *Olympia*, [oil painting] 1863, [http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire\\_id/olympia-7087.html](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire_id/olympia-7087.html).

<sup>85</sup> I. Novacic, ‘How might virtual reality change the world? Stanford lab peers into future’, *CBS News*, 18 June 2015, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-might-virtual-reality-change-the-world-stanford-lab-peers-into-future/>, (accessed 18 March 2018).

I also chose VR 360 for its current lack of accepted syntax in both aesthetics and (methods of) presentation. This aspect especially supported my position as authority figure over the piece and offered a wider, freer space within which I could examine and cultivate my ideas. I also chose VR 360 for several practical and aesthetic reasons. While VR 360 does not offer the fully spatialized experience of true virtual reality (e.g. the ability to move around within a virtual space), VR 360 still provides ample immersion without the expensive sensors that power navigable virtual spaces. On a practical level, I was already familiar with filming in this medium and understood the basics of the editing process. On an aesthetic level, low image resolution and other common problems offered vehicles for obstruction embedded in the technology rather than in my own staging. I also wanted the immersion to depend more on my own aesthetic work and a sense of fascination in the physical space (on set) than on more sophisticated technology. On a theoretical level, the passive user experience tied in well with my own exploration of decolonial theory, critical race studies, and my own analysis of subversive obstruction in relation to power structures and decentralization of the white gaze.

For this thesis, I use my VR 360 piece as a research tool to put my selected theories into practice. At its core, this piece explores the dynamics of raced and gendered hypervisibility and invisibility, and methods of privileging an audience of color in an immersive, non-interactive medium. I wanted to privilege gazes of color, especially Asian American femmes. However, I understand the impossibility of controlling perceptions and cannot control viewership. I cannot account for internalization of the white gaze in Asian diasporic viewers or other viewers of color. The experience shows the same physical obstructions regardless of who views it; the difference lies in each viewer's sedimentation and decoding.

### *Technological considerations*

As a way of seeing, VR 360 links to a centuries-long history of scopic regimes.<sup>86</sup> Around 60 B.C.E., wall-to-wall frescos created an immersive panorama effect in the Villas of Pompeii. In 16th century Italy, similarly domestic immersive spaces were fashionable markers of wealth and taste; and, Baroque churches used immersive paintings for religious purposes. In 18th and 19th century England and Germany, the painted panorama became an enhanced immersive tool for

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<sup>86</sup> This brief history does not dismiss the existence of similar scopic regimes outside of western history. In East Asia, the use of scroll paintings, 秦始皇兵马俑 The Terracotta Army in Xi'an, China, and types of Mahayana Buddhist design (e.g. 寶蓮禪寺 Po Lin Monastery in Hong Kong) are two strong examples of immersion through painting, architecture, and design. However, VR 360 technology and format as we know it comes from Western scopic regimes, although our sense of perspective in art is a result of theories around perception and optics from Hasan Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen), the 10th century mathematician, physicist, astronomer of the Islamic Golden Age.

military and nationalist purposes and were eventually made available for public consumption. In the 20th century, Sergei Eisenstein’s “multisensual 3D movie,” Gene Youngblood’s expanded cinema, and IMAX cinema applied immersive viewing to moving images.<sup>87</sup> With the viewer’s fixed, passive position, VR 360’s aesthetic closely resembles 19th century panoramas, while the technological aspect of the headset has taken after the stereoscope.

The fundamentals of VR 360’s power is the overwhelming visual style and the feelings that it provokes. For many, the word empathy springs to mind. However, equating empathy with sympathy poses some ideological and ethical issues. As German psychiatrist and philosopher Thomas Fuchs states in his article “The Virtual Other: Empathy in the Age of Virtuality”:

[A]n *imaginative operation*, [...] a transposition into an ‘as if’ scenario (i.e. as if I were the other) [...] transcends the bodily or physical level. As a result, it seems necessary to differentiate between primary, implicit, or bodily empathy and an expanded, explicit, or imaginative empathy. The latter already involves a certain degree of virtuality. [...]

[S]imulation theory generalizes incorrectly the possibility of imaginative transposition or simulation [...] to include all kinds of empathy.<sup>88</sup>

This distinction has vital implications for visual projects dealing with painful subjects. As I discuss in Chapter 3, pain tourism is a problematic but popular genre for pieces that try to involve resistance and identity. Typically, the viewer participates as a witness, not as an actor. Empathy implies a kind of deep understanding that virtual reality cannot deliver, as it cannot transmit or change the perspectives sedimented in the viewer. Again, the presence of functioning mirror neurons does not account for the nuances of sedimentation. While the viewer’s emotions are real, virtual reality can only mimic or report experiences, not transmit them, as they require a different understanding and sedimentation to turn mimicry/reports into experiences.

Another important consideration is—in a literal sense—how the viewer experiences the piece. Virtual reality experiences affect viewers differently depending on where they are, e.g. casually watching at home with a cardboard headset versus watching in a gallery space with an Oculus Rift or HTC Vive. Unfamiliar or official settings may add to the anxiety and/or excitement common to VR experiences. However, much of this springs from the medium rather than with the experiences themselves. This anxiety and/or excitement is due, partly, to the newness of the

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<sup>87</sup> O. Grau, ‘Into the Belly of the Image: Historical Aspects of Virtual Reality’, *Leonardo*, vol. 32, no. 5, 1999, pp. 365-371. Available from: JSTOR, (accessed 1 February 2018).

<sup>88</sup> T. Fuchs, ‘The Virtual Other: Empathy in the Age of Virtuality’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 21, no. 5-6, 2014, pp. 158-159. Available from: Academia.edu, (accessed 1 February 2018).

technology and partly, to the the limited sensory feedback, such as impaired peripheral vision (or lack thereof), and the feeling of being in both a virtual and real space simultaneously.

With my VR 360 piece, the experience forces the user into the position of the viewed, literally locked in to position while the figure stares and moves freely. On the surface, this adjustment mimics the Foucauldian panopticon. However, the viewer always knows that they are being watched (by the figure and, potentially, by anyone in the room with them). The centrality of the viewer's central position, in fact, makes them vulnerable, as they do not have the option of obstructing the figure's gaze or access to their own bodies, and they cannot control the figure. In addition, by structuring the red panels in a circle around the viewer, the figure's freedom and unpredictability of movement becomes emphasized in contrast to the viewer's demarcated space. Lastly, the figure belongs to this abstracted immersive space and creates norms by enacting them (fig. 17). As such, she exercises some epistemic dominance over the viewer automatically (who can end the experience at any time), but, to clarify, I did not create this piece as an inverted panopticon.

Through immersion and fleeting moments of near interaction (where I, as the figure, reach out and touch panels near the viewer), the experience forces the viewer to make sense of their own position in relation to the subject, negotiate their own boundaries, and identify—if they can—who is doing what to whom. The question of audience arises here: the VR 360 experience will differ greatly depending on each viewer's own perspective and sedimentation. Some Asian diasporic viewers, for example, may have a different feeling about the power relationships, because they understand more of the codes than white viewers, who may read the experience as more alienating and confrontational. Like many pieces that aim to portray marginalized people, this piece should reveal as much about the makers as it does about the viewers.

Additionally, VR 360 offers a more flexible space where I can build my ideas in my own way. As an exploration of decolonial resistance in an immersive visual format, the choice of VR 360 does not just allow but require delinking from established aesthetics, such as framing, staging, jump cuts, and even the perception of speed and time. Many aesthetic decisions that work well for film and photography look terrible in VR 360, partly due to the low image quality. The inability to frame raises the challenge of how to keep viewers' gazes fixed where you want them. The biggest risk is that viewers will not see certain filmed actions or miss entire sequences, because they happen too quickly or too far away from where they are looking in the VR 360 space. Due to the

limited field of vision (90° versus the typical 114° of everyday life), viewers may experience jump cuts or transitions as jarring or scary despite any intended aesthetic to the contrary.<sup>89</sup>

So far, VR has not yet been cemented in any one set of conventions or genre. Television, fine art, cinema, games industries have all begun to branch out into virtual reality, but between each other and within themselves, they still do not yet agree on a standard format or syntax. Some conventions exist—short runtimes, spatiality, participation (interaction or witnessing), a small dot in the immediate field of vision to select objects and “choose your own adventure”—but even these vary across use and depend greatly upon genre, purpose, and narrative. Projects can also be difficult to commodify, as purpose and genre may be hard to understand. Literality seems to have been many people’s first impulse, and a slew of virtual reality pain tourism around the Syrian refugee crisis has arisen in the last few years. However, virtual reality (both 360 and full immersion) remains a bit of a wild west. Many film funds do not even recognize it, despite its narrative potential. However, I use this to my advantage here. As Audre Lorde explains, the use of the oppressor’s methods, even against the oppressor, only ever reinscribes their power.

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of women of Color to educated white women – in the face of tremendous resistance – as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.<sup>90</sup>

The real inefficacy of using the Master’s tools, which Judith Butler aptly refers to as “reverse-discourse”, is that it can only ever reinscribe the position of the oppressor by continuing oppressive patterns, regardless of intent.<sup>91</sup> I touch on this concept in the previous chapter in regards to still images, but the question expands with VR 360. By continuing to focus my VR 360 piece toward the white gaze, even in a critical and negative sense, I would continue to highlight its position of power in a medium that does not yet have a standard syntax and does not yet center any one perspective. This move would also position viewers of marginalized identities as secondary priorities, reinforcing their marginalization in a work that purports to fight for them.

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<sup>89</sup> I. P. Howard and B. J. Rogers, *Binocular Vision and Stereopsis*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 32.

<sup>90</sup> A. Lorde, ‘Learning from the 60s’, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*, New York, Crossing Press, 2007, p. 113.

<sup>91</sup> “The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms. [This] colonizing gesture [...] can operate to effect other relations of racial, class, and heterosexist subordination, to name a few. And clearly, listing the varieties of oppression, as I began to do, assumes their discrete, sequential coexistence along a horizontal axis that does not describe their convergences within the social field.”

J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 13.

Confrontation is a part of resistance, but future-building and creating solidarities through imagination felt more compelling and effective, given the immersive capabilities and (as of yet) unsettled syntax of VR 360. I cannot create visual decolonial resistance for my fellow Asian diasporic viewers while codifying it for the white gaze and tacitly supporting its power. Virtual reality requires imagination and operating outside of existing structures and ways of thinking. Virtual reality, then, requires an entirely new way of seeing a space, one separate from many, if not most, past and even current conventions. By refusing (through necessity) these conventions, this new way of seeing makes possible the creation and transmission of marginalized perspectives and imaginations in ways that do not privilege old systems, as even the medium itself is not beholden to them. In contrast to animation or CGI, VR 360 actually immerses viewers in impossible spaces of fantasy and imagination. VR 360, then, has the potential as a tool free(r than most) of the white gaze. Despite the name virtual reality, my aim is not to replace or replicate a known reality but to form something else: an abstracted space governed by my own imaginings—a decolonial somewhere.<sup>92</sup>

### *Use of Obstruction in the VR 360 Piece*

In both the written portion of this thesis and in the VR 360, I explore decoloniality, refusal, and the tension between hypervisibility and invisibility in raced, gendered, and otherwise marked bodies, especially (East) Asian American femme bodies. In both my empirical materials and in my VR 360 piece, I distill my interpretation into the visual practice of obstruction, which I then break down into several applications. My VR 360 piece uses obstruction in physical details, literal forms, such as the red textile panels, as well as ways that are inherent to the medium.

#### *Physical Obstruction*

On one level, I refuse everyone's gaze—I refuse to be scrutinized. In those panels where I disappear into the red, I have created small havens of privacy. This goes back to Eleanor Ty's and Monica Chiu's points on the Asian North American "paradox of being 'inscrutable,' visible/

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<sup>92</sup> J. Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 117-118.

invisible, looked at and overlooked[.]”<sup>93</sup> By installing physical obstructors (the panels) and keeping the camera stationary, I use my power over the space (staging) to control visual access to my body. I show myself when I want to be seen and block visual access when I do not, but the viewer has no control over this aspect. Instead, the viewer must either exit the experience or accept my editing and preset choreography. In short, I control the terms of our virtual meeting. As I discuss in Chapter 3, this refusal of the gaze is not just a statement asserting that I am entitled to keep to myself; it paves the way to a space where my gaze dictates the action. In obstructing the hungry gaze and refusing its inquiry, I am able to create a new space for myself and dictate its norms.

Physical obstruction also occurs in the form of my persona in the video. Alongside muted facial expressions and movements, I use makeup, hairstyling, and costume to transform myself into a me that is not necessarily me. I obstruct visual access to my body further by using an oversized costume comprised of three bright red, half-sleeve dresses layered on top of one another. The top two layers were made of transparent polyester mesh while the bottom layer was made of opaque cotton. Through a persona, I obstruct my actual self while still putting my body in the image. Persona carries both a protective and constructive function in the video. Just as refusal makes way for other options, by obstructing my everyday self, I am more equipped to turn my imagination into a witnessable experience. More than a point of focus against a backdrop, the persona also performs part of the worldbuilding.

The film set also undergoes a necessary form of obstruction through staging. The obstruction is necessary to a unified visual language in the VR 360 video. The persona and the space need each other to complete the syntax of full fantasy. Without transforming the set, the space highlights the strangeness of the persona. This way, both elements are equally embedded in a visual language of imagination, so that neither part makes the other look strange by contrast. These are indivisible elements of worldbuilding in the VR 360 video. By partially obstructing the room with strategically placed textiles, the space can transform into a visualized fantasyscape. However, I will expand on this concept in a later section, “Obstruction through Abstraction.”

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<sup>93</sup> E. K. Andres, ‘Scrutinized! Surveillance in Asian North American Literature by Monica Chiu (review)’, *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2015, pp. 376. Available from: Project MUSE, (accessed 5 March 2018).

E. Ty, *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, p. 4

### *Obstruction through Visual Disruption*

Some of the visual disruptions exist in the medium while others happen through staging and editing. VR 360's low resolution provides the most obvious visual disruption. While my camera (Ricoh Theta V) offers higher resolution than many other consumer-level equivalents (in 2017), it still does not deliver the same clarity (pixels per inch) of digital single lens reflex cameras or other HD cameras for 2D filming.<sup>94</sup> The resulting footage shows a grittiness reminiscent of home movies from earlier decades. The resolution makes observation of fine details impossible and distances the viewer from the literality of the physical space. On the other hand, by blocking out fine details, the grainy pixelation allows me to draw the viewer in through a sense of candor and immediacy, as if the image is physically happening around the viewer as they watch it in the headset. The stitching lines offer another vehicle for obstruction embedded in the technology, though their appearance depends on my own staging and movements.<sup>95</sup> However, in the end, I chose not to emphasize them.

I also manipulated the editing to selectively obstruct visual access to my body. Through carefully placed jump cuts, I appear and disappear at will. Some of the jump cuts are more jarring and extreme while others are milder and less surprising. Without the possibility of interaction, I become an elusive figure in the video, independent of the viewer's actions, intentions, and wants. At times, I place the cuts so that I walk into red panels and carefully reemerge nearby. Other times, I disappear into thin air while staring at the camera and reappear just as suddenly on the other side of the room. Given the restricted field of view (90°) in the headset, this sequence of edits may communicate (or provoke) anxiety rather than catharsis or imagination.

Partly, the decision to edit the footage this way does indicate some of my own anxieties about audience. This style clarifies my position and forces viewers to find me, rather than require me to stand around and perform the whole way through. In a way, this editing style works as a failsafe in case the viewer is violently opposed to the experience or to me, in which case I can still assert

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<sup>94</sup> The camera technically films in 4K, but because the total field of vision is 360° and you can only see 90° at any given time. This gives 4000 pixels horizontally by 2000 vertically. In a headset, the footage then plays as 1K instead of 4K. True 4K in a 360 video would actually require 16K VR 360 recording capability, which does not exist yet. (That way, the footage would show 16000 pixels horizontally, 8000 vertically, and 4000 [4K] in a headset.)

<sup>95</sup> Stitching lines are the distortions that run down the middle a VR 360 video. VR 360 records footage with two cameras—side by side or top and bottom—and forms a complete spherical image once the two are “stitched” together. These “lines” appear at the edge of each camera's video. Depending on the distance between the lenses, this distortion may be more or less noticeable. For example, an arm may appear broken (or even like it's missing an elbow) if it is closer than one meter to the camera.

my control over their visual access to me as I communicate this fact to them. If this aesthetic decision seems defensive, this may not be entirely inaccurate—as much as I control the piece, I poured a lot of myself into it. I also know that I am being watched and cannot be sure that my vulnerability will be handled with the knowing care of a safe space. This highlights a common struggle with decolonial visibility—even as I try to speak to my privileged audience of East Asian diasporic viewers, the awareness of scrutiny from the white gaze rarely leaves. However, I enact some radical hope in envisioning a space—however abstract—where I (as a figure) might not have such constant awareness. I cannot know what that future space would look like, but by attempting to connect with it on an emotional and abstracted level, I still try to push toward this thing I cannot yet know or picture with accuracy.

### *Obstruction through Abstraction*

I use abstraction to connect the piece to epistemic disobedience—a vital facet of decolonial resistance—and radical hope. By avoiding literality, the piece also avoids the more obvious trappings of pain tourism. As I discuss in Chapter 3, the genre of pain tourism is not restricted to a particular medium. In virtual reality, the viewer's emotions are magnified, as the immersion aspect promises authenticity. By grounding the visual language in abstraction, I obstruct the white gaze and its hunger for inquiry. As Tuck and Yang explain in their article on refusal, “[a]nalytic practices of refusal involve an active resistance to trading in pain and humiliation, and supply a rationale for blocking the settler colonial gaze that wants those stories.”<sup>96</sup> Instead of promising an authentic, literal experience where a viewer can cosplay as an (East) Asian American femme, I imaged into being an experience that relies on themes, structures, and emotions instead.

The sparseness of the piece—bright red surroundings, bright red panels, and one figure—magnifies the positions, which directly puts to the viewer an unclear system of boundaries and seeing. Swathed in bright red textiles, the space reads more as a color than as a recognizable place. Without the concreteness of a recognizable (type of) physical place, other fantastical elements and the norms of the overall experience become more readily establishable and accepted. In other words, the space presents a place that should not be possible but that exists anyway.

Once the viewer turns their head, however, they can see that the other side of the room is not covered in textiles. While this may take the viewer out of the fantasy element, this does explore

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<sup>96</sup> E. Tuck & K. W. Yang, ‘Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 6, p. 812. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 8 March 2018).

the common tension is many resistance efforts: the difficulty of moving forward requires acknowledgment of where are now. One risk of making resistance too abstract is that it loses the connection to the material world and the everyday, so in forming in an abstraction within a recognizable space, the experience extends into the world we recognize. As I discuss in the previous chapter, radical hope does not require concrete visions or expectations of a future but rather operates in the abstract with current context(s) and constraints as a backdrop.

### *Obstruction through Codification*

Codifying the image through selective obstruction in editing, hair and makeup, costume, and set design, the piece also offers information about the privileged audience. explores connection in a virtual space. In particular, I examine agency in embodiment, my relationship to my own bodied self, and my own attempt to privilege other gazes of color. The visual crux of this investigation boils down to the use of obstruction in a virtual space. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, To achieve this, I manipulated the virtual space with obstructions, which I used as physical and visual translations of refusal.<sup>97</sup>

The red was an instinctive choice. Originally, I had chosen white as the base color. I shifted away from white when I shifted away from confrontation as the focus. I chose red for several reasons. First, I wanted a color that would feel familiar to my target audience of (East) Asian diasporic viewers. While languages, histories, climates, cuisines, and customs vary widely between the 48 countries of Asia—many of which have bitter histories with one another—bright red offers a widely and similarly understood symbol as a color of celebration or happiness. Other reasons for this color choice were more practical and technical. For one, the bright red fabric that I chose was sustainable and more affordable. I also wanted a color that would glow on camera.

In the VR 360 piece, I wanted the viewer to feel awash in red. The background, foreground, and even the figure needed to be covered in the color (fig. 19). I applied further codes to the figure (my own body) in a similar vein. Like the Pat Xi photograph that I discuss in the previous chapter (fig. 16), I use a codified persona through particular styling choices. The hair, makeup, and costume contain specific signifiers that only my privileged audience—East Asian diasporic viewers, particularly Korean and/or Chinese viewers—will be able to readily identify. These

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<sup>97</sup> “We start with a discussion of refusal as an analytic practice that addresses forms of inquiry as invasion. And because we cannot, will not, share certain accounts, we sometimes trace the perimeter of the refusal; other times, we use examples from art and literature to illustrate what we mean.”

E. Tuck & K. W. Yang, ‘Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 6, p. 811. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 8 March 2018).

elements elude accurate Google searching due to the broadness of their descriptors, such as “braided hair,” “heavy blush,” “empire waist.” The results show something other than my references, and these results evidence the pervasiveness of centering whiteness and European histories and discourses. The search may yield links to the latest trends, clickbait listicles, or, at best, a Wikipedia history of rouge that excludes most of the world, apart from England and Egypt.<sup>98</sup> While searching in English may have limited the search results, the broadness of the request may have been unhelpful, particularly aided by the pervasiveness of the concept that whiteness is neutral.<sup>99</sup> (This is also speaking from a North American perspective, and of course, this does not function many other countries.)

If these codes are unfamiliar, together they appear random and, taken individually, unremarkable. But if you do know, you see nods to Korean and Chinese fashion histories. The single braid down the back—a style known as 땡기머리 daeng’gi meori—was worn exclusively by unmarried women during the **대조선국** Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910). Though the length is shorter and I have omitted the red ribbon around the end for continuity’s sake, the style is more or less the same. The empire waist and silhouette refers to **한복** hanbok (which translates to “Korean clothing”), which, for the last few hundred years, has featured high waistlines and obscuring skirts in accordance with Confucian ideals of modesty. (The earliest forms feature a much lower waistline influenced by Chinese fashion.) The heavy blush on the centers of the cheeks admittedly gets more complicated, as this can refer to so many cultures and trends throughout history. My own use of it refers to traditional Chinese makeup from the **唐朝** Tang Dynasty (618–907), which involves a heavy, bright pinkish red blush worn on the cheeks from just below the eyes to the lip level. I used this mixing approach deliberately and in reference to my own ethnically mixed background.

## **Creative and Production Processes**

There were difficulties along the way that touched on the theory in a personal manner. For example, being the figure in the footage felt strange. I am unaccustomed to being so exposed,

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<sup>98</sup> This is what I found from the Google search for “heavy blush.”

<sup>99</sup> A. Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’, *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2-3, 2007, pp. 168-178. Available from: The University of Warwick, (accessed 3 January 2018).

S. Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero: ciencia, raza e ilustración en la Nueva Granada (1750–1816)*, Bogotá, Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2005.

W. Mignolo, ‘Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7-8, 2009, pp. 1-23. Available from: SAGE Publications, (accessed 3 January 2018).

even if it is in the clothing and manner that I choose. The pervasiveness of the white gaze will almost always come with some degree of internalization, if not a constant awareness. Involuntarily, when I first put on the costume, my thoughts circled around body image, race, and fear. I couldn't stop the feeling that I had the wrong body for my own project about decolonial visual resistance, community building, and imaging my raced, gendered body into existence in a safe new space. I had not seen bodies like mine in mainstream visibility, or not often enough, and so I deemed it unfit to be seen on the basis of such bodies not having been seen before. I instinctively oppressed myself while trying to systems that already oppress me. How can you be something you never see, that you cannot even imagine? A thing without precedent is assumed to be a thing that cannot, then, create new precedents and therefore cannot exist. This is partly how the white gaze continues to reinscribe its power, and this highlights the importance of challenging historiography, of applying imagination and radical hope.

This reaction occurred every time I went to film. Every time, in order to perform, I had to pretend that I did not have a body, even as I calculated how it would appear in the footage. Even now, a small part of me still feels wrong for being (or wanting to be) visible. Theoretical oppressive systems have valid and real lived implications beyond the page and beyond academic curiosity. Theories, in their own way, become bodied through discourse and practice. In this VR 360 piece, I wanted to create a fantastic, if not therapeutic or cathartic application, bridging the gap between academic curiosity, theory, and actual life through my own codes and methods.

I should point out that my own anxieties about visibility have complex roots. Sexism, queerphobia, xenophobia, and racism all make it challenging not to feel hyper-vigilant when my body is the focus. My own personal history adds other complexities, and so my hesitance/ anxieties about visibility are not all due to sexism and racism at large. In short, focusing on my own corporeality can be a fraught process. Decoloniality and critical race studies—particularly aspects like epistemic disobedience, radical hope, and refusal—provide me with tools for my own liberation and others'. Just as theory informs experience, experience informs theory. As bell hooks explains her own perspective on theory and personal experience,

I came to theory because I was hurting [...] desperate, wanting to comprehend [...] what was happening around and within me. [...] I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.<sup>100</sup>

Healing, as an act of protection and construction, then clears the way for potential futures that do not include the causes of the initial hurt or the systems that support them. Acknowledging the

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<sup>100</sup> b. hooks, 'Theory as Liberatory Practice', *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1991, p. 1. Available from: Yale Law School Digital Repository, (accessed 28 March 2018).

two-way relationship between theory and experience is a vital aspect of not just disrupting the white gaze in academic institutions but creating space for people of color, women and femmes, and other people of marginalized identities in academia.<sup>101</sup> The VR 360 piece serves as an intriguing vehicle for the application of these liberatory tools, demonstrating the theories' significance beyond the page.

### *Adjustments and Changes*

The VR 360 piece actually began as a form of confrontation. I was angry, and the style reflected that. Initially, the concept was unbroken eye contact and provocation of fear and anxiety through controlled lighting. The piece was linear and meant to be filmed in a long hallway. The palette was white—even the fabric choices differed: ghostly muslin and polyester organza. Over time, I realized that regardless of how much I might control the exhibition space, this design turned the figure into a feared other—literally a form of Yellow Peril. At this point in the creative process, I reevaluated my audience, use of obstruction, and theories. The confrontation sprang from protective reflexes and rightly flagged areas of injustice. Anger has a place in resistance, and like confrontation, it can have more than one expression.<sup>102</sup> However, this approach conflicted somewhat with my own interpretation of decolonial visibility, which centers gazes of color, and yet I had made it all about the white gaze rather than my fellow (East) Asian American viewers. I accept that there is no one formula for decolonial resistance in visibility or even resistance in general. Multiplicity and appreciation of difference are actually the greatest strengths in resistances, as they allow for stronger, wider solidarities, methods, and ways of seeing. However, in pursuing a piece that did not center the very people I focus on, I was hurtling towards a fundamental contradiction.

Still, this process also highlights Chiu's point about the impossibility of "challeng[ing] stereotypes without first alluding to them, [...] echoing Sheng-mei Ma's [...] statement that 'in order to retire

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<sup>101</sup> While this calls to mind Audre Lorde's and Judith Butler's own stances on the futility of using oppressive patterns and structures to counter oppression, an academic career does not preclude other engagements or render resistance ineffective automatically. Oppression is complicated and be deeply nuanced, so approaching resistance in a multi-faceted way is not a logical impossibility. Theory has a way of entering discourse through popular culture, just as popular culture enters theory. Expanding academia, then, can have wider implications for culture at large.

<sup>102</sup> A. Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*, New York, Crossing Press, 2007, pp. 127-129.

racist stereotypes, one is obliged first to evoke them' (xi)[.]”<sup>103</sup> Additionally, as Lorde points out, anger can be a powerful tool to disrupt what has been, but “[s]uch strength does not focus upon what lies ahead, but upon what lies behind, upon what created it – [...] not a lifewish for anything else.”<sup>104</sup> I started to shift my work and perspective towards those with whom I wanted to connect and construct, and realized that those solidarities would disrupt the white gaze anyway but without having to privilege it. I considered how I might move towards future-building, solidarities, and community as productive forms of resistance—which will always refer back to what has been anyway—the design shifted. Here is where I started to craft the piece for other (East) Asian diasporic viewers. What began as a confrontation centering the white gaze transformed into abstract solidarity- and future-building.

The audio also deviated quite dramatically from the initial plans. As the piece is now, Ocean Vuong reads aloud his poem “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong” in the viewer’s ears as they look around the virtual space. At first, I had planned on recording traditional Korean instruments playing specific tones rather than a recognizable melody. This was not a practical option and the use of long tones and tintinnabulation may have added a high level of anxiety to the experience. I moved on to “Indian Ocean,” a 9 minute song composed and performed by 42 Strings, a diasporic contemporary string duo consisting of Althea Sully-Cole, kora player, and Muqi Li, zheng player. However, this decision came from the more panicked, confrontational approach. I tried a quieter song of theirs, but the music seemed to guide the experience too strongly, specifically in an overly sweet, dreamy manner. Spatializing the audio was another tactic that I chose not to use at this juncture, though I may take it up later.

Practically speaking, the scaffolding of the original design proved a big challenge (fig. 20). The scaffolding itself was a product of my own imagination and, consequently, did not come with a blueprint. I wanted it to function like stationary venetian blinds, so that when I turned away from the camera, the attached fabric panels would conceal my body; and, when I turned toward the

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<sup>103</sup> M. Chiu, “The Cultural Production of Asian American Young Adults in the Novels of Marie G. Lee, An Na, and Doris Jones Yang,” *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2006, p. 172. Available from: Project MUSE, (accessed 5 March 2018).

<sup>104</sup> “Growing up, metabolizing hatred like a daily bread. Because I am Black, because I am woman, because I am not Black enough, because I am not some particular fantasy of a woman, because I AM. On such a consistent diet, one can eventually come to value the hatred of one’s enemies more than one values the love of friends, for that hatred becomes the source of anger, and anger is a powerful fuel. And true, sometimes it seems that anger alone keeps me alive [...] Yet anger, like guilt, is an incomplete form of knowledge. More useful than hatred, but limited still. Anger is useful to help clarify our differences, but in the long run, strength that is bred by anger alone is a blind force which cannot create the future. It can only demolish the past. Such strength does not focus upon what lies ahead, but upon what lies behind, upon what created it – hatred. And hatred is a death wish for the hated, not a lifewish for anything else.”

A. Lorde, ‘Eye to Eye’, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*, New York, Crossing Press, 2007, p. 152.

camera, I became visible through the thin slats of the panels. The closest existing structure, a crinoline, offered little help, as I wanted straight vertical lines rather than horizontal ones. Without a larger budget for better materials and professional labor, I attempted a few prototypes using a lightweight, flexible wooden material called rattan, twine, tape, and wire (fig. 20). After a long iterative process, full of failure, I gave up. This was partly due to the failed construction effort but mostly due to my own shifting awareness about the piece. By putting the scaffolding on my own body, I had could hide my body quickly and at will, but the structure was highly fragile. This greatly restricted my mobility, and the physical burden literally and figuratively would put pressure on me. Additionally, this would alienate my body to the point of potential inscrutability. Combined with the neutral facial expression I use as a persona in the VR 360 piece, this would have raised some deeply problematic points in relation to the stereotype of inscrutability of Asian Americans. As it is, I still change my mind about the use of persona and the neutral expressions, but in the end, I needed those obstructions in order to feel safe enough to be on camera. I could have used someone else, but it felt important that I also force my own growth and boundaries in this project. I also did not want to accidentally subject anyone to unwanted scrutiny and I wanted to observe what this process would do to my own inner boundaries and perspectives on the theories and on my own body. As a piece intended to explore decolonial visibility, embodiment as resistance, and Asian American solidarities, the literal burden of the scaffolding on the body combined with the unreadable facial expression might have presented an ideological nightmare.

Instead, I chose to position the scaffolding around the camera, which put me in a much freer position than the viewer, who was now in a fixed position *and* in a visibly contained area *and* without the ability to control the experience (beyond turning their gaze or removing the headset). While I intended the original design to work like a mobile obstruction unit, so that I might obscure and reveal anytime anywhere (within the space), it became too much of a burden in the literal and metaphorical senses. By changing the site of scaffolding/obstructing, I was able to image into being a sense of simultaneous wholeness and fragmentation through manipulation of obstruction to show how not everything is for the white gaze, and sometimes, in protecting or blocking access to certain things, we can create new paths and perspectives. The central tenet of the piece is actually concretized (in that it is a transmittable, viewable video) decolonial imagination directed towards my own privileged audience of (East) Asian diasporic viewers, particularly one where I command attention on my own terms while taking up space and imaging myself—body and perspective—into visual culture.

## Conclusion

Obstruction is more than a stopping action but serves protective and productive functions, particularly in articulating decoloniality and radical hope in visibility. In my VR 360 piece, I apply obstruction (refusal interpreted visually) as a protective and productive method for creating decolonial visibility in an immersive virtual space. Specifically, I deliberately use the camera's technological limitations, physical obstructions, choreography, and editing as forms of obstruction. Through this immersive piece, which I treat as a visual thesis chapter, I explore the materiality of the decolonial, literary, feminist, and critical race theories that I use in the written portions of this thesis. In particular, I worked with epistemic disobedience, the tension(s) in scrutiny (visibility/invisibility) of Asian (North) Americans, and refusal of the white gaze (as applied to visual practice). Engaging with decolonial resistance and privileging Asian diasporic viewers, my VR 360 piece does not seek validation from the white gaze (in a bid for legitimacy) or even empathy, which cannot fully take place in this setting. Instead, the piece is coded (through deliberate obstruction and other aesthetic choices) for my privileged audience; I centered my visibility and epistemology around East Asian aesthetics and histories.

However, regardless of who puts on the headset, the brain processes it as a real exchange. When the figure looks directly at “you” (the camera), “you”/the viewer feel the weight of a present human gaze despite its apparent artificiality (e.g. headset, pixels, and so on). Whether that gaze feels like recognition or confrontation is dependent on the viewer's own sedimentation and sense of anxiety (due to the limited field of vision in the headset). I have kept my VR 360 piece and empirical materials deliberately focused on Asian American embodiment in U.S. visual culture, as this area is both under-researched (evidence of the invisibility part of scrutiny) and personally significant. I wanted to apply my own perspective as a second generation Taiwanese/Chinese/Korean American and delve into the possibilities and limitations of moving towards decolonial visualities.

Currently, the most common form of visualities around difference seems to be explanatory representations or representations that center the white gaze in mainstream discourse. While representation for people of color geared towards more mainstream discourse has its purpose(s), but the inevitable questions arise of who such images are for, who they benefit, and why. A common issue is the impulse to over-explain and argue for meaning as if it does not already exist, as if there is only one site of meaning: whiteness. This move treats depicted subjects of color as figures in need of validation from the white gaze and further reinforces the white gaze as universal authority. As a vehicle for decolonial interventions, visual culture offers spaces for resistance and community- and future-building for people of color and other marginalized

identities. Using the refusal of the white gaze as a starting point, image creators can begin to center gazes of color instead and operate according to value systems that move away from coloniality and the denigration of people of color. Through codification of visual syntax, visual disruptions, physical obstructions, deliberate restriction of distribution, and manipulation of different media's limitations, images can apply obstruction as a productive force for shaping selfhood, community, discourse, and visual communication.

As I demonstrate in Chapter 1, the white gaze—as the scopic drive of the colonial matrix of power—draws much of its power from its (self-styled) perceived neutrality and universality, or what Santiago Castro-Gómez refers to as the hubris of the zero point.<sup>105</sup> An ideology deeply ingrained in U.S. society and visual culture, the white gaze performs epistemic violence by dictating what are (and are not) sites of knowledge and knowledge making, as well as who can know, and what is worth knowing. By extension, this puts parameters on the inner eye (imagination) and ideas of what is possible. Radical hope, as an imaginative force directed towards an unknowable, unseen future goodness, becomes a vital tool in working around these epistemological limits imposed by the white gaze. Using obstruction as a methodological approach to decolonial visual expression, the images are codified projections of spaces governed by perspectives of color (across difference). In it, people of color do not just assert their own value but practice it and acknowledge themselves and their histories as sites of meaning. In short, decolonial visuality becomes a practice of epistemic liberation. More besides, this creates opportunities for building intra- and inter-group solidarities across race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and other forms of difference. This mode of thinking and acting, Audre Lorde states, makes possible a more sustainable effort toward an equitable future.

If our history has taught us anything, it is that action for change directed only against the external conditions of our oppressions is not enough. In order to be whole, we must recognize the despair oppression plants within each of us – that thin persistent voice that says our efforts are useless, it will never change, so why bother, accept it. [...] [A]nd we can lessen its potency by the knowledge of our real connectedness, arcing across our differences. Hopefully, we can learn from the 60s that we cannot afford to do our enemies' work by destroying each other.<sup>106</sup>

By creating visuality that address difference within and between marginalized groups, images encourage and even conduct vital conversations with one another. Beyond a false universality, the white gaze sources its power from the division of those (it perceives to be) beneath it.

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<sup>105</sup> S. Castro-Gómez, *La hubris del punto cero: ciencia, raza e ilustración en la Nueva Granada (1750–1816)*, Bogotá, Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2005, p.18. Translation by the author.

<sup>106</sup> A. Lorde, 'Learning from the 60s', *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*, New York, Crossing Press, 2007, p. 113.

While an argument could be made that putting energy into obstruction may be centering the white gaze (albeit in a defensive manner), the image (coded with the produced obstruction) performs the brunt of this task instead of forcing the creators into a position of explaining (asking for legitimacy). The image does not demand understanding, validation, or even attention from the white gaze, and so the task of explaining becomes irrelevant. The white gaze, as an audience, becomes irrelevant, or at least secondary (if not tertiary). This practice protects creators from repeated exposure to dehumanizing contact and saves them emotional labor and time in a way that does not seek out the white gaze. Instead, the codifying—similar to the social functions of humor—simply identifies who the image is for. In this way, everyone can view images but only the privileged group(s) can really see the “hidden transcript [...] beyond the cognitive range” of the white gaze.<sup>107</sup>

In obstructing the white gaze, image creators obstruct its epistemic and psychic violence. More than a blocking mechanism, obstruction offers a platform for radical hope and imaginative excellence, communication and community building, and the forging of new epistemologies that decenter the white gaze.<sup>108</sup> Obstruction becomes a form of mediation and protection of self, representation(s)/messages, and communities—but even more than protection, obstruction forces creators to use new codes and languages that are instead based on systems that reinforce their value. Use of obstruction forces creators into developing new strategies, value systems, epistemologies, and communication styles that—while not ever truly separated from the coloniality imbued in culture—at least attempt to actively disconnect from it and move towards new methods and inclusive futures that cannot yet be pictured or perhaps even created with our current methods (which might only reinscribe the coloniality of our current structure[s]).

While obstruction offers protection and new avenues, there remains questions about potential defensiveness in tone of obstruction and whether—in an immersive space—it leaves sufficient room for the complexities of personal insecurities, narratives, and preferences without veering off into pain tourism. The coloniality of power is pervasive and insidious. As such, this is a problem facing all of us, not just people of color and will require solidarities across all kinds of difference within and between groups. There remain complex aspects that I do not examine in this thesis but that warrant further analysis, such as the intersections of class and skin tone (colorism) with and across communities of color, how white communities might address this issue with each other, as well as the negotiation in VR between the expressions of personal

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<sup>107</sup> G. Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, p. 117

<sup>108</sup> J. Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 117.

experience and resistance. Specifically, the line between self-expression and pain tourism felt difficult to navigate at times. So much of decolonial visibility is celebratory, beautiful, loving, and entertaining, but just like anything that tries to dismantle a painful, dehumanizing structure, it always refers back to it in some way. There should be room for expressions of individual personhood and moments of pain, as we are sedimented with our experiences and the histories of the world around us, and those things will always be present in what we produce. Decolonial visibility, as a complicated area with a multiplicity of expressions and methods, should continue to be researched. The greatest success of this effort may actually be in the volume and diversity of approaches, and though I focus on obstruction here, this method and many others should continue to be explored.

## Appendix



Fig. 1 – Edgar Heap of Birds, *Relocate Destroy, In Memory of Native Americans, In Memory of Jews*, 1987, *From American Policy* (1987)



Fig. 2 – Defend Boyle Heights protest against gallerists Gavin Brown and Laura Owens, The Whitney Museum, New York, 8 November 2017.



Fig. 3 – Ted Thai, “Those Asian-American WHIZ KIDS”, *TIME* Magazine cover, 1987



Fig. 4 – N.B. Wilkins, “Colorado. - The anti-Chinese riot in Denver, on October 31st. ...”, (1880), sketch in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, Chinese American Museum, Los Angeles archives



Fig. 5 – Banana Mag #2 (2017) – front cover, illustration by Greg Foley



Fig. 6 – Banana Mag #2 (2017) – cover page, illustration by Greg Foley

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She told me a story as she pulled out her dresses. My grandmother worked as a social worker in Hong Kong. At the age of 38, she decided to get out of accounting and into social services.

It's a courageous and unexpected thing to change careers in her late-thirties. "I was a little overage," she admitted. "They usually hired people under 30." But she studied at Hong Kong University, passed her exams and had proven herself. She worked in the Social Work department for twenty-two years until her retirement in 1980.

I asked her why she chose social work. "I followed my mother's will," she said. Her mother often volunteered at organizations like the Red Cross.

Her British supervisors would come visit the children's home she ran in Hong Kong that housed 100 foster children. She recalled the one time Princess Anne (Princes Charles' sister) came to visit. "It was a big event in Hong Kong," she recalled. "I wore my cheongsam so I wouldn't have to bow like the English," she said, as if it gave her some sort of immunity. "I'm Chinese."

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Fig. 7 – “Anna Lee”, *ChinatownPretty.com* (2017)



Fig. 8 – Heidi Cho – “Gay Magic, Gay Shame” (2017) – mixed media installation



Fig. 9 – closeup of Heidi Cho, “Gay Magic, Gay Shame” (2017) – mixed media installation

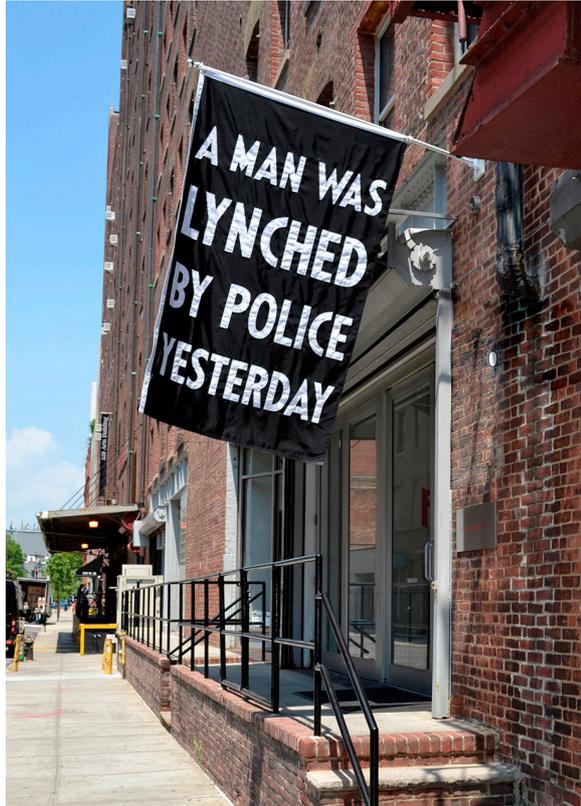


Fig. 10 – Dread Scott, “A man was lynched by police yesterday” (2015)



Fig. 11 – “An Incomplete History of Protest” exhibition, Whitney Museum (2017)

shown in image:

Dread Scott, A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday, 2015

Josephine Meckeskeeper, Silent Echoes of the 60s, 2005 (super 8)

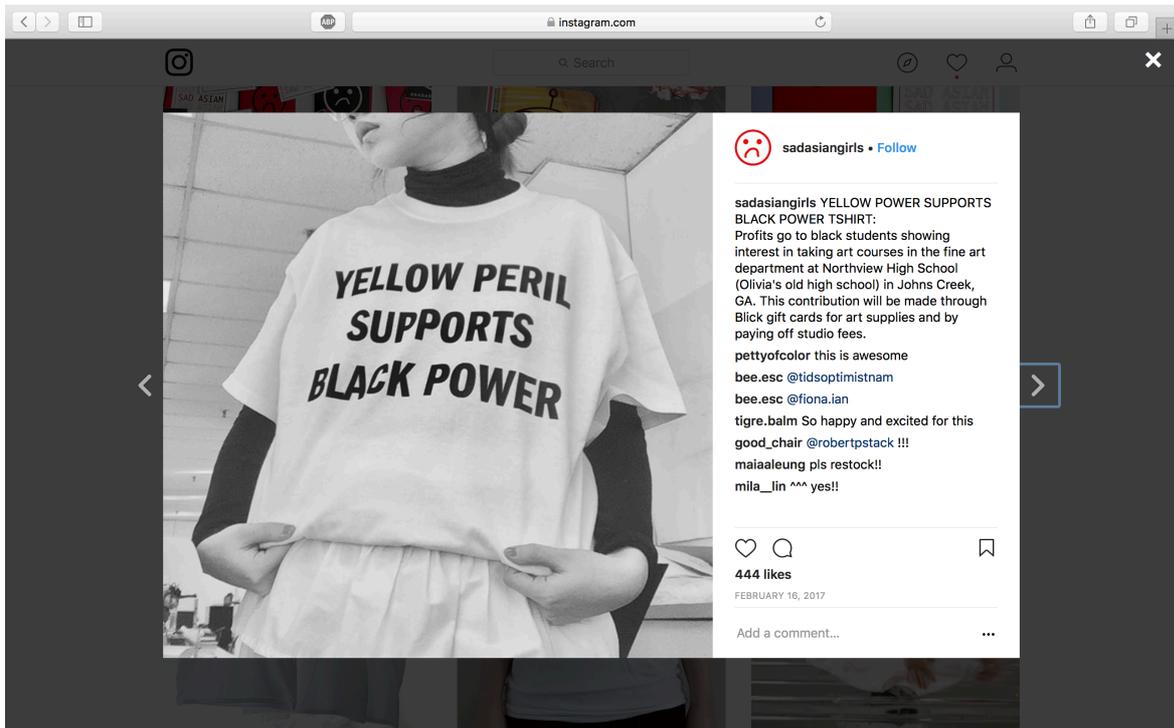


Fig. 12 – SadAsianGirls, “YELLOW POWER SUPPORTS BLACK POWER TSHIRT”



Fig. 13 – left to right: Huey Newton rally, Oakland, California (1969); Michael Brown rally, Ferguson, Missouri (2014)

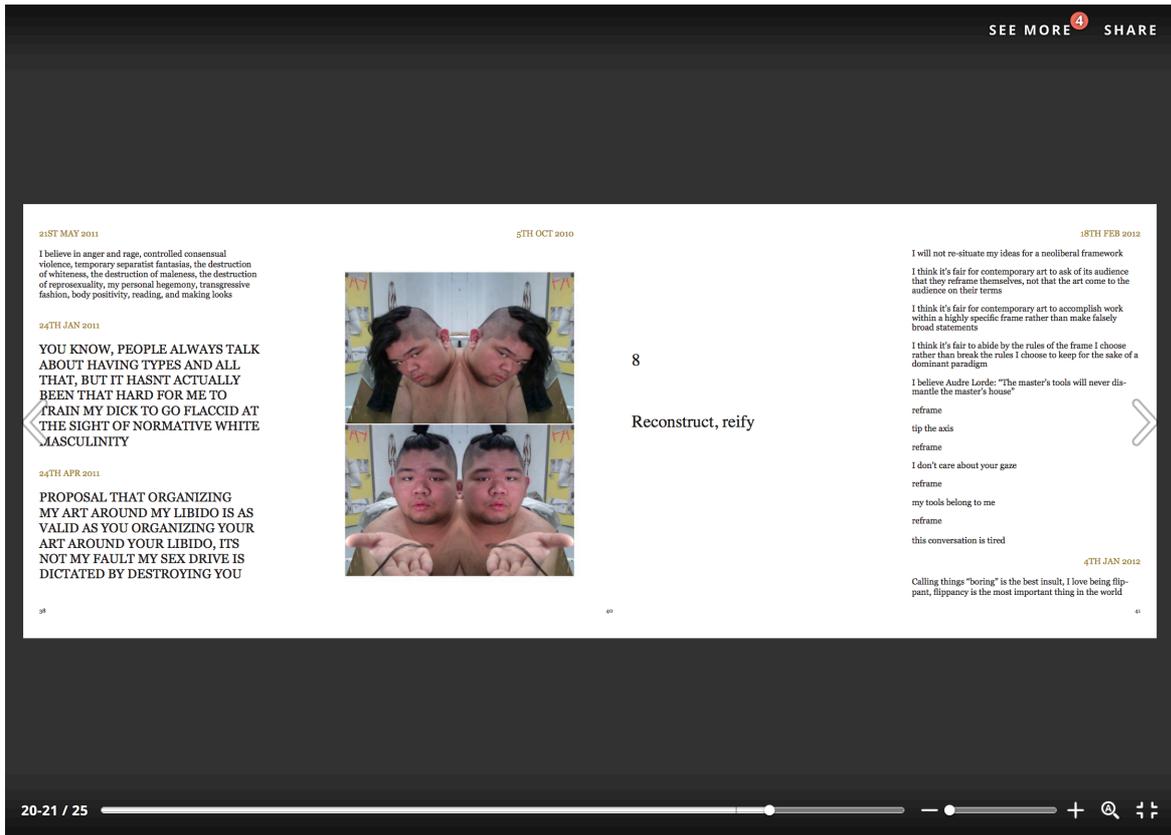


Fig. 14 – Juana Peralta & Roy Pérez, *Call Out Queen Zine*, 2012, p. 20–21 (in memory of Mark Aguhar)

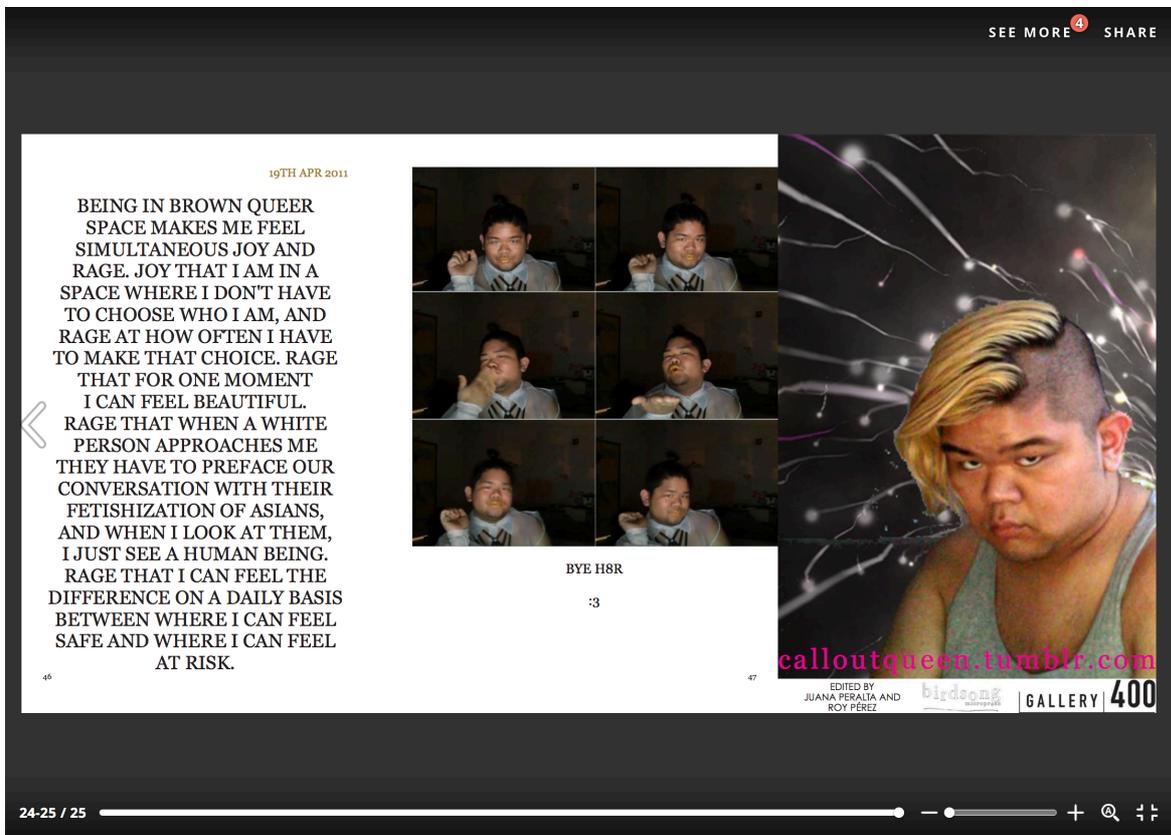


Fig. 15 – Juana Peralta & Roy Pérez, *Call Out Queen Zine*, 2012, p. 20–21 (in memory of Mark Aguhar)



PAT XI, *model and artist*, Versace wool jacket, \$2,200 at 647 Fifth Ave.; Ellery fringe slip dress, \$795 at ellery.com Photo by Mamadi Doumbouya. Styled by Diana Tsui.

Fig. 16 – Pat Xi (modeling/composition), photograph by Mamadi Doumbouya for TheCut.com



Fig. 17 – Yaeji, “Last Breath” (2017) – music video stills



Fig. 18 – Clarissa Grace Chang, “Imagining Somewheres” (2018) – twin lens view inside VR headset



Fig. 19 – Clarissa Grace Chang, “Imagining Somewheres” (2018) – film set



Fig. 20 – “Imagining Somewheres” (2018), materials and processes

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