WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II

EDITED BY KALIA BROOKS, CHERYL FINLEY, ELLYN TOSCANO AND DEBORAH WILLIS

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Cover image: FIRELEI BÁEZ for Marie-Louise Coidavid, exiled, keeper of order, Anacaona, 2018. Oil on canvas. Installation view: 10th Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste (Hanseatenweg), Berlin, 9 June 9-September 2018. Photo: Timo Ohler. Cover design by Anna Gatti

16. Blue and White Forever:

Embodying Race and Gender in Clay[1]

Kalia Brooks

> The Orient [...] is the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other.
>
> Edward Said

Jennifer Ling Datchuk's exploration of race and gender in her recent bodies of work, *Dark and Lovely* (2014), *Blackwork* (2016), and *Girl You Can* (2017), contemplates themes related to identity, otherness and belonging rooted in her mixed Chinese and White American heritage. She uses porcelain as a material and metaphor to visualize the intersection between cultural appropriation, global economy and the commodification of the human body. Her artwork challenges the authenticity of identity narratives that are distributed through commodities, and the impact that has on the reception and appearance of the human body.

Datchuk is familiar with living in an identity space of in-betweenness. Although this transient state may be familiar, it is also a site of contestation. It is the zone she draws upon to inspire her artistic practice. As such, her work is charged with critiquing the rigid

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social and cultural boundaries of race and gender. Not only in how the parameters of race and gender are constructed, but also, and perhaps more importantly, how the appearance of race and gender affects physical bodies by enacting power over standards of beauty, the division of labor and the consumption of goods. Datchuk shows us that these power dynamics take place on a global scale. They are embedded in an international system of exchange that moves through circuits of immigration, commerce and trade, and are rooted in the history of colonialism and imperialism.

Porcelain and the body (Datchuk's specifically) reoccur in each of these bodies of work. She uses her Chinese American experience to intervene in the metaphor of 'pure whiteness' that porcelain symbolizes. She uses her body in relation to the material in performance, installation and digital documentation to subvert the expectation of perfection. In addition to the signification of whiteness, Datchuk similarly extends her investigation to human hair—a product largely exported from China to fuel the billion-dollar hair care industry in the United States. She is concerned with the way the straight texture and length of Chinese hair has been appropriated in African American hair styling as an expression of beauty. In so doing, she brings to the foreground the manufactured elements of identity that mediate the arbitrary, yet reified, cultural distinctions between White, Black and Other.

In the series entitled *Dark and Lovely* (2014), Datchuk uses hair to challenge the dichotomy of prescribed identity categories. Using photography, porcelain, video, performance and installation, she visualizes the imposed duality of her subjective position. She establishes a set of comparisons between her body and the porcelain object that focus on hair as the thread that connects the self to identity and beauty. In a series of diptychs entitled *Blue and White* (Fig. 1), Datchuk plucks her eyebrows to make room for porcelain prosthetic eyebrows that, as an absurd exercise, attempt to make her 'look' more Chinese.

Fig. 1 *Blue and White: Bold Beauty*, 2014, porcelain, blue and white pattern transfer from Jingdezhen, China, digital photograph. © Jennifer Ling Datchuk. Courtesy of the artist.

In another work entitled *Pretty Sister, Ugly Sister* (Fig. 2), the viewer is encouraged to consider the value imbued in hair, in terms of its length and color, to determine cultural standards of beauty.

Fig. 2 *Pretty Sister, Ugly Sister*, 2014, porcelain, black Chinese hair bleached blonde and dyed blue. © Jennifer Ling Datchuk. Courtesy of the artist.

Datchuk reminds us in the artwork entitled *Making Women* (Fig. 3), that these standards are not simply a matter of personal preference, but a reflection of more insidious social and cultural conditioning that is fueled by a billion-dollar hair care industry.

Fig. 3 *Making Women* (series), 2014 (ongoing), porcelain, human hair. © Jennifer Ling Datchuk. Courtesy of the artist.

The title of the series *Dark and Lovely* is appropriated from a line of African American hair care products of the same name. By titling her series this way, Datchuk is able to point to the dynamics of the global hair care industry, namely the Chinese women who provide the majority of hair for wigs and extensions sought after in the American and European markets, the African American consumer base which accounts for over $2 billion of the hair care market, and the latent (yet pervasive) beauty standard of white-ness that is upheld by the labor and consumerism of the Other.

Datchuk does well in establishing a parallel between the African American and Chinese American experiences as they relate to the global beauty industry. There is an economic closeness (if not a social one) that creates proximity among African Americans and Chinese Americans in response to the supply and demand of the beauty industry. Both sets of bodies have been historically and discursively subject to colonial authorship, and as such share a cultural indoctrination to a standard of beauty that is grounded in validating the ideal of white-ness.

One of the more compelling aspects of Datchuk's practice is the way she converts hair into textile. Her series entitled *Blackwork* (2016) reframes the term traditionally used to describe the painstaking work of embroidery into a metaphor that emphasizes the slowness of hair growth, and as a means to compare the women's work that embroidery most often is to the labor of women who grow their hair for a living. In this body of work, Datchuk returns to her diptych motif. Instead of appending porcelain eyebrows, she wears wigs of different textures, lengths and styles that are typically found in American beauty supply stores targeting African American consumers. These wigs, fashioned from Chinese hair, serve to further destabilize the expectation of her appearance, and the perceived instability of her image becomes a site where representations of authenticity are contested and reformed.

In the piece entitled *Blackwerk* (Fig. 4), Datchuk is investigating the similarity between Chinese hair and Chinese porcelain as lucrative exports for American and European markets.

Fig. 4 *Blackwerk*, 2016, porcelain, ceramic decals, blue and white pattern transfers from Jingdezhen, China, Asian human hair. © Jennifer Ling Datchuk. Courtesy of the artist.

The porcelain signifies a Chinese-ness that is manufactured primarily for export, a marker of the collectability and the acquisition of culture through commodities. Human hair, as a commodity, however, is not an indicator of Chinese cultural production. Rather, it is a material that is

processed, treated and manipulated to market an aesthetic idea of Black-ness. The porcelain and the hair are objects that represent an idea of perfection that is manufactured in China by and for the international consumer.

These commodities in an American and European market are the objects by which we learn to perform and identify race and gender in the commercial pursuit of beauty. The lucrative and longstanding economic network between China and the United States specifically is masked by the social pathology of racism. This is evident in the artwork entitled *Sampler of an American Born Chinese* (Fig. 5), where Datchuk uses porcelain and hair, again alongside the language of embroidery, to spell out xenophobic epithets that are an unfortunate part of the American lexicon of racial categorization that undermine the long history of cultural, social, and economic exchange between the United States and China.

Fig. 5 *Sample of an American Born Chinese*, 2016, slip cast porcelain shower drains, collected hair. © Jennifer Ling Datchuk. Courtesy of the artist.

Datchuk contextualizes the appearance of Chinese-ness and Black-ness within a broader economic framework that is rooted in the history of European and American colonialism and imperialism. Additionally, she subverts the limited expectations of racial or ethnic appearances by embracing the plurality of subjective experience. Because she uses her

body in her work to explore the transmission of race, gender and identity, she is aware that her 'look' will read differently in different contexts. There is a level of interpretation involved in deciphering aesthetic language that is determined by culture and geography. Datchuk writes about how her Chinese-ness was more dominantly legible to people in Germany in a way she had never known before in the United States or Asia.

This new awareness granted her an opportunity to conceive of her identity as whole rather than fractured, and to view the position of the Other as the dominant gaze by which to critique American culture. The result is the series entitled *Girl You Can* (2017). In this body of work Datchuk makes apparent the pathologies of racism and stereotypes that function to serve the agenda of inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, as well as the myopic gender roles that are embedded in the ideology of nationalism.

With this series Datchuk opens up to incorporating more media, for example, neon signs, 3D prints and jacquard textile. She also obscures her body as a direct point of reference. In the photograph entitled *Money Honey* (Fig. 6), Datchuk focuses on the hands, which are adorned with ornate acrylic nails and 3D printed porcelain rings.

Fig. 6 *Money Honey*, 2017, image of 3D printed, slip cast porcelain, blue and white transfers from Jingdezhen, China; blue and white nails by GLAZE Nail Lounge, San Antonio. © Jennifer Ling Datchuk. Courtesy of the artist.

The image calls out the artifice of beauty ideals represented by the fake nails and 'impurely' produced porcelain rings. The composition also calls to mind the stereotypical adornments of African American street culture, which has recently crossed over into White or popular culture. Latent in the image is the historical and contemporary flow of Chinese labor, which has expanded from the tradition of porcelain making in China to nail salons across the United States.

Datchuk's use of technology, namely with the 3D prints and neon signs, becomes a way to explicate the artifice of race and gender stereotypes—as well as commentary on the persistence of these images within the contemporary moment. Her neon installation entitled *Ching Chong* (Fig. 7) appropriates the typeface invented in the United States to signify 'Chinese', or more appropriately for this context, the American understanding of the Oriental.

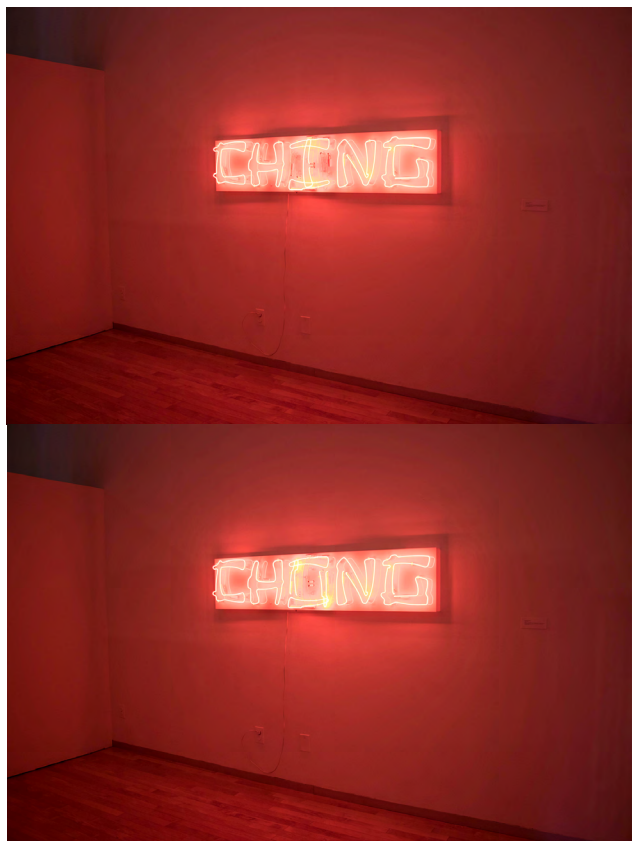

Fig. 7 *Ching Chong*, 2017, neon, acrylic, typeface designed by Jamie Stolarski. © Jennifer Ling Datchuk. Courtesy of the artist.

It is most recognizable in the signage of Chinese restaurants marketing to an American consumer. Even without the direct apprehension of a body, Datchuk exposes that stereotypes manifest through the subliminal messaging of graphic design where the coupling of text and image become a tool for constructing the viewer's perceptions of the Other. In the video entitled *Whitewash* (Fig. 8), Datchuk returns to her analysis of porcelain as a symbol of White-ness valued as beautiful in both Chinese and American culture.

Fig. 8 *Whitewash*, 2017, video stills. © Jennifer Ling Datchuk. Courtesy of the artist.

She creates a double channel display where the images are played side by side. On one side the viewer sees porcelain dishes being exposed to water until they return back to the original clay form, while on the other side Datchuk applies the porcelain clay to her face in an attempt to become the perfect white object. Her performance also calls to mind the beauty rituals of women who mask their faces with clay beauty products in an effort to purify, cleanse, and detoxify the skin. In this way, the clay is the resource by which the body becomes an object, creating and lending its properties to the objectification of the female form.

Datchuk's critical approach to exposing the way race and gender are marketed and sold to the public through the economic systems of trade, labor and commerce creates space for new possibilities in the practice of representation. Her artwork shows the viewer that there is a fertile terrain that exists beyond the boundaries of prescribed identity

positions. And, when one becomes aware that their understanding of the world and the people in it has been manipulated by the motivations of industry, then we can begin to conceive of a society that recognizes difference as a value for community rather than consumption.

By debunking the myth of the homogeneous subject and undermining the notion of purity that is held in relation to national identity, especially in countries that have emerged from colonial pasts,[2] Datchuk is able to call attention to the substructural forces that divide and subjugate humanity for the purposes of global domination. It is often misunderstood that the image we hold of the Other is a result of free will; on the contrary, Datchuk's artwork uncovers the social conditioning that successfully (yet pathologically) informs our apprehension of identity. This information is assimilated into our consciousness through the things we buy, which become surrogates for the human body—a process of externalization (or objectification) that provides the content for who we are.

The traditional expressions of race and gender are mass-produced articulations of identity. They do not take into account for example the natural order of difference that maintains the diverse, productive and abundant ecosystem of the earth. Datchuk exposes the unnatural mechanisms of the beauty industry and cultural production that create the illusion of the Other. In turn she reveals how Othering works in a global economy to produce a framework for White-ness that the Other is consistently striving to emulate through consumption.

2 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 4.