

The Case of Stolen Identity: Performing Consumerism or Impersonating Citizenship?

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Interrogating ID

What happens when autobiography collides with state biography? When state-mandated citizenship, or national recognition, is at odds with self-determination, which mode has more legitimacy in subject formation? In publishing, and thus publicizing the history of the “self,” as well as imagining its future, what role does “personal” agency perform in the complex interplay of the Law, legality and the political ledger? How are these questions further complicated when the “self” is ethnically marked?

What does it mean to be an illegal citizen?

There are a number of different ways in which the state, through a variety of interpellative apparatuses, inducts, recognizes, tracks, and qualifies its subjects. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson interrogates the concept of nation as an imagined community sutured together through mass suggestion and technologies of writing (Anderson 1983). Following his logic, I would like to propose that citizenship is a similar fiction conceived in a two-fold way: citizenship is largely constructed by a general agreement wherein the imaginary plays a substantial role. The state, and in particular, the US state, honors imaginary inclusion and exclusion through channels of legality, creating myriad categories in order to accommodate these states. In her study of citizenship and Asian American communities, *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe enumerates some ways that the nation fingerprints its selves: “‘Legal’ and ‘illegal,’ ‘citizen’ and ‘non-citizen’ ‘US-born’ and ‘permanent resident’ are contemporary modes in which the liberal state

discriminates, surveys and produces immigrant identities” (Lowe 1996:19). Also, citizenship is only authenticated through archival verification; it is a historical (written) set of records, from certificates of birth to certificates of death, cards giving residents the right to work (Social Security), the right to vote (voter registration cards), the right to be conscripted (draft cards), proof of education (diplomas), and so on.

In this essay I will use a recent personal experience in order to investigate “metaphoric, literal and performed possibilities . . . of the everyday through which [to] access (successfully or not) the experience called citizenship” (Joseph 1999:3). I intend to analyze ID, identification, as a product of public surveillance against ID, identity, as covert, private activity. I will frame these seemingly disparate identity formations under the categories *ethnic, capitalist, public, private, traumatic, legal*, and *extra-legal* modes of citizenship.

Just the Facts, Ma’am

Early in June 1999 my California Driver’s License, student health card bearing my Social Security number, and my checkbook were stolen. In July 1999, after having already reported the theft to various institutions and agencies, I was surprised to be inundated by a flood of bills for purchases made by Susan Park. I am Susan Park. Yet, I did not make these purchases. Evidently, someone had fraudulently assumed my identity and had begun writing checks and opening credit accounts to retail outfits for pricey merchandise (computers, jewelry, etc.). I found myself a “victim” of what editor Timothy O’Brian of The New York Times hails as “one of the signature crimes of [this] era,” that is “identity theft” (O’Brian 2000). I have run across similar bylines in The Los Angeles Times, The Detroit News, San Francisco Chronicle, and Seattle Post-Intelligencer of this widespread and growing crime.

I can’t help feeling violated, annoyed, and fascinated simultaneously. Although I am legally waived from financial responsibility of the fraudulent purchases, Susan Park has become something of a *persona non grata*. Strangely enough, she is to me as well. The final irony of the situation is that the person who has been impersonating me can only do limited personal harm. She can attempt to assassinate the character Susan Park, but she can not touch Shin hee. I am Shin hee.

Shin hee is not recognized by the federal government, California DMV, UT Austin, University Federal Credit Union, or I Love Video. Although Shin hee has to deal with the headache of the ordeal, she has maintained an odd yet comforting immunity to the horror of having a doppelganger (Susan Park #2) loose in the world.

The (Yellow) Perils of Interpellation

After this experience, it dawned on me just how *specific* identity is in its rhetorical construction. Althusser's formulation of interpellation in his influential essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" can be understood here as a provocative but unfinished description of subject formation. Can "Hey you, there" be understood as incomplete without a name following "there?" I would argue that Althusser's claim about interpellation falls into contradictory straits by the contention that when an individual is drawn into subjecthood through hailing, she becomes at once anonymous and specific. That is to say, in the process of naming, or calling forth an individual, much about that individual is withheld. At the same time attributes are thrust upon that individual leading to the "inauguration" of the subject (Althusser 1971).

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler refers to this moment as "a totalizing reduction of identity performed by [a] particular hailing," and questions whether that *particular* hailing is "politically strategic or regressive or, if paralyzing and regressive, also enabling in some way" (Butler 1997a:96). What is at stake here is not so much the accuracy behind the hailing privilege, but the power of the hailing itself to instantly determine (or elide) that thing it is naming. I believe one major mode of understanding the effects of interpellative power lies in asking how discernment of particularity is exercised. In naming the *thing* in question according to what non-specific (to the individual), culturally inscribed coordinates s/he occupies, "Hey you, there," does more to describe an individual by location than it does to describe an individual by determining features. In this way, Althusser's theorizations fall short of identifying subjects who are homogenized by such visual markers as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and (arguably) sexuality. Subjects who belong to a peripheral community or multiple communities are in a position that requires an additional interpellative valence in order to encompass their particular individuality. "Hey you,

there,” assumes a universal subjectivity.

Althusser hedged his theory of interpellation with a ten-percent error of margin. “Nine out of ten times,” he wrote, the one who is beckoned will turn and respond. Can we interpret this caveat as a deliberate way to accommodate the marginal? Butler also points out that “Althusser does not offer a clue as to why the individual turns around, accepting the voice as being addressed to him or her, and accepting the subordination and normalization effected by that voice” (Butler 1997a:5). Althusser does not answer the lingering question of why some that are hailed respond while others do not, or how and what they are initially called.

How does this apply to those others who do not seem to have “universal” appearance, customs, languages, etc., to the party doing the naming? As if caught in a Chinese Finger puzzle, the interpellated is trapped between; on the one finger, singled out, and on the other finger, excluded by virtue of his or her particular divergence from the American “norm.” Ruth Hsu, in a critique of Anderson’s “imagined communities,” comments on an ethnic “threat” to these norms by stressing that “ethnicity can be a method of interpellation in which the center calls to those for whom it has marginalized to join this national ‘community,’ supposedly as a full member, but which is in effect the means by which certain Diasporic peoples are marked as the irredeemable other” (Hsu 1991:39). Thus, if the interpellated seeks access into this sphere of “American-ness” unproceeded and unmolested by a racially discriminatory hail, s/he must at some time attempt to arrest or subvert those features that interfere with successful “assimilation.” This influences how US citizenship, for some Americans, becomes recoded as ethnic surrender.

Susan Park

I come from an immediate family whose individual members have undergone different gradients of this surrender in order to approach US citizenship. My maternal grandfather was the first to come to the US. He visited the country such a long time ago that he flew over on a propeller plane instead of a jet. At this time, even if he had wanted to stay he probably could not have done so legally due to the Immigrant Exclusion Acts. My parents came to the US decades later and were granted citizenship with many other Koreans because of the

lifting of quotas in 1965. My parents and two brothers renounced their Korean citizenship in order to become naturalized in the US.

Elements of their cultural citizenship, names, were forfeited in the process—Shin-Chul became Charles, Shin-Kyu became George, etc. I however, was never put in a position of having to surrender my name, although I am all too familiar with Lauren Berlant’s litany of acts (“self-erasure, self-transformation, and assimilation”) required to “fit in” (Berlant 1997:192). I was born in the US, albeit barely; my mother was seven months pregnant with me when she arrived on American shores. On the day of my birth (*Columbus Day*, believe it or not!) my parents equipped me with a Western name, one which is already Romanized in script and aurally familiar to Westerners—Susan Park.

Ethnic Citizenship

Belonging to a minority in number, representation, and power, my family falls into a specific subgroup of US citizen-subjects. As all “ethnic,” (i.e., non-Anglo) Americans have experienced, to be an American of color is to be impaled by a hyphen. To recall my previous argument, the particular name preceding the hyphen is a source of anonymity and specification. Anonymous-specific subjects have compromised rights as citizens.

The US, as a white-dominant state, exercises its racial privilege precisely through the apparatus of naming and name reading. It does so in a quotidian sense, through proper names, as well as in an institutional sense, through channels of documentation. However, in the case of Asian Americans, inferences of racial populace foreruns the person. Lisa Lowe points out that in the last century and a half, the American citizen has “been defined over and against the Asian *immigrant*, legally, economically, and culturally. These definitions have cast Asian immigrants both as persons and populations to be managed by the national public sphere, and as the “contradictory, confusing, unintelligible elements to be marginalized and returned to their alien origins” (Lowe 1996:4).

Capitalist Citizenship

The Word is the province of The Law. A Lacanian perspective of this maxim might explore how this may hold true for determining

state and family law and, as subsequently, how gender is constructed and fortified within these institutions by imposing linguistic constraints upon captive subjects. In a similar way, race/ethnicity/nationality are implicated within a “performative” process. Here I am using the term performative as it has developed from within the field of speech acts. J. L. Austin identifies the performative as a mode of “illocutionary speech, or speech that acts through its pronouncement, as opposed to perlocutionary speech, or speech that is not necessary to the accomplishment of the action” (Austin 1955:79). In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler has written incisively about the constructive process of the performative as “bringing into being and exhaustively constituting that which it names, or, rather, it is that kind of transitive referring which names and inaugurates at once” (Butler 1993:6).

In my case, someone who is not Susan Park is performing Susan Park right now. However, as far as retail outfits are concerned, “performance” is the same as “being.” What strikes me as interesting and alarming is how inextricably fused legal subjecthood is to material consumption. In my situation, these work interchangeably through the province of the written word (signature) to validate one another. The intersection between the three, in my particular circumstances, hinges on credit.

Credit can be recognized in this equation as a capitalist mechanism in that it provides a means by which individuals can be seduced into believing they have a surplus of buying power necessary to have access to goods they otherwise would not immediately be able to afford. An important contradiction of the system of credit practiced by US retail operations is that this credit is reliable for obtaining material goods, but is imaginary. No “potential” buying power is guaranteed by the extension of credit. What is implied is the consumer’s potential to pay off his or her debt little by little, with interest. Indeed, credit “worthiness,” “rating,” and “limit” are based largely on yearly salaries, or the consumer’s profit from the labor they provide. However, as Marx theorizes in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, this is merely a “projected” profit (Marx 1964). The consumer who signs the credit card slip is in effect guaranteeing future labor to pay off his or her debt.

With a sweep of a signature and the aid of my picture ID, my doppelganger has thus far swindled thousands of dollars worth of goods from various stores by energetically responding to a consumer hailing.

In doing so she has also left me with this projected labor debt.

Public Citizenship

One suspected reason that my imposter has been able to abscond with her expensive loot, is that she appears *prima facie*, to be “close enough” to the real thing, i.e., she is Asian-featured, or “Asian-looking” enough to match the picture of Susan Park on her driver’s license. Unless my doppelganger is truly a dead ringer, I have to be suspicious about the naming/recognition privilege that these stores have as well. On the subject of race, Judith Butler writes, “The power to ‘race’ and, indeed, the power to gender, proceeds the ‘one’ who speaks such power, and yet the one who speaks nevertheless appears to have that power” (Butler 1997b:49).

Most likely, my consumer doppelganger used my driver’s license, with picture intact, alongside a secondary piece of identification to open credit accounts on-site at retail operations. She also wrote checks for hefty amounts at those same stores. Again, I am assuming that a driver’s license was required for these check transactions. This leads me to the conclusion that the retail outfits (PC Warehouse and Sam’s Warehouse to name two) have summoned Susan Park into existence as a consumer for their merchandise based on a picture of an Asian woman, a signature, and some corroborating evidence. This makes me suspicious. I can’t help wondering, if I didn’t hail from a race that presumably “all look alike,” would the cashiers perhaps scrutinized more closely the resemblance between the real Susan Park (in the picture) and Susan Park the fraudulent consumer? Furthermore, were the cashiers less apt to look carefully because Asians are honest and frugal “model minorities” and therefore never assume other people’s identities in order to go on shopping binges? These stereotypes, whether “positive” or “negative,” necessarily impose a persona upon citizens which intensifies their vulnerability in public. Berlant takes issue with, “the violence in the traffic in US stereotypes [that demonstrates] that *having an identity in the culture of the stereotype makes a citizen public, makes a citizen definitionally on the streets not privileged by any protections, constantly endangered*, and thus, here, for a minute, Dangerous” (Berlant 1997:213). The true “danger” posed in my particular situation stems from the false security with which salespeople accepted that the woman performing Susan Park is the Susan Park that is writing

this paper.

By virtue of her actions, this “other” Susan Park has made us both outlaws, or rather outside the Law of the State. When performing Susan Park she is criminal; when performing Shin hee Park I am illegal. Yet as far as PC Warehouse and Sam’s Warehouse is concerned, my name is Susan Park, and her name is mud. If I were to ever buy anything from either of those two parties in the future, I am sure that they would be extremely vigilant that I was who I said I was, and in the process, provide me with elaborate ways to prove my identity instead of haphazardly obeying their desire to sell.

Illegal Citizenship

After my life was disrupted and I had to reorder my checks and various forms of ID, I considered legally changing my name to Shin hee. I thought that this would not only put some distance between myself and Susan Park the consumer, but also put the power of naming in my own hands. This perhaps enables me to become, in Butler’s words, “a figure of the law who performatively sentences the subject into being” (Butler 1997b:9). I thought, and still think, that this would be profoundly self-empowering, and ethnic-positive. This is especially true since I only became known as “Shin hee” relatively late, in my mid-20’s. I was never called Shin hee before, by my family or friends, so the name change would have been truly of my own deliberation and execution.

However, I think about the choice my parents made when they printed Susan on the dotted line of the birth certificate instead of Shin hee. They were smart. They probably suspected that we kids would have to come up against all manners of discriminatory challenges in this new country. As a result, they armed me with an incredibly innocuous sounding and inconspicuous looking name—Susan Park. Most Anglo-Americans might assume I am “one of them,” i.e., not particularized by virtue of “color” or “ethnicity” if I am not in plain sight to them. More precisely, they might take for granted that I shared the same “universal” color and ethnicity that most of white America imagines itself to inhabit. In short, my parents gave me a way to culturally “pass” on legal forms. As of now, I like using Susan as a ‘front’ for Shin hee. Or rather, in an Althusserian sense, Susan is the back that is turned toward the state when it calls, “Hey you, there.” Susan keeps

Shin hee obscured and protected from the prying, scrutinizing glare of the state (when she's not out buying computers).

Private Citizenship

Arguably, the unwieldy environment that multiculturalism is designed to accommodate is entrenched in white privilege. Familiar lip-service promoting diversity drowns out grievances made by citizens who do not have access to this privilege. Norma Alarcon recognizes this as, "liberal understandings of multiculturalism as celebratory heterogeneous representations. These responses... are symptomatic of deep dialogic complicity in the formation of all 'American' subjects, though some are constantly on trial as to their 'Americanness'" (Alarcon 1996:140). The costs for suspected and inherent "foreign-ness" (or "conflicting loyalties" as the term has been used to justify Japanese American Internment during WWII), is the stripping away of privacy. Berlant distinguishes between the zones of public/private spaces that are implicitly determined either as "whites only" or "for colored,"

in contrast to the zone of privacy where stars, white people and citizens [live]... the immigrant to the US has no privacy, no power to incorporate automatically the linguistic and cultural practices of normal national culture that make life easier for those who can pass as members of the core society. This is the case whether or not the immigrant has 'papers': indeed,... acquiring the formal trappings of legitimate residence in the country is never sufficient to guarantee the diminution of xenophobic (Berlant 1997:193).

However, I think it would be a mistake to conceptualize Berlant's public/private spheres as absolutely distinct hemispheres. Rather, it should be emphasized that these are *zones* within *spheres*. It should also be recognized that there is some amount of agency for those within these zones to determine their own mobility.

It is quite understandable to recoil into a conceptually guarded zone of difference when forcibly "exposed" and excluded. To Alarcon, *Identity-in-difference* can have an interstitial dimension for those to which it applies. The in-between-ness of Alarcon's formulation recognizes a hyphenated state through which Americans of color are identi-

fied/can identify themselves. “Race,” then, is both a performative injunction as well as performative back talk, depending on who is doing the speaking. Though it may appear as counteridentification, *Identity-in-difference* also dissidentifies with white hegemonic institutional structures and practices. The idea of a dissidentificatory stance is immediately appealing to me, however, I recognize that to attempt to disengage epistemologically from the behemoth that bell hooks sighted as “white racist capitalist patriarchy,” would be as dangerous as it would be liberating. Retreat and separatism only can not dismantle White privilege in our burgeoning state of multinational flows of capital. In my understanding of identity-in-difference, “in-between-ness” becomes a way of remaining strategically flexible. It becomes a way of surviving in a racist environment called home, while maintaining a caul of self-determined distinction, so that neither dignity nor quality of life has to be sacrificed.

Traumatic Citizenship

In view of a lot of recent “Culture Wars” scholarship chronicling the tensions between cultural politics and Old Left politics, Alarcon’s strategies for deliberately amorphous, coalitional politics seem to strike a reasonable compromise between effacing difference, and “overly” particularized interests against rehabilitating those who cling to those interests as to make them, what Wendy Brown calls, “wounded attachments” (1995). The representation of these latter citizens can easily become co-opted in the popular image of the state as a site for national trauma. Damage control against “insidious and unintelligible sources of trauma get directed towards ‘citizen-victims—pathological, poignant, heroic, and grotesque—[who] now permeate the political public sphere, putting on display a mass experience of economic insecurity, racial discord, class conflict, and sexual unease” (Berlant 1997:1).

Brown’s admonitions against wounded attachments elaborate on the Nietzschean notion of *resentiment* as seen in *The birth of tragedy* and *The genealogy of morals* (Nietzsche 1956). Resentiment there is conceived as a form of indignation produced in subject formation which authorizes and retroactively naturalizes that agency doing the “subjecting.” The danger that Brown sees necessarily developing from this process of subjectivication is one that casts “the Law in particular

and state more generally as neutral arbiters of injury rather than as themselves invested with the power to injure. Thus, the effort to ‘out-law’ the social injury powerfully legitimizes law and the state as appropriate and protectors against injury and casts injured individuals as needing such protection by such protectors” (Brown 1995:27).

Wounded attachments can be understood in this way as something of a metaphorical *prosthesis* for ethnically and racially “disabled” citizens. The prosthesis here is put in place to soothe the “‘unendurable’ pain of social politics, a politics of recrimination that seeks to avenge the hurt even while it reaffirms it” (Brown 1995:73). But the prosthesis only serves to demonstrate that the loss of the original limb has been replaced by the emergence of a “phantom limb.” Although the limb is gone, no longer useful, for immediate purposes no longer existing, everyone knows that the pain of separation from that limb is very real indeed. (You may consciously be aware that you have no arm, so the pain in your arm is imaginary, but the nerve endings in your shoulder might not know this.) Even Brown qualifies her position against the imagined pain by conceding that “erased histories and historical invisibility are themselves such integral elements of the pain inscribed in most subjugated identities that the counsel of forgetting, at least in its unreconstructed Nietzschean form seems inappropriate if not cruel” (Brown 1995:74). In much the same way, marginalized citizens who are not cut off from the political corpus proper, must interrogate this amputation or loss of visibility, rights, and political viability as both real and imagined.

Shin hee

When I originally made the transition away from Susan, I had some amount of trouble spelling my name. It is a somewhat uncommon name to have. It is so uncommon that Korean nationals often mispronounce it, preferring to call me Sun-he, or Sun-yi (an unfortunate conflation with Mrs. Woody Allen, née Previn). The first syllable is actually more legible in Romanized script than in Hangul, Korean script. The full name however, outside of Korean phonetics, is still in a state of flux. I have experimented with Shin-hie, Shin Hi, Shin hee. The spelling keeps changing because there is no direct or standard form of transliteration. Since the name doesn’t appear on official documents, it has no legally bound transliteration either. In other words, “Shin

hee,” at least in the eye of the imagined national public is yet unpublished, has not yet been submitted for publication.

This state of change, state of Alarcon’s “not yet/that’s not it” suits my feelings about my illegal name just fine. Privileging *becoming* over *being* helps to sidetrack some of the messy conceptual detritus that is often shorn from discourses around essentialism and race in the construction of subjects. An undetermined state is a free state.

Interrogating Shin hee

Or is it?

In questioning my own “interiority,” that space that I imagine is private, pre-socialized, free-associating, and self-determined, am I simply being deluded into the comfortable nook of false consciousness? I am questioning interiority here as Butler examines it as, if “not . . . a soul, and . . . not . . . a psyche, . . . what will it be?” Is this a space of pure malleability, one which is as it were, ready to conform to the demands of socialization? Or is this interiority to be called simply, the body? Has it come to the paradoxical point where Foucault wants to claim that the soul is the exterior form and the body the interior space” (Butler 1997a:89)?

Have I traversed these different paths of citizenship—ethnic, capitalist, private, traumatized, resistant—only to find myself in the same place (albeit, with a brand new name) from where I started? In enacting the performative on myself, have I really inaugurated a new, “stateless” being? Have I inaugurated a being in between fixed “states,” or have I just imagined having left my former state? Is it possible that the policeman who hails Shin hee according to Althusser’s interpellation, has been refigured and internalized into what Augusto Boal would refer to as a “cop in [my] head” (Boal 1979)? Is Shin hee a phantom limb indicating the theft and subsequent loss of Susan Park?

Beware the Doppelganger

Nomenclature is a tactic for determination, for if Susan Park were to change name, change form legally, then the Shin hee that lurks behind Susan becomes more easily assailable when beckoned. As of now I have no problem with assuming a more ethnic name on an informal basis. Still the excess of susan parks in the world disturbs me. Is

it what Freud might call ‘uncanny’ to know that there are at least two of me in the US? I’m fascinated when I find out what my imposter has bought lately. However, I’m still angry and hurt that someone would do this to me, *and* offended at her apparent lack of taste: we have a difference of opinion as to what stores to patronize.

If I saw her on the street, I would apprehend her myself. It’s disorienting to have had your public identity stolen, as I am sure that having their merchandise stolen financially disorients the stores she has deceived. My only consolation is that Shin hee is safe. For now, as far as I’m aware, Shin hee’s back remains unturned when Susan is hailed.

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