

ABSTRACT

Title: BEYOND THE RAILROAD PEOPLE: RACE
AND THE COLOR OF HISTORY IN CHINESE
AMERICA

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Past discourses on Asian Americans, specifically Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans, have historically focused on specific racial interactions with white America that fell somewhere between exclusion and assimilation. However, lost in these discussions are the different nonwhite interracial hybridities that did and continue to inhabit Chinese immigrant and Chinese American lives.

This study offers a departure from dominant scholarly conversations that reproduce the master narrative of Chinese immigrants coming to the United States, building the railroads, and assimilating just enough to become what white America has termed the “model minority” and shifts the analysis and conversation to look at other experiences, opening up a racial narrative that situates Chinese bodies in proximity to black and nonwhite America.

In applying theoretical perspectives from race and ethnic studies, history, visual culture studies, and immigration studies to examine a broad range of texts, I have

discovered that Chinese men using racial passing as a tool to cross American borders illegally, Gold Mountain frontier experiences that included significant contact with Native people, husbands and fathers refusing to bow to greater community pressures and disown their black wives and mixed race children in the Mississippi Delta region, and the presence of Chinese women of African descent in local California Miss Chinatown beauty pageants all suggest that how Chinese people saw themselves racially and continue to see themselves was and is more complex and fluid than the master narratives depict and many Americans appear to believe.

Beyond the Railroad People contributes to the growing field of Asian American studies by establishing a dialogue between counter-hegemonic discourses and works that give agency and voice to various Chinese Americans whose lived racial realities that included kinship with nonwhite Americans complicate what it means to be Chinese, immigrant, or American. This dissertation also intervenes in the field of American Studies by expanding how we gauge the many ways race, power, and agency shape bodies, relationship, communities, and national identities in the United States.

BEYOND THE RAILROAD PEOPLE: RACE AND THE COLOR OF HISTORY IN
CHINESE AMERICA

By

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Prologue: Like Your Daddy

He asked me, “Are you Chinese?”

We were all three going up an elevator in a high-rise apartment building: me; a fellow graduate student; and a Chinese delivery man, his white plastic bags packed with takeout cartons hanging heavy from both his arms. Standing in silence as we waited for our respective floors, I hadn't been paying attention to anything other than my reflection in the elevator doors. So when he asked me, “Are you Chinese?” I hesitated at the mouth of his question and for a moment I didn't know what to say.

It was the first and possibly only time I would ever be asked this by another Chinese person, the only time without me having provoked it first, my usual routine being a hint thrown out in the form of a word or two in Chinese or a revealing glimpse of my tattoos: a black-scaled, five fingered dragon spanning from the bone of my spine, my Chinese name peeking from above the cut of my jeans, a phoenix taken from the lid of a decorative Chinese bakery box curling from the side of my chest.



Author's phoenix tattoo, 2009. Jean-Noel Seredouma.

At the time that he asked that question, I was in my early twenties and had been living for a few months in Silver Spring, Maryland. I had decided to move all the way from California in 2003 to pursue a doctoral degree at the University of Maryland after having grown tired of the same many mountains, the same wide bodied, frigid Pacific Ocean.

I wanted to see a different landscape. I wanted to see what it was like other side of the country. And at the time of my encounter with the delivery man, it had all been an initial disappointment: the flatness and brick of the Mid-Atlantic region; the uneventful sight of a middle age Chinese man hanging out in my apartment lobby during the late afternoon on a weekend, leaned over the front desk chatting with the West African concierge; my gloveless palms stinging and red from having just walked inside from the cold.

The other graduate student, a young Jewish American woman who had grown up in Maryland her whole life, thought nothing of it and it was either her or myself who caught the door.

He had asked us to hold the elevator for him.

It was the winter, I remember that much. And once inside the elevator, the deliveryman began some small talk about the snowstorm that was expected to hit us in the next couple of days. Then out of nowhere he put one of his hands up to his face and gestured, his hand turned inward, the fingers circling his eyes and nose before asking in English:

“Are you Chinese?”

I was unprepared for the question even though I had practiced the answer for this very moment all of my life: receiving a red envelope for luck, washing the rice in a pot, bowing three times with joss in front of the framed photos of your deceased maternal grandfather and aunt, marrying a Chinese man with a strong name and Northern civilized features on a prosperous calendar day, month, and year.

The delivery man was not terribly handsome nor was he terribly unattractive.

“Yeah,” I responded in English.

From that moment, we began to converse in Chinese, him unintentionally dragging me into a forgotten region I had once known through my mother, my mouth butchering the meat off the bones of Chinese words and simple sentences. He seemed amused, forgiving, while the Jewish woman said nothing. But when we arrived at the question of my paternity, his expression changed. As if he could not tell.

I said, “I am half Chinese, my mother is Chinese.”

“And your father?”

“My father is American. My father is black.”

No one had ever taught me how to say black American in Chinese.

The conversation was ended at the tenth floor and the last image I was left with was walking out of the elevator, the delivery man quickly rifling through his jacket pocket, looking for something. He could have been searching for a number of things—the delivery address, his cell phone—but I did not wait to find out, saying goodbye as the elevator doors slid shut with such closure.

Looking back on it now, I wonder if perhaps he was not attempting to pull out a restaurant menu for reference, a pen and paper to begin some form of connection with his exchanging his name and phone number for mine, a continuation to our brief conversation. At this point, I would take anything besides this one lone memory, anything to stand as a testimony to the only Chinese person on earth, a delivery man, who saw my Chineseness just by looking at my face.

No other Chinese before or after this incident would act with such public risk, asking, and upon receiving confirmation, owning me. All other times, their realization that I might be Chinese occurred by accident or was followed by shock. Otherwise it was like dancing for their curiosity: ordering something at a Chinese restaurant or bakery with a Chinese friend by my side and having a waitress or cashier note in Chinese to the friend that I pronounced a certain food item or pastry with “such good accent.” It

was to be expected when it came to a young brown skinned woman at dim sum, the waitress asking, “Does she speak Chinese?” in front of my blind ears.

Because of the frequency of incidents like this throughout my life, I have since become very intrigued with the way race works (or doesn't) in the United States along with our own understanding of and constructions of racial meaning, you know, speaking black, dressing white, looking Asian.

As race and racism have both been historically written into the very core of American values, ideals, and governance by the white elite, we are left as citizens of a nation whose national and cultural identities are nothing less than obsessed with and unable to think or function structurally outside of race. So concepts such as beauty, violence, power, law, morality, enemy, and nation that are already complicated have been made even more so having been deeply colored by race and racism for decades and centuries.

Going into this project, I was already wide awake to the fervent anti-black racial prejudice felt among Chinese people, both recent immigrants and American born. An article in an Ivy League university newspaper would only confirm it publicly in 2006 when the *Harvard Crimson* published quotes from undergraduate students like Jimmy Zhao who talked about how his parents “used to joke that if he ever brought a white girl home, at least they could be glad she wasn't African American.”

In defense of Zhao's parents, the article's author uses statistics from the United States Census Bureau to politely argue the commonness of parents like Zhao's expressing potential “surprise” if their children ever brought home a black date since

only “0.1 percent of Chinese-American men have African-American wives, compared to 5.1 percent who are married to white women.”¹

Other Chinese American Harvard University students speak just as candidly about interracial dating, that is, dating whites versus dating nonwhites. And while a higher economic and educational status—an elite college education from a private university or a profession in which one makes six figures—seemed to improve the chances of an African American suitor being received well in a Chinese household, the right skin and power still tend to make all the difference.

Student Quinnie Lin was quoted as saying that Chinese and Chinese American parents typically “look at economic status, and they see black and Latino Americans as having a lower economic status than whites...[whereas] a lot of these Asian parents come to this country with the goal of building a better life and getting ahead.” Fellow student Sherri Y. Geng reiterates Lin’s point, adding: “ideally you would marry up, and by marry up, we mean marry white.”²

Was the anti-black prejudice a cultural part of being Chinese, American, or the intersection of both? Either way, it had affected me deeply, contributing to the enormous amount of shame I felt for not looking like my mother. My mother’s mother would have preferred her daughter give birth to a hundred half white children to one that was ruined by its father’s color and all things associated with his dark race. And so my blackness became the one central thing I wanted to but could never scrape away as a child, the rejection I felt whenever I stretched my two brown arms across the table to face the pale reception of my white skinned Chinese relatives.

¹ Lois E. Beckett, “Color Line Cuts Through the Heart: In the Face of Stereotypes, Lee ’08 Looks ‘to Make the Asian Man Sexy Again,’” *Harvard Crimson*, March 22, 2006.

² *Ibid.*

It was never direct, but conversations about eating the Chinese greens off my plate so that I would grow up to be as beautiful as Miss Chinatown happened in the same space that my mother's family reluctantly tried to reconcile the taste of their own tongues around the subject of my mother's marriage to a black man.



The author's parents at their wedding reception, 1979. Courtesy of the author.

It would leave such an impression on me that by the year I was in the sixth grade I knew I would never grow up to be Miss Chinatown. I was too embarrassed of my own color, too nearsighted and scrawny, never knowing what to do with the ashy parts of me between fingers and at the hip. I also carried my father's surname and history which held me apart from the sash and crown of the Chinese New Year stage, my interpretation differing from those specified in the pageant guidelines requiring

contestants had to be “of Chinese ancestry, meaning your father must be of Chinese descent.”³

This was a way to ensure proof of Chinese paternity, I suppose. Meaning that while your mother might claim to represent whatever kind of tribal, ethnic, or racial background under the sun, your daddy and his name had to link you directly to the Middle Kingdom, legitimizing you as Chinese. Of course even this pageant guideline would be tested when Trinidadian born Arlene Scott Sum entered the scene as a contestant in 1960 because from its conception in 1958 as the brainchild of H. K. Wong, a local San Francisco Chinatown community leader and businessman, it was a social and political platform to showcase a more wholesome Chinese America with young Chinese American women at the forefront.

In its first year, Wong and other pageant officials including one of the pageant’s sponsors, the San Francisco Chinese Chamber of Commerce, sat down to create a standard of beauty and femininity that would define Chinese American womanhood in the public sphere. What would end up debuting in front of a Chinese and non-Chinese American audience would be a racially exclusive model highlighting “the centuries-old Chinese concept of beauty such as melon-seed face, new moon eyebrows, phoenix eyes, peachlike cheek, shapely nose, cherry lips, medium height, willowy figure, radiant smile and jet black hair.”⁴ A Chinese American college senior and Home Economics major named June Gong from New Hampshire who had won college and statewide pageants in the past, would go on to win the title that first year in 1958.⁵

³ Miss Chinatown U.S.A. Pageant, “Qualifications of a Contestant,” The Southwest Airlines Chinese New Year Parade, <http://www.chineseparade.com/pageant.asp>.

⁴ Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, “‘Loveliest Daughter of Our Ancient Cathay!’ Representations of Ethnic and Gender Identity in the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. Beauty Pageant,” *journal of social history* 31:1 (1997): 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

Years later, the national and various local state pageants would continue to beckon and reward the same type of women, courting and crowning an appropriate racial and feminine version of Chinese America in front of a mixed Chinese and white American audience who would come to the event or more likely, the parade that followed, during Chinese New Year as tourists. I would pick up a promotional poster from the 2006 pageant and notice that although contestants wear a range of contemporary hairstyles, makeup, and hair coloring, there is little to no question that these women would fit Wong's earlier set standard of Chinese American womanhood.

2006

The Chinese Chamber of Commerce of San Francisco Presents 舊金山中華總商會主辦

全美華埠小姐競選 Miss Chinatown U.S.A. Pageant

Saturday 二月四日 (星期六) February 4th @ 7:30 pm

Palace of Fine Arts Theatre 三藩市藝術宮
3301 Lyon Street @ Bay, San Francisco, CA
Tickets 票價: \$25, \$30, \$50

United Commercial Bank 聯合銀行
900 Kearny Street, San Francisco, CA
Tel: (415) 397-8988
Monday-Saturday

Man's Trading Corporation 音樂世界
745-A Clay Street, San Francisco, CA
Tel: (415) 392-0203
Monday-Sunday

Noriega Tapes Video 多利文錄影帶公司
1443-A Mission Street, San Francisco, CA
Tel: (415) 753-3388
Monday-Sunday

Ford

CCTV

Comcast

SOUTHWEST.COM

CAESARS

macys 萬物集之購物

Harrah's Miss Chinatown U.S.A. Coronation Ball
Friday, February 10th
6:00 pm Hot-Leaf Cocktails
7:00 pm Dinner
Hilton San Francisco & Towers
333 O'Farrell Street
San Francisco, CA
Tickets 票價: \$120
(415) 952-0000

Contestants (from top-left to bottom-right):
 KATIE AU (North, WA), TIFFANY & CHIU (Petal, Laurel Park, CA), FIONA WANG (Mantle, CA), JESSICA BING (Los Angeles, CA),
 CHAN GUAN (San Francisco, CA), JIA WU (Hempock, TX), SAMANHA HU (San Jose, CA), AMANDA HUANG (San Francisco, CA),
 ANABELA LIU (Combridge, MA), YING-YING LI (Duluth, GA), MARY LY (San Francisco, CA), TIFANI F. MAH (San Francisco, CA),
 JESSICA NG (Issaquah, WA), THERESA TAY (Menlo Park, CA), HUI WANG (Brooklyn, NY), LISA WONG (Honolulu, HI),
 OLIVER WU (Fremont, CA), LILY XU (Oakland, CA),

Miss Chinatown U.S.A. Pageant flyer, 2006. Courtesy of the author.

That had to be the reason why Angela Chao Roberson's crowning as third princess at the Miss Chinatown Los Angeles in 2006 prompted me to make multiple excited long distance phone calls to family members in California from Maryland. It was the first time in the history of the local city pageant that a woman of African descent won a place on the Miss Chinatown court. And in looking at the press images from the event, I couldn't stop noticing how Chao Roberson's brown skin, hair, and body served as a direct challenge to the constant defining and upholding of what it means to be and look Chinese in line with contemporary Chinese American racial expectations and prejudices.

Outside of the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. pageant held annually in San Francisco, California, other local and regional Miss Chinatown competitions ask contestants to follow different sets of rules and mixed race women like Angela Chao Roberson are able to assume a place on these smaller courts. In cities like Las Vegas and Atlanta, there is room for negotiating blood percentage and paternal ancestry, room for fitting women who have been adopted or are mixed race into the program booklet.

In the Miss Chinatown Los Angeles pageant, contestants are required to be "at least 25 % Chinese ancestry."⁶ That means seventy-five percent in blood and a family history detached from a Chinese father or surname. This is partially reflected in the surnames of previous winners—Lee Johnson in 1979, Chew Sanchez in 1981, Luis and Morton in 1990, and Chang-Cox in 1992—which means to some extent the reality of mixed race or multiethnic contestants in the pageant was not and had not been an alien

⁶ Miss Los Angeles Chinatown Pageant, "Miss Los Angeles Chinatown Pageant Application Form," Chinese Chamber of Commerce of Los Angeles, <http://www.misslachinatown.com/application.html>.

concept for some time.⁷ So why was it treated as such when Chao Roberson was sashed and crowned?

In what Gregory Rodriguez, one of the judges, called a display of “of old-world continuity and American progress,” publicity materials following the 2006 pageant proudly announced that “second princess, Kaye Ponnusamy, is half East Indian; the third princess, Angela Chao Roberson, is half African American.” It was an announcement that even noodle entrepreneur and head of the Los Angeles Chinese Chamber of Commerce Kenny Yee couldn’t help but elaborate on, indulging in the ethnic and racially diverse crowning moment by saying: “It reflects well on us that we still embrace the fact that we’re Chinese even as we’re mixing.”⁸

For me, reading Yee’s quote as if racial mixing for Chinese people is a new concept in the United States and in the diaspora, sat strange. But perhaps if I read his words the way I learned to pick up the racist references my mother would hint to without actually saying them, then what Yee is trying to say is that it is a bit more socially acceptable for some Chinese Americans to acknowledge nonwhite mixing and even appears as a brave sign of progressive thinking. The rest still cling to the beliefs of their forefathers: dressing their kids in red for luck, looking down on all those who were unfortunate enough to not have been born Chinese as barbarians, boasting the names raw of their sons and daughters, nephews, nieces, and grandchildren who either got accepted to or graduated from MIT, Yale, and Princeton.

Those were the ones I’m sure grew flustered at the presence of a dark face at a beauty pageant specifically intended to showcase authentic representations of Chinese

⁷ Miss Los Angeles Chinatown Pageant, “Miss Los Angeles Chinatown Alumni,” Chinese Chamber of Commerce of Los Angeles, <http://www.misslachinatown.com/history.html>.

⁸ Gregory Rodriguez, “There She Is, Miss Chinatown: Celebrating Heritage and Assimilation, Pageant-Style,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 2006.

American femininity, of racially unblemished Chinese American ethnic communities. Not exclusive to Miss Chinatown pageants, some community outrage was expressed over the seeming violation of a tribal pageant with the win of a mixed race contestant when Radmilla Cody assumed the title of forty-sixth Miss Navajo Nation in 1997.

Born to an African American father and a Navajo mother who “considered giving her up,” Cody was raised on the Navajo reservation in Arizona by her maternal grandmother Dorothy. From a young age, Radmilla was “butchering sheep, raising goats and speaking Diné.” But it was also from a young age that Radmilla learned that her blackness was unwelcome and seen as a source of shame in her family and among tribal members. She was called a “black pig” by a maternal uncle and children in her predominately Navajo community teased her with little racist singsong chants like “Zhinii Zhinii coco puff,” *zhinii* being the pejorative term for “black person” in Diné.

Being both racially marginalized and embraced by various members of her family and tribal nation, Cody would later remark at the age of 29 after getting very publicly caught up in a drug ring fronted by her then African American boyfriend Darrell Dwight Bellamy and eventually serving time in federal prison, “I identify more with the Navajo side...But I love the black side as well. That is who I am.”⁹

And this is who entered the competition 1997 at the age of 23, focused on wining the four competitive events that spanned a week and required contestants to prove in front of pageant judges their ability to perform various traditional tasks and customs that would “exemplify the essence and characters of First Woman, White Shell Woman and Changing Woman and to display leadership as the Goodwill

⁹ Jodi Rave, “Natives Who Are Black Struggling to Gain Acceptance From their Own Tribes,” *Missoulian*, December 4, 2005.

Ambassador.”¹⁰ Cody, who was fluent in both Diné and English, did more than excel throughout the pageant. She “impressed the tribal judges with her fry-bread making, sheep butchering, and knowledge of the foundational stories of the Diné people.”¹¹

Still, in the event of her win, some Navajos felt Cody did not deserve the title of Miss Navajo Nation and like Orlando Tom from Blue Gap, Arizona would take this opinion to the *Navajo Times* newspaper, voicing in print that “Miss Cody’s appearance and physical characteristics are clearly black, and are thus representative of another race of people.” In his letter, Tom would clarify his disapproval of Cody, stating, “It is the very essence of the genetic code which is passed down to us from generation to generation that makes us who we are. Miss Cody should focus on her African American heritage and stay out of Navajo affairs.”¹²

Those who disagreed—and there were many—lambasted Tom’s ignorance and racial prejudice in their response letters in support of Cody. And in a final critique of the whole ordeal, Diné historian Jennifer Nez Denetdale points out, “It seems that some Navajos like Tom have conveniently forgotten that Navajos claim an ancestry that includes the adoption of and intermarriage with neighboring Pueblos and Mexicans.”¹³

Did most Chinese Americans also forget the moments in their collective histories that welcomed non-Chinese spouses, colleagues, and mixed race children? That there wasn’t a public outcry against Chao Roberson on the Miss Chinatown Los

¹⁰ Miss Navajo Nations, “About Us,” Miss Navajo Council, Inc., <http://www.missnavajocouncil.org/aboutus.htm>.

¹¹ James F. Brooks, “Confounding the Color Line: Indian-Black Relations in Historical and Anthropological Perspective,” *American Indian Quarterly* 22:1 & 2 (1998): 132.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Jennifer Nez Denetdale, “Chairmen, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 21:1 (2006): 19.

Angeles pageant court didn't mean there was not some apprehension that came before the celebration of tolerance and surprise by Chinese Americans in the local paper.

The idea to enter the Miss Chinatown Los Angeles pageant initially arose after Chao Roberson's mother Nancy heard an announcement for it on the only Mandarin language radio station KWRM-AM (1370) broadcasting in the family's hometown of Victorville, California. A call was made for "*hua fu xiao jie*—Miss Chinatown" and after recalling a Chinese friend who had married a white American and whose mixed race children rejected her because they were ashamed of her Chineseness, Nancy pitched the pageant idea to Chao Roberson, an opportunity for her own daughter to represent the very thing her friend's children bluntly denied.

Nancy would later be quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* saying, "Since they were young, I taught my kids, it doesn't matter what color you are... You don't want to be hiding or embarrassed because your mom is Chinese and your daddy's black."¹⁴ As for her father, an electronics technician employed at the Fort Irwin Army Base, he had kept the whole pageant ordeal to himself, opening up only after Chao Roberson had been crowned third princess at which point he would tell a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, "I'm glad she did it. This tells the [Chinese] community there's more out there than just pure Chinese."¹⁵

It was the same thing I was familiar with growing up, the same half language my family spoke in trying to create a racial narrative for ourselves that went against a social reality that saw black and Chinese America as two enemy nations: my mother trying to convince me that I shouldn't be ashamed while smelling out a stereotype that

¹⁴ Jia-Rui Chong, "Tiaras, Sashes, Diversity," *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2006.

¹⁵ Ibid.

was black on both sides; her constant assurance that I shouldn't be left standing behind the straight of her hair or afraid in the dark of my own father's shadow. But living in the Republic of America where racial representations are taken over the real human thing, where a passing driver gets nervous after being pulled over dark skinned by a white cop at night and your dreams are replayed back to you in the form of looped television news footage of two planes crashing, I knew better.

It is too dangerous a thing no matter the circumstance to act like the black of your daddy doesn't matter.



The author's father at a track meet in San Francisco, CA, date unknown. Image taken from a digital

film still from *Stories from the Blackasian Planet*, courtesy of the author.¹⁶

¹⁶ A young African American man is interrupted from a track meet in order to enter into conversation with the unidentified person behind the camera and in the moment of interruption, the viewer is presented with the gaze of a young, working class African American man. Given the political, cultural, and racial climate of this time period, this image is a powerful symbol of black pride and black power which stands as a historical indicator to the political and racial lenses—Afrocentric, diasporic, black working class, and new black middle class—the author would eventually approach her scholarship around renegotiating race, family, and Chineseness.

Introduction

Since their arrival to the United States, Chinese people have negotiated their place in the American racial landscape in much more complex ways than simply combating racism and choosing to assimilate into the closest shadow of the white middle class. Overlaps in labor, sex, and food as well as shared histories of racial exclusion and mutual reliance between Chinese people and other nonwhite Americans have served as powerful frames for shaping how Chinese immigrants have engaged with and continue to look at race.

This has led me to complicate what it means to be Chinese in the United States, looking at the various ways Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans have historically learned race as part of their learning to be American. That this racial knowledge allowed them the ability to not only act as participants in their own racialization but as participants in the shaping of a racially fraught dialogue between black and white reveals a level of agency and power that Chinese people had over the staging of their own racial place in the United States.

Unfortunately, this agency and power sometimes meant suppressing the histories and experiences of other Chinese people who might threaten that racial place. And it is in this corner of Chinese American history that I locate my study, turning over the multiple occasions and reasons that Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans have rejected or embraced the racial norm, have rejected or embraced blackness, in crossing borders, acquiring citizenship, having sex and marrying despite anti-miscegenation rulings, making family and creating (or destroying) community despite Jim Crow to present a very different look at Chinese America.

In some ways, the work that I am doing is archaeological, unearthing the unspoken, recovering details of lives and histories kept hidden for multiple reasons. One of those reasons is that black American experiences have always been positioned in opposition to white middle class experiences and white middle class ideals and values, acting as a tool for measuring how close or how far other nonwhites stood from attaining citizenship and a range of other civil liberties withheld from them.

But still, as much as black bodies and black people were never meant to be included in what would stand as the dominant narrative of Chinese American history, there were those black Americans who played roles, whose lives became intertwined.

I came from two lives that became intertwined.

Born in Oakland, California in 1981 to an African American father and a Southeast Asian born ethnic Chinese mother, I was given the name Wendy after a Japanese American news anchorwoman rather than the white girl in *Peter Pan*. From there, I grew up speaking both Chinese and English as my first languages and had relatives who would look into my eyes and deny that my father's people—a gorgeous, disparate, imaginative mass of Freedom Riders, fighter pilots, politicians, explorers, and opera singers, not to mention entertainers and ballplayers—ever did a thing worth a damn for this country or the world and were all shit kicking, scary, shiftless types.

Above all, I had a mother who taught me to dream in Chinese.



Author as a baby with her grandmother, grand-aunt, and mother on the front steps of the Song's Richmond District house, San Francisco, CA, date unknown. Courtesy of author.

But dreams would never be enough to carry you through in the United States where being American has always been fraught with racial tension especially when having a Chinese face. I mean, just try to prove yourself to be an American with your perfect English, your successful career as a chief executive, your white picket fence and 2.5 kids, your liberal multilingual white wife who lived in Uganda while in the Peace Corps. It will not even matter.

Because five hundred years later in the United States, you're still Chinese, bound to stereotypes of being a terrible or scripted dancer; a bad driver; a bad lover; a quintessential unfunny geek with a career in either mathematics, biochemistry, or an engineer who is more than capable of financially supporting a family but is still suspiciously assumed to have loyal ties to China.

Consider the opinion poll conducted by Yankelovich Partners for the Committee of 100 via telephone in 2001 where it was found that “One in four Americans has ‘strong negative attitudes’ toward Chinese Americans, would feel uncomfortable voting for an Asian American for president of the United States, and would disapprove of a family member marrying someone of Asian descent.” This same poll would find that “Ninety percent [of participants] said they think Chinese American have strong family values.”

The results put together make up a racial conundrum to which San Francisco Asian Law Caucus executive director Zenobia Lai finds no rationale:

‘You can’t marry my kid.’ What is that all about? ‘You can be creative, hard-working and honest, but you can’t be my president.’ I can’t find any explanation, except that it’s a kind of prejudice and racism.¹⁷

But the meanings couldn’t be any more clear than the poll results suggested. And Larry Wang, a software contractor from Saratoga, considers that a problem: “We’re held out as a model minority in the context of the American whole, but we’re seen as something less than desirable and trustworthy than the average American.”¹⁸

If we are to look at the historical experience of Chinese people in the United States, we would find that their career as peripheral Americans has been long spanning. As far as America was concerned, it wasn’t up until 1870 that persons other than free white men were eligible for full citizenship privileges. After 1870, black men were incorporated into the definition of “American” but only in theory while the Chinese

¹⁷ Matthew Yi and Ryan Kim, “Asian Americans Seen Negatively: Results of Landmark Survey Called Startling, Disheartening,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 27, 2001.

¹⁸ Ibid.

continued to be systematically barred from becoming naturalized citizens and were not allowed to testify “in favor of, or against a white man” in court.¹⁹

They were issued taxes and heavily fined in California for just about anything: laundering practices, the exhumation of bones to be sent back for burial in China, space violations in living quarters, walking down a public city sidewalk with a carrying pole that was too long.²⁰ And with so many restrictions being passed, arrest was sometimes unavoidable but even then, they were not spared from further violation, their bodies defiled after a law that passed in 1876 allowed county jail personnel to remove queues, an act that showed serious cultural disregard.

The Chinese were also not spared from public displays of aggression and violence which seemed to flare up every time they were seen as being too much of an economic and social threat. In portraying the Chinese as a nuisance that must be gotten rid of, white rabble-rousers were able to rile up local politicians and townsfolk to form angry mobs bent on running the Chinese out of town. But while not all townsfolk agreed with running the Chinese out of their communities as some of them had grown very fond of their local launderers, live-in cooks, and housekeepers, the support gathered from anti-Chinese public campaigning was louder than any amount of their personal protests.

And so across the West, numerous Chinese individuals and families were ordered out of town, first being given a timeframe within which they needed to pack their things and vacate their quarters, then being chased out by the gun. Sometimes

¹⁹ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 11; Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* (New York: Random House, 2007), 30, 39.

²⁰ John S. W. Park, *Elusive Citizenship: Immigration, Asian Americans, and the Paradox of Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 59.

there was no time to pack and the Chinese were driven out of the few blocks they inhabited, their persons robbed and then beaten, their possessions and homes looted then burned.

Punished through association were those white women who were married to Chinese men and subsequently lost their American citizenships under the 1907 Expatriation Act. This law forced American women to take “the legal status of her husband: if her husband was an alien ineligible for citizenship, she would be regarded as such, too; if she herself was an American citizen, she lost her citizenship when she married a foreign man.” This law, practiced roughly until 1931, was eventually repealed but only after Congress felt secure in that every state had some form of legal ruling against the coupling of white women and “aliens ineligible for citizenship.”²¹

Confined to a place socially, sexually, and racially outside of America while inhabiting the country within as documented alien citizens, it only made sense that Chinese immigrants would move to change their outsider status, legally challenging the American tradition of controlling and excluding new immigrants who were considered inassimilable or caused feelings of national anxiety and constructing counternarratives that went against dominant national discourse by proving the Chinese to be assimilable, clean, industrious, and nonthreatening.

²¹ Ibid., 119.



Studio portrait of Chinese men in Georgetown, Clear Creek County, Colorado taken between 1890-1910.²²

[Western History/Genealogy Department, Denver Public Library]

In regard to the latter, transforming the American public's perception would have been a feat in itself since most Americans, black and white, believed strongly in negative popular imagery and stereotypes that pointed to the Chinese as hopelessly foreign and non-English speaking, wearing strange clothes and hairstyles, eating

²² Studio portraits were a way for individuals to permanently capture and sometimes create an image of themselves in a particular moment of their lives and for many Chinese immigrants, the studio portrait was a way to communicate their social and material realities or aspirations. In that sense, portrait takers took great care to present themselves in ways that sometimes far exceeded their meager realities. Here a group of men in Colorado pose in what one assumes to be his finest American wear—pocket watches and chains, gloves, identical hats, double-breasted jackets and trousers—while one man, center, wears a Chinese outfit, identifiable by the long draped sleeves and hem of the top to his shoes. However, even in standard “Americanized” men’s outfits, the men appear very Chinese, the one trait that could not be assimilated through imitating American behavior and custom. Behind them is an idyllic scene of a house and foliage foreign to the architecture and landscape of southern China; to the right are props. Two of the men were identified in this photograph: Wa Chin, center, who is dressed in traditional Chinese garb and Tang Ya-Shun who is dressed in a suit and wears a watch chain and charm.

offensive foods and praying to different gods. The majority held the opinion that it was necessary to Americanize the immigrant, providing them with the opportunity for a rigorous cultural transformation guided by white missionaries and other benevolent do-gooders who would lead the Chinese through a process of proper English speaking, patriotic American flag pledging, white Christian God praying, and white middle class American values and etiquette learning.



Postcard image of the classroom interior in the Chinese Primary School on San Francisco

Chinatown's Chinatown, 920 Clay Street. Date and author unknown.²³

[California Historical Society, San Francisco. SF Social Groups: postcards: 23272]

²³ The Chinese Primary School had been established after a court ruling in the *Tape v Hurley* case which required the San Francisco Board of Education to allow Chinese children to attend public schools. In 1906, the school's name was changed to the Oriental Public School to incorporate Korean and Japanese students.

Decades later with many having converted to Christianity, given their children the names of notable and famous American historical figures, joined the United States Armed forces, attained college degrees, married white people and had children who proudly called themselves unhyphenated Americans, trained their tastes to white American preferences, bought luxury cars and luxury homes in the suburbs, and avoided any and all closeness or likeness to black people and blackness, Chinese Americans as a whole are seen as near white, providing a model of how a nonwhite group can successfully beat the odds of living through continued structural racism and social exclusion and “make it.” But nobody ever talks about the cost.

At what cost are we continuing to flirt between the racial lines of white privilege and black disenfranchisement, raising our pride as if we were the ones who pulled our own selves up from a history fraught with racial violence and oppression, pulled ourselves up from a system that continually functions so long as we stay cut and fighting over the comparative worth placed on our bodies, our skin, our tribe, our language, our class, our sex? As if our racial ascent was not part of a larger plan of subverting collective rage and resistance and maintaining white racial dominance in America by throwing us a few more gold coins that we could in turn fight over and feel that we deserved because of our own distorted sense of betterness?

Who can say that it was by our merit alone that we were allowed to utilize white only facilities during racially segregated times and it was something about black Americans, something they did other than be born on the other side of white, that made them less worthy?

I admit that when I began writing this book, I wrote from a place of anger. It was an attempt to pull out the internalized racism and shame by its hair. To say, *True, we didn't always all get along but in some cases we did, choosing to eat, fight, fuck, and live together rather than apart as enemies.* I wanted to come out the other side of my own multiple traumas resilient, beautiful, and evenly Chinese and black.

And so this book which began as a research project focused on complicating the Chinese experience in the United States (i.e. being born Chinese but adopted white and having more than one's fair share of dirty blond cousins, cheesy mall-bought Christmas sweaters, and an Aunt Irene in Saginaw, Michigan) would eventually turn into a book interested in recovering the Chinese immigrant and Chinese American historical experience beyond exchanges with whites.

In particular, I wanted to know what happens when you look at Chinese people in the dark, what happens to a history that was once written so deeply in color but over time has been shaped in ways that has left it nearly white or trapped inside its own isolated shade? I wanted to know, having inherited this skin from my father, what to do with the current state of Chinese America and this narrative of my own darkness which traveled as an insult between families.

As I see it, to fully document the past from multiple viewpoints or from the viewpoint of the disenfranchised in addition to that of the privileged is to engage in better critical, ethical, and human scholarship. Because to erase a part of an ethnic or racial narrative, to erase people, is a powerful act of silencing that serves only to further remove agency and suppress vital narratives, voices, and experiences that could take us down a much needed path in making real discourse between racial groups that have

been since torn away from each other because of the violence of white supremacy, leaving us also torn among our multiple selves.

The fact that my family and the names and lives of other mixed race or interracial married Chinese American individuals and families are left out of the many histories that make up the backbone of the dominant version of Chinese American history is not accidental nor is it a slight oversight.

This is why I wrote this book; to answer my own questions—What does it mean to be Chinese and African American? What does it mean to stand on the outside of Chinese America looking in on half of your own history?—which in turn led to more questions—What roles have American constructions of race and racial hierarchies played in how the Chinese American experience has been written? How different does Chinese America look when we take into consideration the parts of its collective histories that have been left out? How do we remember ourselves through history?

These questions would come to form the thesis of my research, and would shape in a more formal and final way, the problem I have always had with the way group histories are written: a select few historians mapping out a group's experience during a particular political, social, cultural, and historical moment, which in turn is reiterated and reemphasized by the next generation of historians and scholars from other fields as well as nonacademic writers who cause this history to become canonized. Then what are we all doing but regurgitating the same anecdotes about specific incidents, the same tropes, themes, regions, and dates? The same incomplete story?

If I were to create a body of literature that most closely reflects what it is I am trying to do with *Beyond the Railroad People*, I would reference the following journal articles, papers, anthologies, and monographs—all of which span multiple fields and disciplines, using various methods and theories to write across multiple genres and explore the complexities and limitations of race and racial constructions within the human experience.

I begin with the article by Traise Yamamoto titled, “An Apology to Althea Connor: Private Memory, Public Racialization, and Making a Language” which is based on Yamamoto’s personal life—a childhood friendship in elementary school struck up with an African American classmate in 1972, both girls one of the few students of color in their California Bay Area classrooms. It was through Althea Connor’s “ideological caregiving” that Yamamoto became conscious—both racially and socially—an act that eventually led both girls to be punished by the school community: the parents of white students complaining to both girls’ white teacher who in turn informed their parents.

Japanese American Yamamoto was perceived as the innocent victim influenced by the dangerous and angry black Althea Connor who was, as white parents and teachers saw it, exposing and harming non-black schoolchildren with talk of race and racism.

Their punishment would be extreme. Yamamoto would be physically moved (saved?) from her seat near Althea Connor in the classroom and banned from having any contact at school and at home. Althea would be repressed, seeming broken and alienated in classes that the girls shared until soon after, Althea Connor stopped

showing up to school at all. This symbolic and very public moment of both girls being “put back in their place”—Althea Connor punished for “acting Black” and Yamamoto experiencing an intervention meant to encourage her to continue “acting (properly) Asian” would remain a concrete moment of Yamamoto’s racialization, both as an Asian American in white America and in understanding Asian America’s relationship to blackness and black Americans. To foster a good relation with white America, one must sever ties with “radical” blacks and not join in nor be complicit in race talk.²⁴

It is in this way that Yamamoto begins to talk about what much of the scholarship on Asian immigrant and Asian American history and experiences fail to—race beyond whiteness and racism/racial intersections beyond Asian/white. And it is she along with some of the following authors, scholars, and texts that I explore below who are all actively working to create a discourse where “not only does a public discourse hardly exist for thinking through Asian American-African American relations, but there seem any number of social investments in maintaining the disjuncture between private and public realms, between stories and discourse.”²⁵

In the United States where “we do not and cannot talk about relations between African Americans and Asian Americans in the absence of obvious and extreme circumstances,” Vijay Prashad does just that in his book *The Karma of Brown Folk* in which he looks at the roles South Asians play in an American racial landscape where blacks are seen as a problem and Asians who are usually constructed as a “model minority” are the solution. Prashad counters the South Asian neoconservative belief that the United States offers a level playing field for all Americans and without any

²⁴ Traise Yamamoto, “An Apology to Althea Connor: Private Memory, Public Racialization, and Making a Language,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 5:1 (2002): 22.

²⁵ Traise Yamamoto, “An Apology to Althea Connor: Private Memory, Public Racialization, and Making a Language,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 5:1 (2002): 14.

regard to historical circumstances or any admittance that racism plays key factors in employment, education, healthcare, popular culture, etcetera; it is black Americans who fail to capture the American dream because of their own ineptitude.

He also offers a departure from the image of the naturally successful, highly achieving, and upwardly mobile model minority South Asian immigrant/American by suggesting that American immigration policies favor certain types of immigrants along with Orientalist popular culture leanings.

Picking up where Vijay Prashad and Sunaina Maira's book on second generation South Asian American youth's employment of a mix of Hindi/Bollywood film music and bhangra with black popular youth culture and style in specific New York City party scenes in order to define themselves ethnically, racially, and sexually, Nitasha Sharma has used ethnography to examine how middle class, upwardly mobile second generation South Asian American hip hop artists and consumers use black popular culture to situate themselves racially and build alliances with African Americans and other nonwhites.

Seeing themselves as people of color, their racial consciousness and identification "complicates assimilationist paradigms, such as those predicting that second generation immigrants who associate with Blacks and black culture are on a path of 'downward mobility.'"²⁶

Hip hop certainly is one vehicle for talking about race between Asians and African Americans especially in talking about Asian American engagement with or appropriation of black images and representations and what this means within many of

²⁶ Nitasha Tamar Sharma, "Claiming Space, Making Race: Second Generation South Asian American Hip Hop Artists," from Research Manuscript Précis, <http://www3.amherst.edu/~nsharma>, accessed March 19, 2009.

“their ethnic communities’ anti-Black racial politics” where many of these Asian Americans themselves become “inter-cultural brokers.”²⁷

I should mention that Vijay Prashad followed up on the African/Asian American cultural and political intersections but looked globally, focusing on religion, aesthetics, resistance movements, and identities. However, his book *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* was a bit unfocused, reading more like a grocery list of local and international exchanges down to the penny which lacked a concise answer to Prashad’s “so what?” question.

A better attempt at looking at global exchanges would be musician Fred Ho and scholar Bill V. Mullen’s edited collection *Afro Asia: Revolutionary, Political, and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans* in which various political, historical, and aesthetic intersections between African Americans and Asian Americans are thoroughly addressed. However, with statement from Mao Zedong in support of black Americans resisting racial discrimination in the United States to the significance of martial arts and kung fu in African American popular and expressive culture, there is a dimension of critical racial and social assessment that looks at *why* Asian Americans and African Americans, despite moments of cultural exchange and connection, sit in racial opposition to each other, a fundamental issue of focus for anyone doing comparative work between the groups.

In his book *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles*, Scott Kurashige discusses how race politics and various forms of anti-black and anti-Japanese sentiments and restrictions helped construct the geography and cultural landscape of Los Angeles. Veering from a black/

²⁷ Ibid.

white framework, Kurashige looks at the historical mapping of Los Angeles as a white city where blacks, Japanese, and other nonwhites were pushed into segregated pockets in order to avoid disrupting the racial composition. Experiencing minimal contact, Japanese and Japanese American men sometimes found themselves working alongside blacks as servants or chauffeurs while most African Americans thought about Japanese people in global terms with a few going so far as viewing Japan as the savior of colored people.

Kurashige however makes more cultural comparisons between Japanese and African Americans than actual moments of intersections and offers the origin of racial divergence between African Americans and Japanese following the removal of Japanese under Executive Order 9066 which was seen by some as an opportunity to become a first time homebuyer. This geographic disruption or the “changing over” of Japanese owned properties was not without ideological and racial disruption or rupture in the often polite interactions between Japanese and African Americans.

The postwar decades would see Japanese and Japanese Americans assuming the problematic title and social role of “model minority,” driving a social, racial, and political wedge between themselves and black Americans in the continued racial shifting (and darkening) of the Los Angeles city.

Not at all exclusive to black and Asian communities in Los Angeles, very specific American racial conditions have made for difficult relations between Asians who have been racially constructed as a “model minority” and black Americans who have been historically constructed as an abject eternally disenfranchised racial group, the antithesis to whiteness across the entire United States. Of course, while this racial

polarity has certain rootings here in the United States, it is not exclusive to the United States, or even in national landscapes where race is drawn out to operate in white and black.

Locally, few scholars like Paul C.P. Siu indirectly alluded to mixed race and cross-cultural encounters, prone to happen due to the inevitable meeting of Chinese immigrants and local bodies, economies, and politics. But hand it to scholars who came after, like Lok Siu (no relation) who began to seriously consider the aftermath of the flow of Chinese bodies and identities between China and the Americas, the bodies, language, culture, traditions, and politics of Chinese people shifting between geography, time, and space to create new interpretations of Chineseness.

Siu argues this in her book—a new interpretation, or rather, ongoing contestation of Chineseness in Latin America—while looking at the Chinese in Panama from the stage of a Chinese beauty pageant, *Reina de la Colonia China*. From this stage, Chinese femininity and racial Chineseness are both judged, symbolically and literally. And it is on this stage that *mestizaje* (mixedness) both in the body of mixed race female contestants and in the cultural presentation of Chinese femininity becomes a contested thing.

In much of the Caribbean where the African slave population greatly outnumbered the white slave owners, race took on a shape very different than that in the United States. Having entered into the West Indian world as coolies during the slavery and post-slavery periods, Chinese and Indians were among the first Asians to make a space for themselves in a black world. Like the United States and elsewhere in the Chinese and Indian diasporas, many of these coolies were able to buy themselves

out of contracts and establish themselves as middle men, working as entrepreneurs who soon came to rest in a position of petit elites.

It was from this position that many Asians came under attack, having their stores looted and their persons assaulted. The research of Darren Brown, who presented a paper titled “‘Mister Singh and Mister Chin:’ The Subject of the Asian Grocer in Reggae Music” at multiple conferences, looks specifically at how black Jamaicans have crafted representations of Asians in reggae music which in itself has been constructed “as a product of the African Diaspora” despite the many Chinese who have been instrumental in producing and distributing the sounds and music itself.

In addition Brown looks at how representations of Indians and Chinese in various reggae songs produced in Jamaica and in the Jamaican diaspora acts as an indicator of the simultaneous racial unease and racial normalcy of Asians in Jamaican society: “ill-interactions between Asian shopkeepers and African customers revealing a desire for black owned businesses...[and] the subject of Asian woman is a recurring theme which perpetuates notions of black male sexuality through sexual conquest.”²⁸

The racial landscape of the Americas, especially in respect to Asian immigration and settlement, has never as neatly separated by race, language, color, or national identity as it had been previously historicized and more and more scholars working in fields of American, diaspora, and ethnic studies are making it a point to emphasize that. Scholars like Allison Varzally who recently published a book *Making a Non-White America: Californians Coloring Outside Ethnic Lines, 1925-1955* on the prevalence of interracial marriage, family, and people in California or Rudy Guevarra,

²⁸ Darren Brown, “‘Mister Singh and Mister Chin:’ The Subject of the Asian Grocer in Reggae Music,” Conference paper abstract, Asian Pacific American Studies Conference, April 12, 2008, Michigan State University.

who is currently editing a collection on “interdisciplinary essays that examine the intersections of Asian American, Pacific Islander and Latin@ American Studies from a hemispheric and transnational perspective within and across the Americas, the Caribbean, Asian and Pacific” and whose dissertation “Mexipino: A History of Multiethnic Identity and the Formation of the Mexican and Filipino Communities of San Diego” explores multiethnic identities for individuals from two “minority” groups both make it a point to rescue these mixed histories and make more complex the history and experience of Asians to the Americas.

Still little seems to be acknowledged in critical scholarship when it comes to specific relations between Asian Americans and African Americans in the United States. Interventions are being made with at least two of all the papers being presented at the 2009 Association of Asian American Studies Conference—Helen Jun and Shanshan Lan’s—being offered on Asian and African American intersections. Jun’s paper titled, “Harassment in the Hood: Asian Refugees, Black Residents, and the Racial Politics of Protection” mirrors her academic work which looks at citizenship, cultural politics, and the racialization of Asian Americans and African Americans.

Lan’s paper, “‘I don’t want to be Chinese. I want to be black.’: Race Consciousness among Chinese American Youths in Bridgeport” builds on a body of scholarship which Lan began as a graduate student, eventually producing a dissertation titled “Learning Race and Class: Chinese Americans in Multiracial Bridgeport” and journal articles that look at how Chinese immigrants and second generation Chinese American youth negotiate racial place in a working class immigrant neighborhood on the periphery of Chicago Chinatown.

Lan's scholarship stays focused on the complicated relationships Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans are expected to negotiate: "together with Latinos as 'foreigners' who are taking over the nation; as people of color side by side with African Americans; and/or as a model minority in opposition to both Latinos and African Americans," with class acting as an additional layer to how racial hierarchies are built.²⁹

In thinking about Chinese American historical experience and region in this project, I have used a much broader geographical range of focus in my research in order to assess how Chinese immigrants constructed home, families, careers, and leisure. I was more interested in exploring these areas by theme rather than by order of region, as I wanted to create as full and complex a picture as possible. However, I acknowledge that regional differences shaped Chinese experiences in ways that were incomparable. Certain laws and racial expectations in the South were not always present in the North or on the West Coast and therefore Chinese experiences under Jim Crow or with racial segregation or even exclusion and anti-Chinese violence were at times overt and constant or at best minimal.

The works of the following scholars, writers, and media makers have made it possible for me to locate primary and secondary source references in the first place, their work usually falling beyond the West and California, and drawing from the American South and Midwest.

James W. Loewen's *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* gave me initial perspective on the Chinese experience in the American South and first

²⁹ Shanshan Lan, *Learning Race and Class: Chinese Americans in Multiracial Bridgeport*, Dissertation Abstract, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

introduced me to a racial landscape and reality where Chinese people had quite a few things to say about their experiences with and in relation to blacks. From here, other scholars such as Robert Seto Quan (Mississippi), Huping Ling (St. Louis, MO) and Lucy M. Cohen provided further materials for analysis in looking at the Chinese in Louisiana where my father's people are from. Christine Choy's film *Mississippi Triangle*; Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *Chinese American Portraits: Personal Histories, 1828-1988*; and Jianli Zhao's *Strangers in the City: The Atlanta Chinese, their Community and Stories of their Lives* should also be noted.

I wanted to mention here the work of historian Mary Ting Yi Lui and her book *Chinatown Trunk Murder Mystery* which explores the historical nature of Chinese/white relations and sex in New York City. Both Lui's dedication to scholarship and the outcome of her book convinced me that it was possible to study and write in depth about something for which there was seemingly little evidential material. In the same way, my work, like hers, acts as a witness to a history that did exist based on the few sources that are still around.

Both of our scholarship breaks further ground in the field of Chinese American studies as we are forced to rethink the racial boundaries (and fluidity) around Chinese America, in both the public and domestic spheres, a not so new concept as those scholars who have been studying the Chinese diaspora have been dealing in this area for years.

In mapping out how I decided to approach and set up a way to answer my questions theoretically and aesthetically, the following works greatly influenced my choice in not only speaking in large part from my own personal experience, situating

myself and my family in the text but also in the types of texts I chose to analyze and the thematic versus chronological approach to how I connected my chapters. What I ended up with was an interdisciplinary revisit of Chinese American history in which I chose to look at how Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans navigated the American racial terrain from their close interactions with black Americans and other nonwhites.

A similar model to how I decided to thematically engage archival and historical sources can be found in Elena Tajima Creef's book *Imaging Japanese America: The Visual Construction of Citizenship, Race, and the Body* which uses photographs, drawings, historical and archival documents, wartime propaganda, film, and museum exhibitions to present a counternarrative of the interned Japanese American body and subject as multidimensional and to "recover a collective identity and suppressed history, and tell a new story."³⁰ Creef is dealing in the rewriting of Japanese American historical memory which has been shaped, or as she argues, repressed and erased in part by an American "culture of racism."³¹

This same "culture of racism" has shaped, repressed, and erased parts of Chinese American history but while Creef looks at representations made through both white American and interned/post-internment Japanese American lenses, I am looking at how a culture of racism oppresses Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans while stratifying them in a racial hierarchy that gives them the option to acquire a sense of privilege by oppressing and rejecting African Americans.

Equal in his use of a wide range of textual objects which he analyzes but even more so creative in the multiple voices he uses to analyze is Amitava Kumar's book

³⁰ Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2008), 146.

³¹ Elena Tajima Creef, *Imaging Japanese America: The Visual Construction of Citizenship, Nation, and the Body*, (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 4.

Passport Photos in which Kumar combines “his talents as a photographer, poet, scriptwriter, and journalist to [perform] the job of critical commentary, refusing to partition and delegate these skills to separate provinces of his intellectual life” in his interrogation of the immigrant condition between diaspora and the United States, between various historical periods, various persons speaking, between violence and Americanization.

With the inclusion of photographs, music lyrics, and poetry, and chapter titles like Language, Photograph, Name, Profession, Nationality, and Sex, Kumar explores through the reading of various texts how each construction is assessed by Americans, from immigration agents to immigrant bashers, in order to map out an immigrant experience.

Of course what we are left with is a narrative that shows the scattered and fractured experiences of multiple immigrants, a map in which multiple divergent paths of immigrants are shown to be as connected to the *types* and *kinds* of languages spoken, images in photographs, names on passports, profession at arrival, national origin, and sexual orientation and identification than anything else.

The interdisciplinary and comparative use of multiple methodologies and the engagement of multiple kinds of sources with which to see history, race, citizenship, the body, gender, the nation, language, and so forth seems to be not only the direction in which many scholarly disciplines and fields are moving but stand as real directions in being able to better critique the complicated nature of human lives caught within multiple spheres.

When I first sat down to begin writing this literature review, I thought to base this conversation of scholarship on the work of historian Alberto Rodriguez whose work I first became aware of via the 2008 Association for American Studies Conference website which listed the various panelists and their papers. After Googling Rodriguez, I discovered his specialization (Black/Brown relations on the South Texas Borderlands and the West) and his straightforward thesis (to understand how Blacks and ethnic Mexicans got along or did not).

From this discovery I felt that I had found an academic neighbor, someone who used popular culture coined terminology to explain racial and ethnic convergences that were not canonically acknowledged in public history or scholarship (BlaXican history) and whose dissertation's purpose was to engage "theories of hybridity and transculturation to analyze relations between Blacks and Mexican/Mexican Americans on the border in order to conceptually Blacken the Borderlands and move South Texas into our understanding of the West."³²

But my book however is not simply a scholarly attempt to "blacken" Chinese American studies. I feel like to do such a thing would be too simplistic, throwing Chinese and black people together and creating a similar grocery list of experiences without a collective context to root these experiences, like Prashad's book *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*. Instead I am interested in broadening the way we imagine and know Chinese American history, to cause a shift in the main discourses in the field which always talk about the racialization of Chinese Americans exclusive to white American terms. Rather than "blacken," I am interested in looking at how Chinese

³² From Alberto Rodriguez's 2007 Graduate Certificate bio on the University of Houston's Women's Studies website, <http://www.class.uh.edu/WS/gradcert.asp>, accessed March 19, 2009.

immigrants learned American racial ideologies and how their various interactions with black Americans shaped Chinese America in as many ways as having to resist, acquiesce, and negotiate with white America.

So where Fred Ho and V. Mullen's collection *Afro Asia* mentions that the field of "African American and Asian American intersections is wide and expanding...[but] certain topics that have not been explored or need further investigation and discussion, including black and Asian intersections in cuisine, clothing, lifestyle (child rearing, marriage), social life (dating, friendships, daily interactions), and more,"³³ I see my work as directly responding to these areas.

And so I begin with Chapter 1, giving a historical overview of early Chinese immigrant encounters with Natives and African Americans, focusing on cooperation and reciprocity between the groups—guide services and trade supplies being offered; interracial marriages occurring; a common lingua franca being developed; collaborations in vice and moneylending; and negotiating a shared geography—as well as conflict and violence. These encounters were affected at times by whites constantly attempting to conspire and turn groups against each other. Still, Native people, African Americans, and Chinese found subversive ways to continue to interact through business, intimacy, and leisure.

In looking at Chinese immigrant history in this context, one realizes that their racial engagements and acts of social agency extended further than being caught in a binary of white racist oppression and cultural assimilation which have commonly been the major themes narrating in the Chinese immigrant experience. It is through viewing

³³ Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen, *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans* (Durham: Duke University Press: 2008), 14-15.

the Chinese as having a much more complicated racial history in the United States that we can come closer to fully contextualizing how race played out for and between immigrants and native white and nonwhite citizens in early America.

Following suit, I use the frame of race studies in Chapter 2 to talk about how Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans used their working knowledge of race in the United States to maneuver a landscape where racial restrictions were placed on practically every dimension of American life: the type of people allowed to enter the country, the living areas available to nonwhite people, who nonwhites were legally allowed to marry and reside with. In this hostile landscape where white authority meant the policing and control of nonwhite bodies, movement, and livelihood, race passing became a common tactic for immigrants moving illegally across borders and settling into sexual and domestic spaces outside of their legal right.

This same device would be used a generation later by mixed race descendants of Chinese and black American parents who were looking to live life outside of the scrutiny, exclusion, and harassment of Jim Crow and their local Chinese communities. Born largely to immigrant Chinese fathers and black or black mixed race American mothers, their very existence does more than just suggest casual interracial sex between Chinese men and black women although casual sex—whether for desire or money—did occur and which I look at in part in Chapter 3.

The exclusion of women and the gender imbalance among Chinese immigrants in the United States that followed was in part a response to a growing white American protest against the Chinese who they saw as corrupting national morality, competing for jobs, and threatening to overrun and dramatically shift the racial landscape. If you

barred the women from entry, you killed two birds with one stone: prohibit the entry of would be prostitutes and brides of Chinese laborers and the men would be forced to return to China once their duties were completed having no means of setting up family and permanent domicile in the States.

But there is always a third way down a two way street and in an exercise of agency many Chinese men decided to defy existing anti-miscegenation laws by having sex, marrying, and cohabitating with white women which stood to violate various anti-miscegenation laws or doing the same with nonwhite women for which there was no public or state consequence.

From these pairings came Chinese American families who offer a departure from early dominant normative representations or a lack thereof. These families of love and convenience would eventually be removed from cultural memory, an act to clean up the “face” of Chinese America in an effort to be more presentable in line with white American interests.

I use a dual frame of historiography and race studies to turn to look at Chinese restaurants as sites of racial negotiation between white and black America in Chapter 4. While Chinese food would eventually become a popular dinner option to the average white American suburban middle class family, it served historically as a way for African Americans to have access to the same dining and leisure as white Americans which they were denied during much of the twentieth century.

Concurrently, Chinese restaurant owners were able to exercise their own agency and power in choosing to negate white racial order and allow black patrons into their establishments or acting in accordance to Jim Crow laws and not offering them service

at all. The latter decision would reflect in part the changing attitudes of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans around the issue of race.

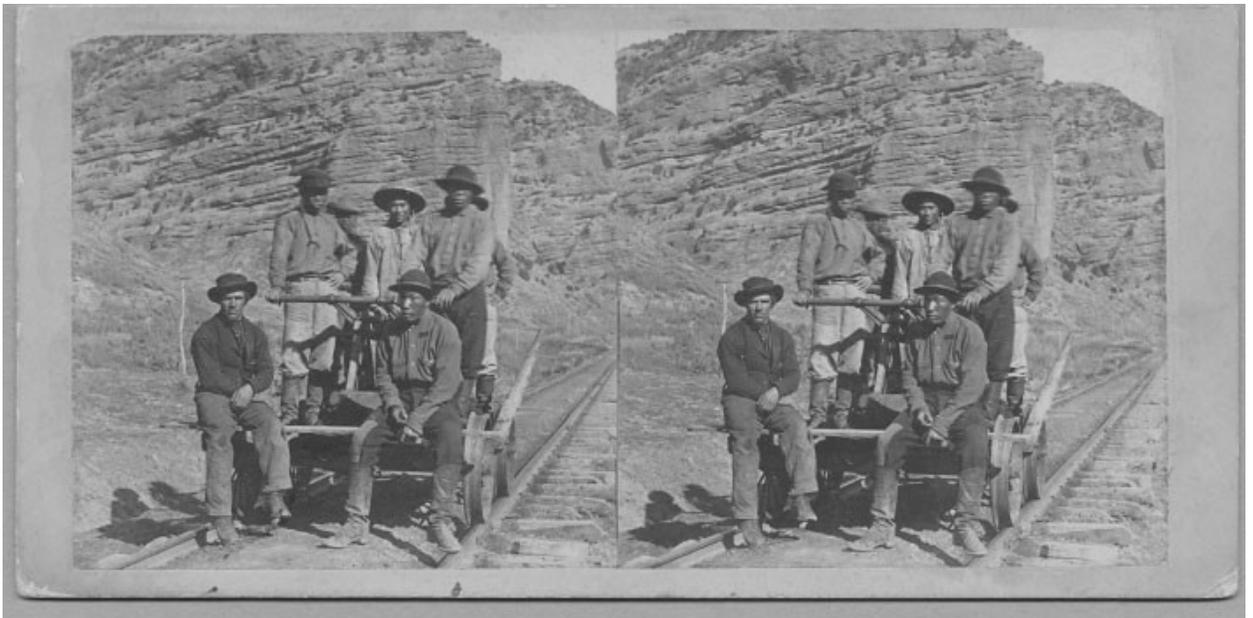
While some clearly made the decision to exclude black customers solely for business reasons, others thoroughly embodied this racial separation which I mention in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 as taking the form of interracial marriage and mixed race Chinese being forced or excluded from various communities. It is through this experience that a part of Chinese American history is also erased. And I conclude in Chapter 5 with this in mind, exploring the partial erasure of blacks and other nonwhites from the canon of Chinese American history.

This historical canon both ignores and suppresses the myriad of experiences and histories of Chinese individuals and communities while privileging the existence and histories of a certain select few. But even in this climate of censorship there are voices that counter the dominant narrative, voices such as that of mixed media artist Flo Oy Wong who through art explores Chinese and black American kinship in the American South.

Perhaps it is not enough to speak back to such violent erasures as the barring of a Trinidadian born Miss Chinatown pageant contestant with some African ancestry or the running out of town and memory of black and Native members in Chinese American families but it is a beginning. With voices like Wong's serving as a testimony to the social reality of interracial encounters between Chinese and blacks in the United States, marrying the two in region, family, and blood, we can certainly begin to do more than imagine, we can continue the dialogue, our many sides speaking.

Chapter 1: The Color of History

It has always begun with gold and railroads, both the glory of personal fortune and the promise of cross-country travel for white Americans serving as reasons for why the Chinese entered into the frontier country of the West. And with each new site excavated and new leg of track laid, we were pushed deeper into contact with Native communities, into the terrain of Indian Country.



An unidentified white man with Chinese railroad workers posed on a hand car on the Union Pacific Rail Road line. Photograph possibly taken in 1867.

[The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. BANC PIC 1995.012--STER]

I make the point of saying we were pushed into Indian Country because in addition to the scrape of gold and dirt in a rusted pan, the terrible mountainous territory, the frostbite and the snow, the hot of the desert and strike of the dynamite, the white men armed and ready to assault, the Chinese bodies buried under exploded rock, there were encounters with Native people in the history of the Chinese frontier experience.

In this chapter, I highlight encounters with not only Native people but also with African Americans both with whom Chinese men and, to a lesser extent, women negotiated land claims, labor competition, romance, vice, and leisure. Because it was during this earliest frontier period while race was still transitory and racial codes were not yet permanently, lawfully, and institutionally mandated that Chinese bodies were able to move about and interact freely with both whites and nonwhite people.

This was true across America, beyond the West, extending into parts of the American South, and in urban enclaves along the East Coast where Chinese immigrants mixed freely with blacks and whites, living as neighbors, business associates, rivals, and lovers. And it was through these early interactions with Native, black, and white people in a shifting racial landscape that Chinese people learned to be American beginning a process in which they would both uphold and resist a racial order that would become more rigid in the decades to come.

But let me back up and provide a bit of context because to tell of the story of the West, one must make central the experiences of Native people. To not do so would be the equivalent of leaving a cowboy hanging off his horse: the most racist role model of my father's childhood left without anyone to slaughter or be flanked by in sidekick fashion.

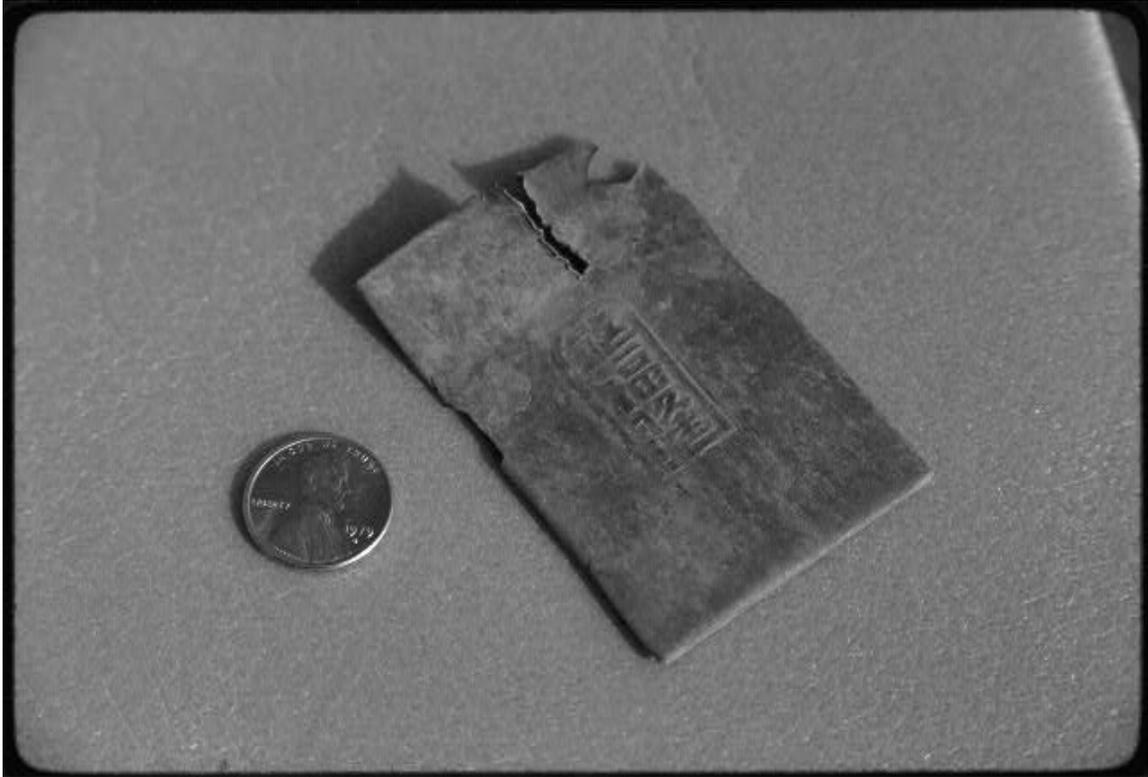
Likewise, whenever I hear stories of the West in which the characters are only white or Native, I immediately think about the absence of black homesteaders and black cowboys, Chinese miners and Chinese ranch hands. Because while history—the privileged recording of the historical experiences and lives of an elite few—is happening to white America, it is simultaneously happening to everybody else. And

eventually evidence like the Chinese medicine vials discovered in an area that had been inhabited by local Paiutes at an archeological site that was being surveyed in the California Mono Basin comes to surface.

Then who can deny a West in which there was more than cowboy and Indian? Who can deny what medical anthropologist William M. Bowen suspected after the medicine vials were discovered, that the vials had to do with the frequency of trade between the early Chinese and local indigenous people? And after being compared, those same medicine vials found at the California Mono Basin site would show similar properties as those found at archaeological Chinese dig sites in Weaverville and Riverside, California.³⁴

In finding early artifacts like medicine vials; parts of buildings; tools; toys; food jars and other canisters; pieces of earthenware; coins; opium paraphernalia; gaming pieces; tea cups and other vessels hand painted with images of lotuses, peonies, plum flowers; one can begin to partially reinvent early Chinese frontier life.

³⁴ William M. Bowen, "The Five Eras of Chinese Medicine in California," in *The Chinese in America: A History from Gold Mountain to the New Millennium*, ed. Susie Lan Cassel (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002), 176.



This remnant of a Chinese opium tin was unearthed at a Northern Nevada archaeological site in 1979.³⁵

[Library of Congress, Buckaroos in Paradise Collection, Digital ID-afc96ran 46750 (33mm slide)]

The rest comes together after, unearthed from early newspapers, diary entries, and legal accounts, detailing both Chinese and Native encounters during the Westward Expansion and Chinese and African American encounters in major American cities during Jim Crow. And from all of these pieces come the whole picture, stories of friendship and murder, conflict and the destruction of cultures and people, everyone and everything permanently changed under ever rapidly growing white interests.

Beginning with historical encounters between early Chinese immigrants and Native or African American people, each situation, each run-in varied and depended as

³⁵ The penny to the left is placed next to the tin to give it size and dimensional value. However, when read symbolically, the penny with the presidential image on it becomes the United States flanked by the large Chinese opium tin which can be read as the historical representation of the hordes of Chinese immigrants who were assumed by many Americans to be the carriers of disease, vice, and immorality upon entry and settlement in the United States. The penny also represents American capitalism and the dominant national currency while the opium tin represents a form of private leisure practiced by a disempowered group of people used as cheap labor.

much on location and region as the persons who were involved. Good relations were conditional and could turn bad quick depending on the situation, season, or who else rolled into or failed to leave town. However, for many Chinese, their earliest interactions in the American West were positive or at least decent so they lived to tell about it.

Hardly friendless, an elderly Chinese by the name of Wong Ying remembered arriving in Idaho in 1856 and being shown placer gold beds by a local tribe who also offered him and some other Chinese miners food. In Arizona, local Yuma tribal members sold fish to Chinese miners to eat and wood to heat the water in Chinese laundries.³⁶ But beyond trade and the exchange of goods, romance was recorded with at least one case in which a Chinese laundryman at the Fort Apache military post took as a wife an Apache woman “and by 1918 this had led to a small community of their descendants on the reservation.”³⁷

What parts Apache and what parts Chinese these descendants would choose to keep is unknown. But I wonder if perhaps they at least spoke some kind of hybrid language between Apache, English, and Chinese, English being a staple in many western mining communities and border towns. Never too busy in their constant pursuits of mining for gold, fighting for survival, drinking through winter, and working as hired labor, many frontier residents found the time to learn a common language between them, usually a pidgin English that would get them to a place of understanding in this ruthless, transitory landscape.

³⁶ Daniel Liestman, “Horizontal Inter-Ethnic Relations: Chinese and American Indians in the Nineteenth-Century American West,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 30:3 (1999): 330-331.

³⁷ Elizabeth Brandt and Christopher MacCrate, “‘Make Like Seem Heep Injin’: Pidginization in the Southwest,” *Ethnohistory* 29:3 (1982): 203.

Pidgin English became the primary mode of communication between Chinese and Native people in Nevada. And in a recorded encounter between a Paiute who was an alleged tax collector and the Chinese workers whom he was collecting from, the tax collector issued the following threat in order to shake down the Chinese for money in a language that they apparently understood or, at least in the Paiute collector's opinion, should've understood:

Me Piute cappen. Me kill plenty Melican man. Dis my lan'. You payee me, John. No payee me, gottom me killee you!...D---'n Melican man! Me no sabbe Melican man! Me Piute cappen. S'pose you no payee me fifty dollar, me killee you!³⁸

In addition to pidgin English, many Chinese in the Southwest also spoke, wrote, and understood pidgin Spanish. And while both pidgin English and Spanish were what two anthropological linguists Elizabeth Brandt and Christopher MacCrate describe as a kind of common speech between groups with differing native languages, the ability to speak and understand "an English-based code" was crucial to survival in a borderland where both Chinese, Mexican, white, African American, and Native people were forced to cohabitate alongside each other.³⁹

Of course language itself is already a powerful bonding agent, a way for individuals to create community and a sense of shared identity. Take for example the handful of Chinese in the Southwest who were looked upon fondly by local tribal members after having become fluent in various Native languages having lived in close

³⁸ Ibid; The name "John" is the shortened version of "John Chinaman" a racist name that was used to refer to all Chinese men during this time period.

³⁹ Ibid., 214.

proximity to various Native communities. George Webb, a Pima from Arizona remembers in his autobiography:

[W]e were in a Chinese store in a certain town near the reservation. We were looking for some kind of dessert. The Chinese clerk came up and asked us what we were looking for. We told him. He picked up a strawberry preserver and to our surprise he said in plain Pima: Go ‘ep sitoli we.nags ‘i.da, (This is pretty good. It has syrup in it.)”

Turns out the Chinese storekeeper had learned Pima as a child when he used to play with the local Pima and Papago children.⁴⁰ And in Arizona along Pinal Creek, due to Chinese vegetable growers hiring Apaches to help in the fields, one Chinese became fluent in a local Apache dialect.⁴¹

Lines between race and tribe tended to blur in areas where both Chinese and Native people shared livelihood and labor, making the presence of sixty Ute tribal members at the memorial of Wong Sing who was killed in an automobile accident, not so terribly unusual. Sing himself had been a staple in the community, running a laundry at Fort Duchesne, Utah and learning to speak Ute in multiple dialects while never fully becoming fluent in English.⁴²

But all was not always well between Chinese and Natives on the Southwestern frontier. In a family memoir written by Lorena Edwards Meadows, the Chinese in the frontier mining town of Candelaria, Nevada seemed to be in constant conflict with the local Paiutes over the issue of food to the amusement of the white townspeople. As was the customary practice, after a Chinese person was buried, food would be set out

⁴⁰ Ibid., 345-346.

⁴¹ Daniel Liestman, “Horizontal Inter-Ethnic Relations: Chinese and American Indians in the Nineteenth-Century American West,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 30:3 (1999): 344.

⁴² Ibid., 346.

on his or her grave. This was a tradition that we practiced on my mother's side every year with oranges and a plate of roasted pork, steamed rice, and incense set on tables in front of two portraits, one for a deceased grandfather and one for his eldest daughter. But in the case of Candelaria, Nevada, the Chinese were subjected to the usual drama of leaving perfectly edible food out in the open and walking away: someone was sure to discover it!

And so:

after the Chinese had set out large quantities of elaborately prepared food to nourish the spirits of their dead, the Indians would wait for night to come, then under cover of the black darkness of desert country, they would help themselves to a feast.⁴³

Apparently the food theft and the Chinese anger that followed were interesting enough topics to report about in the local paper and residents of Candelaria were treated to forecasts such as:

Chinese New Year begins next Friday. The screeching contests between the tom-toms and tomcats will be heart-rending. In the meantime, lock up your chicken house o' nights.

or:

A Chinaman committed suicide last Saturday, by hanging himself to a tree. He was buried Sunday. Whisky John (Piute) was undertaker, pallbearer and master of ceremonies. The funeral was conducted with great *éclat*, and the funeral baked meats attracted the hungry coyote and Piute.⁴⁴

⁴³ Lorena Edwards Meadows, *A Sagebrush Heritage* (El Cerrito: Earl Enterprises, 1972), 116.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Then in 1891 came a graver story of what happens when food becomes a contested thing, specifically, when it becomes a matter of murder over the assumption of a cannibalized kinsman on your plate. That year the town of Bridgeport, Nevada was almost burned to the ground when local merchant Ah Quong Tai who operated a Chinese restaurant came under the suspicion not only of killing Poker Tom whose horse was found riderless on the Walker River Indian Reservation but serving Tom's remains to other Paiutes who frequented Ah Quong Tai's establishment to eat and gamble.

Originating around a story of a card game that was played between both men, the events that unraveled after fifty dollars was squarely won and lost would be corroborated and disputed by various sources, none however able to prevent the demise of Ah Quong Tai. In one account, some men had witnessed both Tai and Poker Tom sitting at a table playing cards behind a locked door. Later, in a field north of Bridgeport, Poker Tom's saddle, saddle blanket, and purchase of calico were discovered. This came during the same time that a group of Paiute men and women pulled up a coat thought to belong to the missing man after combing the river.

With so much evidence pointing toward suspicious circumstance, the Bridgeport sheriff was urged by two Paiutes to look into the room where the missing man had played cards with the Chinese proprietor and the sheriff was able to discover a bullet hole and blood evidence on the floor and wall. Then, eight miles outside of Bridgeport, a badly decomposed human torso was fished out of the Walker River. It was around this time that rumors began circulating about Poker Tom's disappearance

and the “big feed” Ah Quong Tai had prepared at his restaurant shortly after, a special gesture for all his Native regular customers.

The meat served—either in the form of a stew containing “pickled goat” or two long wood tables upon which sat a “Damn tough” steak dinner—was the source according to several oral history accounts of Bridgeport residents that caused local Paiutes to come together collectively, angry after supposedly being deliberately tricked into eating Poker Tom’s body, an even further violation to add to the continued violation of non-Native settlers occupying tribal land.⁴⁵

After that, it would only be a matter of time, the entire town probably sensing the pending intention to avenge the death of Poker Tom and to punish the one called Ah Quong Tai. And as feelings of alarm, disbelief, and outrage among the local Paiute community deepened over the course of the murder investigation, a panicked and fearful Ah Quong Tai sought protection in the Bridgeport jail. His life would be basically ended at his trial when two white men, M.P. Hays and Frank Hanson, testified to having heard him confess to killing Poker Tom in self-defense after winning back fifty dollars Poker Tom insisted were his. Despite this however, the murder charge against Ah Quong Tai would be dropped on the supposed grounds of not enough evidence, a turn of events which had more to do with the large number of Paiutes gathered outside than anything else.

Demanding that white law officials of Bridgeport turn over the murderer, Sheriff Michael J. Cody could only do so much to hold off the angry Paiute mob. And in the end, Tai was abandoned by his lawyers and townsmen. His plea to pay five

⁴⁵ Sally Zanjani, “Paiute Revenge: Grisly Crime Brought Threat of Massacre,” *American West* 21 (1984): 54.

dollars a day to any man willing to form a posse and protect him fell to deaf ears and Tai's attempt to stay in the courtroom was aborted when four Paiute men grabbed him. Even Judge Thomas Fales "was curtly told to keep still" when he told the men to restrain from doing anything inside the courtroom.⁴⁶

Once outside, the white townsfolk were treated to the horrifying sound of Tai who was tortured before being killed in a nearby field yet they did nothing, relieved for the most part that at the expense of one Chinese culprit, the rest of the white townsfolk and their property in Bridgeport were spared.⁴⁷ One Chinese death later, Sheriff Cody was able to reinstate some form of order: instructing the Paiutes to leave town, arranging for the burial of Tai's body, and seeing that all nonlocal Paiutes and their camps were moved downriver before being disbanded a day later.

Tai's queue was taken as souvenir.

In newspaper accounts from Bridgeport to San Francisco, Ah Quong Tai would be blamed for his own death, a supposed American who was born in Marysville and had not only committed previous murders but had repeatedly sold opium to local Natives. Only one man would publicly come forward and question the events surrounding Ah Quong Tai's death, a white man who wrote in to the San Francisco Chinese consul noting: "It is well known that a conspiracy was formed to have the defendant discharged on examination and turned over to the tender mercies of a large band of Indians."⁴⁸

But after an investigation in which a man who worked for the United States District Court was sent to Bridgeport to confront town officials over matters of

⁴⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 56.

mishandling the case, all hope for justice fell through when the investigation was abandoned.

Left conflicted over whether to make war or peace with either local Native tribes or Chinese immigrants, many whites often felt ambivalent toward both and compassionate toward neither. At times they did their part to coax out racial tensions between Chinese and Native populations, courting or bribing members of nearby tribes to scare or murder Chinese in exchange for a truce or other nonessential goods.

In Nevada, where local whites began to feel the bulge of too many Chinese miners in the canyon land areas of the Humboldt Range mountains, a number of Northern Paiutes were contacted and “promised good relations if they ran off the Chinese.” And so during Chinese New Year while the Chinese were in the midst of celebrating and eating, a fierce group of Paiute men with painted faces and feather headdresses rushed screaming toward the Chinese. Apparently, the scene had been so frightening that the Chinese immediately and indefinitely abandoned their camp.⁴⁹

With the frequency of settlers of all colors encroaching on Native land, more and more Native tribes became unsettled with few choosing to relocate voluntarily and the majority being forcibly and violently removed by the United States military. Tensions over who had the right to claim the existing territory and build new cities which pushed the indigenous population to the outskirts of town began to rise. And settlers lived in constant fear that they’d be attacked in a reactive attempt by local tribes to retake the land.

⁴⁹ Daniel Liestman, “Horizontal Inter-Ethnic Relations: Chinese and American Indians in the Nineteenth-Century American West,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 30:3 (1999): 342.

For the Chinese, the outcomes of these territorial battles varied between being murdered while in the way or left completely alone. A few were so fortunate in one case outside of Elk City, Idaho, when a Nez Perce raiding party ran into a Chinese cabin in 1878, and after receiving tips on whites in the area, the Nez Perce gave the Chinese five dollars and promised them safety as the Nez Perce had no fight with them.⁵⁰

This was the West of the Chinese, a place of turning luck, of run-ins, of easy murder, and hard fortune. For those who were not driven out by encounters with local Native tribes or whites eager to claim another's land, labor, or fortune, they would find themselves being driven out by the decline of gold mining and regional, state, or county industrial, agricultural, and transportation projects. Most would migrate to major cities around the United States looking for other jobs while a smaller number would strike out into other lesser known territories like the East Coast or the low country of the American South.

The first Chinese in the South had been a few curious men who arrived as seamen or came to work as servants in port cities such as New Orleans.⁵¹ It wasn't until some wealthy white man came up with the clever idea of how to successfully replace newly freed black labor at a convention in Memphis, Tennessee in July of 1869 that the decision to import Chinese labor was put into effect. It was expected that Chinese men

⁵⁰ Ibid., 349.

⁵¹ Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without A History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 2.

would put up better with the work in the plantation system, tending cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco fields in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana.⁵²

Convinced this was a good idea based on perceptions of the Chinese as a fitting submissive substitute for unmanageable freed black slaves, white planters reckoned that the Chinese coolie would either permanently displace black labor or force black men and women back into their former subjugated positions once they found there was no longer a place for them. So began the project of replacing the previously enslaved with the coolie, a process that saw Chinese men who had come from indentured posts in the West Indies, recruiting ports of China and Hong Kong, and unemployed California railroad workers showing up to work in equally dark pastures.

And for awhile things did look bright. That is until some of the contracted Chinese workers began to openly resist exploitative working conditions as there was just no good taste in the mouth with being threatened with violence or physically assaulted by employers. Chinese plantation workers fought back, and in some cases, murdered their overseers, picking up and running away to escape poor working conditions that otherwise offered no way out of one's contract. Then there were other problems on plantations where everything could have worked save for the resentment of a small number of freed blacks who were still employed and found the Chinese competition nothing to smile about.

The following reads like something out of a handbook for white plantation owners of what could go wrong when you don't suitably balance out the racial climate between your Chinese and black laborers. At least it was what Frederick Metcalfe had

⁵² Robert Seto Quan, *Lotus Among the Magnolias: The Mississippi Chinese* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1982), 4-6.

to learn by mistake, Metcalfe being an ambitious planter in Washington County, Mississippi who was able to secure some Chinese laborers in 1873 and whom he put directly to work at his Newstead plantation alongside his black laborers.

The Chinese were put up in a house across from the quarters of the freed blacks and it seemed as though they were adjusting well, the Chinese having grown very fond of cigars over the course of their stay and finding time to celebrate Chinese New Year on the plantation. But perhaps it was the look of willingness on some of the Chinese men's faces that put them in a position of fondness with Metcalfe which he rewarded.

In 1874, Metcalfe asked one of his Chinese laborers to prepare the family's Christmas dinner, a task for which the laborer was paid seventy-five cents. Several others also made additional cash on the side by picking cotton for a neighboring planter; whether or not Metcalfe knew about this, it is not noted.

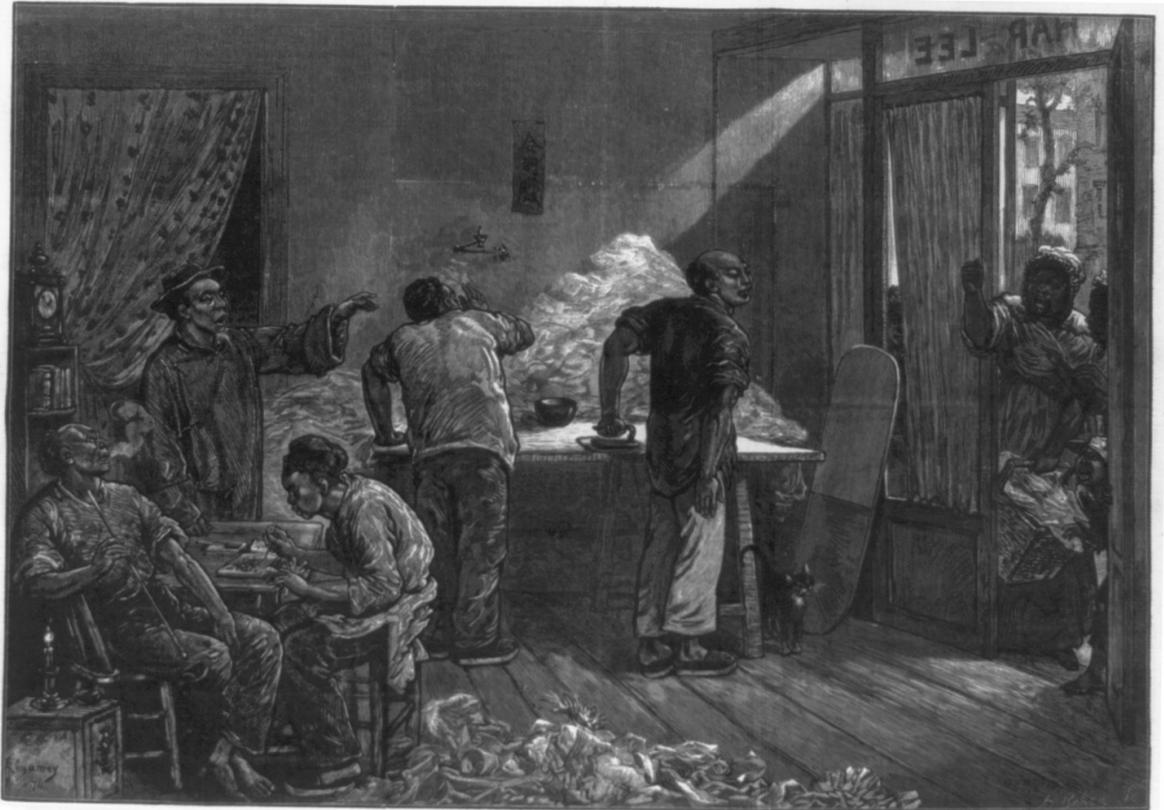
It is noted however that resentment quickly rose among his black workers and in November of 1873, one worker voiced his disapproval by refusing to take the cotton the Chinese had picked up to the gin. Soon after, there were incidents of breaking and entering in the house occupied by the Chinese followed by accusations that some of the black workers were stealing their cigars. Working relations eventually deteriorated so much that Metcalfe was forced to call the constable to maintain order at his plantation after some black workers entered into physical altercations with the Chinese on multiple occasions.

As a result, the Chinese at Newstead fell into disagreement amongst themselves and began absconding in small numbers until 1875 when only black laborers could be

found under the employment of Metcalfe.⁵³ Perhaps, in part, this was not an uncommon scene with the economy of the South beginning to change from plantation system to one of industrialization and modernization. And as was the typical response, many Chinese picked up and left the South with the few who remained taking up professions like small town local grocer or other entrepreneurial ventures which had them selling goods to black customers who were refused service by whites and sat them square in the middle of the southern racial divide.

In situations where entrepreneurship was not an option, Chinese men caught in the predicament of needing a job yet prevented from working in positions designated for whites, often found themselves competing for jobs predominantly worked by African Americans. This ultimately meant going to war with black women whose career choices were limited due to anti-black racism and gender discrimination and who were forced to make wages mainly as washerwomen, child nurses, cooks, and servants.

⁵³ John C. Willis, *Forgotten Time: The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta after the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 24.



PENNSYLVANIA—WAR OF RACE IN THE CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE—COLORED WASHERWOMEN BERATING CHINESE LAUNDRYMEN.—Drawn by Stewart.—See Page 181.

An illustration from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper that shows black washerwomen at the front door of Hap Lee, a Chinese laundry, berating the men inside who are both working and engaged in leisure, 1875. An excerpt of the illustration's caption reads "Pennsylvania – war of race in the city of brotherly love."

[Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-55039 (b&w film copy neg.)]

And it would be a hard war, especially in the realm of washing,⁵⁴ an occupation that allowed black women the freedom to spend time alone or with family in ways that other live-in employment arrangements didn't.⁵⁵ Every Chinese man who entered into the field of laundering—opening or running laundries with relatives or kinsmen across

⁵⁴ Paul Ong refers to Chinese men's entry into the laundry trade as "a venture in pariah capitalism" rather than "a working-class occupation" as it was less of a choice for Chinese immigrants who, due to racism, anti-Chinese attitudes, and discrimination, were relegated to the least desirable positions in society in order to make a living. This meant taking the lowest jobs usually worked by women of color. See Paul Ong, "Chinese Laundries as an Urban Occupation in Nineteenth Century California," *The Annals of the Chinese Historical Society of the Pacific Northwest* 1 (1983): 68.

⁵⁵ Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 26.

the country—would become a serious threat to black women’s economic and personal livelihood and that would bring the heat at least in one case in Galveston, Texas where a labor riot led by black men eventually turned over to the hands of black women who targeted their not so friendly competition.

In the summer of 1877, during a strike led by African American male laborers in response to low wages, several black women who worked as laundresses decided to go on a strike of their own. They would threaten the owner of a white-owned steam laundry before turning their attention to the local Chinese laundries, “telling Sam Lee, Slam Sling, Wu Loong and the rest that they must close up and leave this city within fifteen days, or they would be driven away.” The women went so far as to issue an open letter that reiterated the same demand: “Now Mr. Slam Sling Chinamen you better sling your shirt short because we mean what we say, cause your time is growing old.” The letter continues with threats of marching on the Chinese laundries armed and ready to shoot,⁵⁶ however, not much more is found in the local papers about whether or not the Chinese targeted by the strike were attacked or run out of town.

Ironically even as black women and Chinese men competed for the opportunity to wash the dirty undergarments of whites, both were vilified by white labor activists and anti-Chinese advocates who claimed that both black laundresses and Chinese laundries spread disease in their care for white people’s clothes.⁵⁷ These activists and anti-Chinese advocates deliberately used racist propaganda citing health violations to displace both Chinese and African Americans from the laundry trade in an effort to protect white interests.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 78-81.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 208-209.

Elsewhere in the world of black labor, the hiring of a few Chinese Americans by the Pullman Car & Manufacturing Company caused some panic among black men in the public rail transportation industry. Take the articles printed in 1927 in *The New York Times* when an initial announcement of the hiring of Chinese porters was read as an attempt by the Pullman Car & Manufacturing Company to replace black porters.

It began with a short piece reported in the paper on December 29 in which it was confirmed that twelve young Chinese men had been hired in Chicago as club car porters on the Northwestern Union Pacific lines in crack trains, eleven of whom were American born.⁵⁸ The next day in an apparent attempt to ease any unrest around the issue of Chinese porters being introduced, the Pullman Company issued a statement that, while not denying the hiring of Filipinos and Chinese as porters on club cars out of Chicago, assured that regular Pullman hiring practices and the staffing of black porters would not be changed.

⁵⁸ “Young Chinese as Pullman Porters,” *New York Times*, December 29, 1927.



Porter handing a white woman a glass of water in a railroad sleeping car, 1905.⁵⁹

[Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-116409 (b&w film copy neg.)]

This statement remained unconvincing to many of the black porters, for whom a representative pointing out that the labor of the Pullman porter necessitated a person who was capable of handling luggage, and such was an impossibility for Filipinos and

⁵⁹ This staged image was possibly used as promotional material and underscored a sense of racial and sexual discipline of black men employed as porters on railroad cars. This scene and the poses exhibited by the porter and the white female passenger are carefully and painstakingly arranged as if to say that even white women could be safely left alone in the presence of black porters. However, the not so comfortable expressions on the faces of both the individuals in this image can be read as perhaps saying otherwise as existing racial and sexual anxieties around black men and white women inhabiting such close quarters were reasons enough for lynching elsewhere outside of the train.

Chinese since “Orientals did not have the physique to be adaptable for the heavier work.”⁶⁰ The *New York Age*, a black newspaper, would echo the claim, reporting that in comparison to the Chinese and Filipinos, black men were “psychologically equipped” and “superior” for the position of Pullman porter due to a “long association with the American traveling public.”⁶¹

But despite a long association with the white American public, shifting times associated with the influx of new immigrants moving into the country and unsettling older ethnic communities would put African Americans in the constant position of fighting to keep the small economic and social gains they had achieved. It was fight or collaborate, fight or overlap, selling goods and borrowing money, covering each other under the policing eyes of whites which was probably best when it came to vice and the world of illegal gambling and drugs.

As popular forms of entertainment for both Chinese and non-Chinese patrons, African American men and youth played a supporting role in running numbers, basically collecting lottery numbers for illegal lotteries. But in a business where so much of one’s money was at stake, any kind of dispute could find one dead in an instant or a head in a basket of rice.

In a case that became known as the “Highbinder Murder Case,” an African American man’s head was found in just that: a basket of rice in St. Louis Chinatown in 1883. It was a grisly discovery that led to a local investigation that later revealed that the man, named Johnson, had been killed in an alley in a dispute with a Chinese gambler who had connections with Chinese Highbinders. A total of six men from the

⁶⁰ “Negro Porters To Stay,” *New York Times*, December 30, 1927.

⁶¹ “Chinese Porters A Challenge to Organized Labor: Randolph Sees Threat To Decent Living in Act of Pullman Co,” *New York Age*, January 14, 1928.

St. Louis Chinatown were arrested and charged with murder but without any supporting evidence, the case was dismissed.⁶²

In addition to the illegal gambling were the drugs. Unlike the gambling however, the handling of drug operations was a bit more difficult with the constant eye of white local law enforcement always keeping tabs. This led to a few local Chinese, including merchants, setting up opium dens in the nearby predominately African American Chestnut Valley neighborhood in order to avoid being raided by the St. Louis police. Even then, the Chinese remained under police surveillance with an 1896 report disclosing fourteen drug operations owned by Chinese in Chestnut Valley.

Ever so industrious, a few Chinese went beyond the drugs and police surveillance to open up banks in Chestnut Valley with African Americans as their primary customers. And by the early twentieth century, at least fifty percent of all black owned businesses in Chestnut Valley were paid for with money acquired through Chinese money lenders.⁶³

This kind of intersection between Chinese immigrants and African Americans was what Caribbean American journalist Roi Ottley observed during the 1930s and 1940s, with some of the Chinese living among the black residents of New York City's Harlem neighborhood doing so because of "residential restrictions...[due to their belonging] to the low-income group."⁶⁴ They would eventually build up a small part of Lenox Avenue to house Chinese import and grocery stores and spend their time off in black clubs and entertainment venues, "even stomping the lindy hop at the Savoy

⁶² Huping Ling, "'Hop Alley': Myth and Reality of the St. Louis Chinatown, 1860s-1930s," *Journal of Urban History* 28:2 (2002): 188.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 201-202.

⁶⁴ Roi Ottley, *New World A-Coming': Inside Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), 53.

Ballroom.”⁶⁵ Others joined “Negro organizations” like the Elks lodge and attended “Negro churches” with a few communing in the Peace Kingdoms of Father Divine who was something of a religious cult leader, driving around “the longest automobile in Harlem” and adorning his outfits “with a stickpin made of a shiny five-dollar gold piece.”⁶⁶

There were also a number of Chinese merchants in Harlem whose families included black wives and mixed race children much like the few Chinese on the West Coast whose marriages “seem to have been successful and incidentally to have produced some beautiful children.”⁶⁷ Hardly ever expressed anywhere in Chinese American history, it was a romantic inclination Chinese Angelino Harry Lem couldn’t seem to resist according to an oral history interview conducted with his sister. During the 1930s, Harry had dated a series of African American women because, as his sister remarked, “Harry loved black women.” Of course, his dating preference “quietly abhorred” their mother especially when Harry would bring the women over for dinner.⁶⁸

Romantic encounters and the family relationships that ensued were not the only types of relationships experienced by Chinese and African Americans. In the South where a social and economic culture of domestic servitude placed black women in the role of caregiver to white families, some southern Chinese families included black domestics creating family arrangements that intersected the illusion of love with the reality of labor.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 53-54.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁸ Allison Varzally, “Romantic Crossings: Making love, Family, and Non-Whiteness in California, 1925-1950,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 23:1 (2003): 9.

The hired domestic usually did all the cooking, cleaning, and the majority of the childrearing. It was a job that was “low-paid [and came with]...low social status and few guaranteed fringe benefits.”⁶⁹ Typically the domestic was an older African American woman who was invited to live in the family’s household indefinitely, thus becoming part of the family while inhabiting a subordinate role, always at the beck and call of family members.



Negro domestic servant. Atlanta, Georgia, May 1939.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Bonnie T. Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race & Class: An Exploration of Work & Family Among Black Female Domestic Servants* (New York: Garland, 1994), 4.

⁷⁰ In this image, a middle aged African American domestic observes a white baby girl put in her care. The baby appears to be eating and, at least for the camera, the domestic’s eyes are solely on the child, leaving the dirty dishes piled in the sink as a chore to be finished later. The domestic wears a modest and plain dark colored dress under her apron leading one to believe she has just recently been cooking. The window to the left appears to set this scene at evening time or night leading one to wonder where the rest of the family is. In Chinese families in the South, those who could afford to hire a domestic servant most likely expected the same kind of labor performed as white southern families. However, as far as the realm of childrearing, it is unclear as to whether or not southern Chinese families employed black women as nursemaids or allowed them to act as secondary mothers to their children.

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In 2000, interviewee Luck Wing, a Mississippi Delta Chinese, spoke with scholar John Thornell, and recounted the reason for his brother's move from the South to Southern California. Wing's brother had taken his family along with the family's African American maid out to Clarksdale for some ice cream but were denied service on account of the maid. This simple yet powerful gesture of racial rejection in the intolerably racist climate of the South had angered and embarrassed Wing's brother so much that he and the family moved to Los Angeles.⁷¹ No further mention was made in regard to whatever happened to the maid.

Considering that history finds many different people meeting at various political, economic, social, racial, and cultural crossroads, coming at one another with different intentions, some asserting power and dominance while others are forced to respond with agency and resistance against their descent into powerlessness, it is no surprise that Chinese immigrants would interact and intermarry with nonwhite people especially since they were considered and subsequently classed as a race apart from whites throughout all of the nineteenth and much of the first half of the twentieth centuries.

That at some point beginning in the nineteenth century, Chinese immigrants began to collectively understand the loaded meaning of being colored in America, an understanding that was solidified as factual knowledge and a reason to desire a better classification in the twentieth, should come as no surprise either. Because in the moment that Chinese immigrants understood the association between colored and black

⁷¹ John Thornell, "Struggle for Identity in the Most Southern Place on Earth: The Chinese in the Mississippi Delta," *Chinese America: History & Perspectives* 1:1 (2003): 65-66.

and recognized it to be the most socially inferior place in the American racial landscape, many began to walk away, becoming estranged with black and other nonwhite Americans who they saw as the source of the problem rather than pointing a finger at white supremacy and domination.

At the same time, many Chinese were using their knowledge of American racial order to manipulate and permeate aggressively policed national, racial, and social class borders in order to move in between the United States and China, Chinese and American, citizen and immigrant. This would become an embarrassment to American immigration officials and all others upon realizing they had been duped, revealing the failings of a supposed foolproof system of racial classification created to control the movement and actions of nonwhite bodies.

In the next chapter, I analyze how Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans both subversively used race and racial passing in order to move less detected among both white and nonwhite bodies, revealing a level of agency, imagination, and power in navigating the complicated and at times violent American racial terrain.

Chapter 2: Looking Chinese and Other Racial Tricks: Race

Passing and Ambiguity in the Shaping of Early Chinese

American Identity

My father had never paused at two water fountains
And asked a white man which he should drink from,
And never told his children what the answer had been.

– Adrienne Su, *Sanctuary*

It was the simple and desperate idea of a young Chinese immigrant woman, alienated and disowned from her family and living in the peripheries of both black and Chinese America: to force me into the loud keys of a piano and hope the classical music might rub off and pull my thick curly hair into two straight braids, sending me into the world embarrassed of my roots. I don't think she realized what it would do to me, her only hope being that somehow, through merit and politeness, I could fool the rest of the world and avoid the symbol of my own dark skin which her Chinese family, my relatives, considered with silence and shame.

My mother groomed me from childhood to avoid being too loud in public, to limit my gestures and remain passive in a world full of men, to privilege discipline and softness over dancing and black music, and to ignore with some level of revulsion the sound of black men calling me with their teeth. She felt that it might save me if I could pass as a nice little Chinese girl—obedient, quiet, respectful, and polite with no dark corners. Because on the other side of that lived my mother's very real immigrant fear

of the loud purple images she saw on the television screen of black murderers and rapists, black poverty and aggression.

But my sisters and I were nothing like our Chinese mother. Instead, we sweat like men, grew hair in awkward places, and held no concern for the dark way the sun would mark us and lead to the supposed black ruin of our future and phenotype. I most of all would gravitate to black music and dance, discontinuing my piano lessons and walking straight into the wide teeth and flat mouths of black men all around me. There was no way that race, and more specifically blackness, and its many meanings would not find its way into our family, no way my mother could prevent it from chewing through the careful identities she had constructed for us.

In this same way, race found its way into the lives of many early Chinese immigrants, some of whom used racial passing either temporarily or permanently to manipulate the existing racial order so that they could travel a little more freely in the United States, establishing home, wealth, family, and business. Arriving at an understanding of race would be one more leg of the journey for new immigrants who had to learn quick that depending on one's racial positioning in the United States, certain privileges would be either granted or rescinded with the latter occurring far more than the former.

I suppose this is how my mother came to see her marriage to an African American man and the birth of her three mixed race children: that we were all extensions that bound her to blackness, a racial categorization that sat on her immigrant imagination full of hope and white middle class American dreams and ripped the feathers out of it.

In this chapter, I look at race passing as a tool used by both Chinese immigrants and mixed race Chinese Americans to pass back and forth through national borders and live a life in which racial fabrications could get them beyond existing racist conditions and grant them lives in which they could live relatively undisturbed in racially mixed neighborhoods, acquire better jobs, and join certain communities, churches, social organizations of their choosing.

Popularly and historically recognized in the United States as a way for nonwhite people to gain certain social and material privileges meant only for whites at the risk of family and community estrangement, race passing or choosing to remain racially ambiguous has also worked as a way for some nonwhite individuals to secure a degree of everyday normalcy and dignity outside of the constant violence of racism.

My mother never had to pass as anything other than an immigrant through customs, her mother having come to the United States before her and sponsoring all of the children through family reunification. But as a new citizen in America she would have to grapple with both old and new knowledge about race, arriving with white longing, black fear, and aching over her own torn leather suitcase still smelling of beef and rice.



The author's mother at a Burmese house party in California. Date unknown, courtesy of the author.

What would follow, the half black kids and her effort to pass on what she knew of being Chinese, would be her second hard lesson about race in America. The point though is that she knew the language of race in America even before arriving here, even before attempting and failing in English.

That so many Chinese during the nineteenth century were able and ready to manipulate and test the limits of racial phenotype in their quest for residency, citizenship, material comfort, and freedom reveals not only the negotiable nature of race in the United States but also that a sense of racial knowledge existed beyond American borders.

As humiliating and exhausting as it was being an immigrant seeking entry, having to undergo repeated interrogation about identity, trade, and character and stand exposed

during physical examination by white physicians looking for signs of illness and degeneracy, it remained necessary for United States immigration officials to stay vigilant and guard the gates, maintaining a sense of order to the mass of new, foreign bodies attempting to enter the country.

The interrogations, conducted by white American immigration officials armed with a hired Chinese interpreter, were persistent and designed to trap the immigrant in his own uncertainty. The tricky phrasing and confusing cross examination was meant to try the person's memory and the smallest detail between the answer of a husband and his wife could see one or both on a return passage to China.

Clearance came after the outcome of each case while the wait in the meantime could last for weeks or months or years leaving Chinese men, women, and children sitting in detention on San Francisco's Angel Island Immigration Station. Those who were denied entry were made to board the next outbound ship with a few desperate enough to run, fleeing the city or state, and risking prosecution like Wong Yuk who absconded from his fate in 1912.

DD889

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF POLICE
Bureau of Identification

\$20.00 REWARD



WONG YUK (Chinese)

WONG YUK, (Chinese) age 27 years; height 5 feet 7½ inches; weight 165 pounds; large scar over right ear in hair; front tooth upper jaw broken.

This man was ordered deported and placed on board Steamship Chiyo Maru for that purpose.

He escaped from the steamer just prior to sailing Saturday, August 31, 1912.

If located arrest and wire me, or U. S. Immigration Authorities, or notify any Southern Pacific Agent.

Dated, San Francisco, September 2, 1912. D. A. WHITE,
Chief of Police

PERNAO PUB. CO. 753 MARKET ST.

A reward in the amount of \$20.00 was offered by the San Francisco Chief of Police for the capture of Wong Yuk, a Chinese man who absconded deportation while boarding the steamship Chiyo Maru, September 2, 1912.

[The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, F870.C5.Y9 1912]

Prior to 1912, the swell of Chinese immigrants arriving in the United States had already reached a breaking point which ruptured into a national public outcry against the entry and presence of all Chinese on American soil. This also led to the exacerbation of racial fictions surrounding the Chinese—that they were heathens; that

they were ugly; that they were unhygienic; that they ate rats or worse; that they loved their opium; that they were murderous highbinders; that they forced young girls, both Chinese and white, into prostitution; that they had no souls; that they worshipped many gods; that they didn't mind living in squalid cramped quarters with other Chinese; that they spoke crazy bird talk, always squawking; that they were addicted to gambling; that they were easily expendable and that when they died, the Christian God of white Americans did not cry—which helped make them undesirable citizens in the popular American imagination.⁷²

It was the Chinese—a horde of colored and backward immigrants who were willing to work for lower wages, putting the American man out of his job and posing a threat to white American morality—that needed to be fixed. And so the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibiting all new ethnic Chinese from entering the country and making it nearly impossible for those Chinese who were once admitted but left for China to

⁷² The Chinese as heathens: “A Heathen Festival,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1872; “Converted Heathens,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1874. As ugly and unhygienic: “Chinese As A Nuisance,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1880; Philip P. Choy et al., *Coming Man: 19th Century American Perceptions of the Chinese* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 102; Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 42. As eating vermin: Philip P. Choy et al., *Coming Man: 19th Century American Perceptions of the Chinese* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 154. As opium lovers: “With the Opium-Smokers,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1880; Diana L. Ahmad, “Opium Smoking, Anti-Chinese Attitudes, and the American Medical Community, 1850-1890,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 1:2 (2000): 53-68. As murderous highbinders: “Chinese Highbinders Make Threats,” *New York Times*, June 10, 1892. As engaging in white slavery: Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the Century New York City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 85-89. As being idolaters and worshipping many gods: “A Chinese Joss House: What a Chinese Heathen Said,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1877; “A Chinese Joss-House,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1877. As preferring to live in squalid conditions: Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 20-35. As speaking an undecipherable language: “Pigeon English: A Curious Oriental Patois,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1875. As being compulsive gamblers: George M. Blackburn and Sherman L. Ricards, “The Prostitutes and Gamblers of Virginia City, Nevada: 1870,” *Pacific Historical Review* 48:2 (1979): 239-258; Ivan Light, “From Racketeers to Restaurateurs,” *Mankind: The Magazine of Popular History* 5:10 (1976): 8-10, 52-53. As being easily expendable: Najia Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 83; R. Scott Baxter and Rebecca Allen, “Life within the Woolen Mills Chinatown, San Jose,” in *The Chinese in America: A History From Gold Mountain to the New Millennium*, ed. Susie Lan Cassel (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002), 383.

seek reentry was passed in 1882.⁷³ Despite this, many Chinese continued their attempts to enter or reenter the country under even higher levels of intense scrutiny and surveillance.

This is where racial passing enters into the story, with some Chinese immigrants paying or relying on human smugglers and other connected Chinese to help them get across the appropriate border and into the United States, donning costumes that racially reinvented Chinese men as African Americans, Mexicans, or First Nations people. To not do so would risk being too easily seen like three Chinese men hidden in a boxcar from Canada.

⁷³ Prior to 1882, the evolution of “the legal definition of ‘white’ and the rule of racial unassimilability” worked to form a racialized framework for either granting or denying citizenship. So while eastern European immigrants were viewed as “undesirable races” by American nativists, their classification as “white persons” always held them eligible to citizenship. See Mae Ngai, “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924,” *The Journal of American History* 86:1 (1999): 81.



A Chicago Daily News photograph of Chinese men who were found in boxcar at 52nd Street in Chicago, Illinois. All three were attempting to enter the United States illegally from Canada, 1909. [Chicago Daily News negatives collection, DN-0006946. Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society.] Still, not every concealed body promised undetected entry. And it was only a matter of time before United States immigration officials began to put the pieces together,

drawing up detailed investigations of human smugglers and their practices of dressing up immigrants.

At least one account reported in the *Buffalo Times* in 1904 mentions white human traffickers from Canada bringing in Chinese who were passed off as First Nations aboriginal people clothed in “Indian garb” and carrying “a basket of sassafras” while traveling by small boat. This would parallel the operation of Chinese smuggler José Chang who was based in Guaymas, Mexico and brought in Chinese illegally through the southern border.

Before being discovered in 1907 by American officials, Chang had been dressing up Chinese as Mexicans, removing their queues by shaving their heads or styling the hair proper and putting them into “picturesque Mexican dress.” He would then prepare them for the United States, by issuing them fake documents and teaching them a few phrases in Spanish. One American immigration official, Marcus Braun, commented that it was hard even for him to “distinguish these Chinamen from Mexicans.”⁷⁴

Despite the ongoing investigation, Chinese men continued to pass into the United States from Mexico but with an upgraded cover which was blown in 1914 when a Pullman porter reported two Chinese men dressed as Mexican women attempting to slip into Los Angeles from Calexico, California.⁷⁵ They would also try to slip in from the southern border into the American South as was noted in the correspondence between an immigration inspector and the Commissioner General of Immigration in 1911.

⁷⁴ Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 161-162.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

The inspector, stationed in Mobile, Alabama, detailed an illegal smuggling operation which brought in Chinese men from Mexico disguised “as negroes.” It was suspected that a Chinese man by the name of “Crooked Face” who lived in Mobile was behind the scheme, passing off illegal Chinese as blacks when paid to do so.⁷⁶

In an interesting juxtaposition, the racial experiences of mixed race Chinese American men, women, and children during the immigration period and the decades that followed were at times fraught with the same racial surveillance and restrictions experienced by their unmixed Chinese immigrant kin. But due to the ambiguous nature of their racial phenotype, many mixed race Chinese Americans were able to experience significant levels of personal freedom when it came to enrolling in predominately white schools, attaining jobs, doing business, traveling overseas, marrying non-Chinese, and joining either Chinese or white American church communities and social circles.

Of course, these freedoms became limited when faced with particular regional or institutional racisms directed toward all non-whites. And without question, the experiences of those who had one white parent almost always differed than those with a parent who was black.

With some historic sources, public records, and oral testimonies shedding light on the fact of interracial intimacy and sex between Chinese immigrants and other nonwhite Americans, much of the major writing being done on Chinese American history still maintains that racism, legal restrictions, and personal choice dictated the sexual and romantic decision of early Chinese immigrant men to either satisfy themselves by

⁷⁶ Ibid., 162.

frequenting Chinese prostitutes or living lonely and celibate lives in segregated bachelor communities until death and repatriation to China.⁷⁷

Indeed there were those who made up the merchant class, an elite and selected few who were able to dodge immigration laws and bring their wives and children into the country but the majority were not so lucky, and if the history that's been written has got it right, these men never married, never reproduced, only returned home posthumously as an assortment of bones.



A Chinese funeral in Colma, California, 1903.⁷⁸

[The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. BANC PIC 1986.039--AX]

⁷⁷ Noticeably absent from the scholarship on early Chinese in the United States is the mention of same-sex relations and relationships between Chinese immigrant men.

⁷⁸ Note the food offering and joss sticks being tended to a man and little boy crouched on the ground. The exhumation and repatriation of bones back to China after the burial of a deceased person was frequently practiced in California until the late nineteenth century when laws such as the one passed in 1878 called “An Act to Protect Public Health from Infection Caused by Exhumation and Removal of the Remains of Deceased Persons” requiring a permit for body exhumations made it difficult for many Chinese to continue traditional funerary practices.

To ask me, I would tell you that this story, told as the whole story, is a lie. I knew my family was not the only one, not the only post-Civil Rights pioneer experiment of what would spring from the Chinese almanac between the mating of the Horse and the Cock. And it would be crazy to believe this anyway since not all the Chinese who arrived during the earliest Gold Rush years were men and not all of the Chinese male immigrants who arrived were satisfied with masturbation or bachelorhood.

Take the case of laundry owner Quong Wah whose attempted marriage made the local papers in September of 1898 in Utah after his non-Chinese bride to be's physical appearance came into question. The couple's attempt to obtain a marriage license was immediately declined by Deputy County Clerk George Blair after it was suspected that Dora Harris was a white woman. Unbeknownst or at least not fully believed by those whites who objected to the marriage, Harris identified as mixed race, her mother being "French Creole" and her father being "half Irish and half negro."⁷⁹

Following the deputy county clerk's refusal to issue a marriage license, Wah sent for the unofficial Chinatown spokesperson, a merchant by the name of Quong Chung Yuen to act as a go-between to try to convince the deputy whose issue stood with whether he could "legally issue a license to the Chinaman and the girl whose complexion is that of a Caucasion."⁸⁰ However, it is doubtful that the issue of marriage between Quong Wah and Dora Harris was ever resolved and no further newspaper accounts exist to tell us how the story ends.

Because of the possibility of legal prosecution or outside interference, other interracial couples, especially those in which the female partner was white, did all that

⁷⁹ Patrick Q. Mason, "The Prohibition of Interracial Marriage in Utah, 1888-1963," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 76 (2008): 108.

⁸⁰ Michael Lansing, "Race, Space, and Chinese Life in Late-Nineteenth-Century Salt Lake City," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 72:3 (2004): 225.

they could to prevent too much public scrutiny into their private lives. For couples in which the female partner was nonwhite, there was little concern with much of the scrutiny coming from whites who lived with a sense of racial privilege and superiority from birth and believed that whiteness and white women in particular should be protected from the racial denigration of too much close contact with nonwhite men.

Still, the evidence speaks for itself, and anti-miscegenation laws or not, Chinese men did marry and cohabit with white women. And no better evidence is there than the presence of mixed race Chinese persons with some form of white ancestry who show up occasionally in Chinese American history and become entangled in the racial, political, and social moments of that particular era.

Lawrence Klindt Kentwell, a law student at Columbia University who did business in Honolulu, Hawaii, had made frequent international trips, traveling first-class by ship during the late 1890s and early 1900s, entering through both West Coast and East Coast seaports with very little qualms from immigration officials. He appeared in the photograph of his passport “a light-skinned, neatly groomed young man in suit and tie and hairstyle consistent with white American middle-class norms.”

However in February of 1904 upon his return from the Philippines to Hawaii, Honolulu, immigration official Robert Brown confronted Kentwell, demanding that he show documentation just like any other Chinese who would have been entering into American territory. The incident had embarrassed Kentwell who after straightening out his citizenship with Brown, wrote a letter to the President at the time, Theodore Roosevelt, as well as the Immigration Commissioner-General, arguing that despite

being born to a Chinese mother, “I was born in British territory and under the law of nations, I am English, the Exclusion Act notwithstanding.”

It is possible though that it was not his racial ancestry alone but his dealings with local Chinese in Hawaii—according to Brown, Kentwell fraternized often in Honolulu’s Chinese community where he was known as Kam Duck Won—that read as suspicious to immigration officials.⁸¹

Similarly in 1904, the racial ancestry of Mrs. Riggs, the wife of U.S. Marine Corps officer J. Morton Riggs, was called into question upon disembarking the steam ship she had sailed in on, first-class like her fellow white passengers. A wealthy Hawaiian resident of mixed race white and Chinese parentage, Mrs. Riggs was detained by immigration officials in San Francisco who disregarded her “conventional American gown” and the fact that she possessed “no trace of the Asiatic in her features” and still proceeded to interrogate her. After having her paperwork examined and proving her identity, Mrs. Riggs was eventually allowed to go on her way.⁸²

With mixed race African American and Chinese marriages and offspring, things were a little bit trickier due to existing anti-black racism which prohibited African Americans from equal access to housing, education, healthcare, legal representation, and leisure. Yet status through marriage to a New York City Chinese restaurant owner overrode the potential speculation of racial ancestry in the case of twenty-four year old Olga Claudine Chin. Chin, who had left Trinidad for the United States in 1921 with her young daughter, was observed by the American Consul in Trinidad, H.D. Baker, as appearing “only partly Chinese, being mostly of colored race,” but because her

⁸¹ Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates*, 79-80.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 81.

husband's assets were valued over \$20,000, she was eligible for a Section 6 certificate and therefore was able to land with her daughter relatively easily.⁸³

Both seen as marginalized figures in the American racial landscape, Chinese immigrant men and black or mixed race women drew little attention when they courted, married, or created families. It was their children however, who, occupying a third racial space, had to negotiate life in the margins of both the immigrant and black worlds of their parents. In their youth, these children would often be the subject of curious observations over their phenotype and racial place only to have to face more complicated and critical racial decisions as adults.

In his book *From Negro to Caucasian; or How the Ethiopian is Changing His Skin* which was published in 1929, Louis Fremont Baldwin recalled the story of “a very fine appearing colored woman” and her Chinese fruit merchant husband who raised their five children with no knowledge of their being “Chinese or Negroes.” In Fremont Baldwin's opinion, the children were “typical American brunettes” with the two boys appearing “handsome” and the three girls sitting as “perfect beauties.”⁸⁴

A little more typical in the opinion of looks and in regional proximity to one another were the children born to Chinese men and their Mexican wives. According to Clarence Yip Yeu, a Los Angeles native who worked as a houseboy in white homes alongside other Chinese and African American men after graduating high school in the late 1920s, Yip Yeu noticed that while African Americans and Chinese “got along nice...[because African Americans] respected Chinese more than the white,” he saw fewer marital unions occurring between blacks and Chinese than those between

⁸³ Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 157.

⁸⁴ Louis Fremont Baldwin, *From Negro to Caucasian; or How the Ethiopian is Changing His Skin* (San Francisco: Pilot Publishing Company, 1929), 20.

Mexicans and Chinese. Among the reasons Yip Yeu speculated for the higher marriage rates among the latter, he concludes that Mexican Chinese children “don’t look so bad...so different.”⁸⁵

As they got older, many children born to parents who were Chinese and African Americans began to tangle with more than casual remarks made about the differentness of their racial appearance. Some began to see the material privileges associated with race and devised ways to alter the truth around their own racial identities, either withholding the fact of their African ancestry, cutting off ties with relatives who might give them away, or attempting to restructure the entirety of their lives.

This was the case in places like Charleston, South Carolina where, during the late eighteenth and earlier part of the nineteenth centuries, such a small number of Chinese existed across the entire state that many of them simply chose to interact and intermarry across black and white racial lines. However, as the Chinese community grew and racial lines began to harden, so did the ambitions of a select few. One community member in particular, Chung Lum, was most likely aware of the dangers of race passing but still chose to do so anyway.

It was practically common knowledge that those who trespassed across racial lines often risked public exposure, legal punishment, or reactive violence in event that the true nature of one’s racial identity, or rather, one’s blackness, was found out. But on the other side of that risk, possibly the side Lum was betting on, was the room for acquiring more power, material wealth, and status than was ever allowed to any

⁸⁵ Allison Varzally, “Romantic Crossings: Making love, Family, and Non-Whiteness in California, 1925-1950,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 23:1 (2003): 27.

Chinese or black man especially in the South. And so Chung Lum, the son of a Chinese Charleston laundryman began to reinvent himself.

As a boy, Chung Lum had been sent to a private school intended for upper middle class black youth in Charleston, South Carolina. After graduating, he would meet and eventually marry his future wife, a light skinned black woman who could physically pass as white. Their coupling resulted in children who had the appearance of those mixed with Chinese and white with no amount of noticeable black features that might have betrayed them. This played an especially important role in their acceptance to attend Courtenay School, a white Charleston public school, sometime in 1947.⁸⁶

Everything seemed fine until April of 1948 when Chung Lum's children were suddenly expelled from school after school officials received an anonymous tip that some of Lum's relatives were attending Immaculate Conception, a black school. Initially puzzling, it was this incident that began to unravel the carefully constructed racial lives of Chung Lum and his family who had purposely moved away from their racial past in order to strategically live as close to white as possible even attending Our Lady of Mercy, a white church, while relatives attended the predominately black Centenary United Methodist Church.⁸⁷

Nothing detrimental would come to members of Chung Lum's family aside from public shame and the hard reality of being unable to escape someone always watching, always knowing, ready to call you out. Yet, the risk of racial misinterpretation between black and white in the American South and the potential

⁸⁶ Jian Li, "A History of the Chinese in Charleston," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 99:1 (1998): 57.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

consequence of either waking up and seeing another sunrise or tasting the dirt in the ground was well worth it to some who lived on the racial periphery.

In the Mississippi Delta where Chinese laborers were recruited to work on cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco plantations in the late 1800s, race passing across heavily segregated racial lines similarly became a fact of life for certain interracial married and mixed race Chinese.

First thought of by whites as an easy replacement for freed blacks who had become difficult to control, the South's changing economy eventually swapped human labor for machine leaving the Chinese replacement and freed blacks to fend for themselves. Many left the area, migrating elsewhere but those who stayed fell into the role of customer and seller, with the majority of Mississippi Delta Chinese men going into the profession of small town grocer.

Of the many Chinese grocery stores in the South, there was the Joe Gow Nue & Co. Grocery and Meat Market which was one of the bigger Chinese-owned enterprises in the Mississippi Delta and had multiple branches. The largest store, the No. 1 in Greenville, Mississippi, had Arlee Hen, born to a Chinese father and an African American mother, employed as a clerk. The following image was taken in 1939 of the Joe God Nue & Co. store in Leland, Mississippi.



The front of the Joe Gow Nue and Co. Grocery and Meat Market in Leland, Mississippi, 1939. Note the number of African American customers inside and in front of the store. Chinese grocery stores not only allowed African American customers the opportunity to shop for goods, they also served as sites of leisure and information exchange.

[Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-052450-D

(b&w film neg.)]

A normal happening in many of these grocery stores was the hiring of black help, usually a woman who would clean, stock, and tend to customers. Perhaps equally normal due to the lack of Chinese women in the area and the laws barring sexual contact with white women was the frequency of which these work arrangement would eventually turn to sexual arrangements, leading to pregnancy or marriage between employer and employee.

During these Jim Crow times of strict racial segregation and rampant public displays of anti-black racism, interracial couples and their children were sometimes afforded small luxuries like being allowed to sit in the “whites only” section of the drive-in movies or in restaurants. But for the most part, racial lines were constantly enforced and anyone from the South knew better than to get caught drinking out of the white fountain while black or married to one.

An elderly Greenville resident described an event in which the racial discovery of one Delta Chinese man’s wife in Shaw, Mississippi led to greater consequences for the local Chinese community:

Around 1912 to 1915, I don’t remember exactly, a Chinese man named Quon took ill and went to Kings Daughter Hospital in Greenville. You see, there was two Kings Daughter hospitals. One was white and located on Arnold Street, and the other was colored, located on Alexander Street. Both were private. Quon went to the white hospital—those were the only two hospitals around at the time, and they were private. A colored woman came to see her husband at the hospital. You know, she gave his name and everything. The whites kicked them out! From that time on, things got worse, and the Chinese couldn’t even get a haircut sometimes. Even at the Italian barbershop!⁸⁸

Of course things got worse before the Delta Chinese figured out how to make them better. But once they did, once they realized that the further away they sat from blacks the more distance and room they had to make gradual social gains, they made the

⁸⁸ Robert Seto Quan and Julian B. Roebuck, *Lotus Among the Magnolias: The Mississippi Chinese* (University Press of Mississippi, 1982), 45.

appropriate moves toward white southern Americanness, a move that would result in the ostracizing of those Chinese who refused to break ties with blacks.

In these times of community restructuring, certain Mississippi Delta residents would be gradually excluded such as one woman who had come to worship at a Chinese mission but was quietly turned away by some of the congregation and told never to return. When asked why this was done to the woman who did have some African ancestry but was able to pass as full Chinese and was married to a Chinese man, one Delta Chinese resident replied, “They didn’t want the whites to know she had Hok-Guey [African American] blood in her...it was bad for them to be associated with her.”⁸⁹

This was also the case in 1947, when a young boy whose father was Chinese and whose mother was African American and Chinese was expelled from a white Catholic school for misconduct. His parents tried enrolling him in a nearby white public school, confident that he would be accepted but after a meeting with school administration, the boy was refused. It would be revealed later that local Mississippi Delta Chinese leaders had approached school officials and told them that the boy was not “pure Chinese,” provoking the school’s decision to refuse him. Traumatized and angered by the whole ordeal, the family left the state.⁹⁰

Once Mississippi Delta Chinese community members began rejecting certain individuals with known African ancestry from community functions, schools, churches, and other institutions, many mixed race people were left with the option of leaving the area or denying their African ancestry in an attempt to stay a part of the community.

⁸⁹ Jeannie Rhee, “In Black and White: Chinese in the Mississippi Delta,” *Journal of Supreme Court History: Yearbook of the Supreme Court Historical Society* 117 (1994): 127.

⁹⁰ James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Illinois: Waveland Press reprint, 1988), 76-77.

Some did both, like a handful of men who were known back home in the Delta to be part black but upon leaving the region and joining the military, served as “Chinese American” in white infantry units during the Second World War. Had they disclosed their racial identities in full, they would have been assigned to segregated military units made up entirely of colored soldiers.⁹¹

In thinking of these Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans and how each individual crafted or imagined his or her racial identity somewhere between white, black, Chinese, or other in the United States, an interesting question to pose is why we in America are hardly ever given the opportunity to see them imagining their racial selves as something other than the popular and standard image we are given? Beyond that, how have the complicated racial identities of both Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans bled into the choices they have made regarding sexual and romantic relationships with other white and nonwhite Americans?

In the next chapter I begin to explore not only the circumstances surrounding and historical moments during which Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans courted, wed, and created families with black and mixed race women but also how Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans engaged in sex and constructed family despite not having access to Chinese women or the right to white women.

⁹¹ Ibid., 142.

Chapter 3: Between the Sheets and Nine Months Later:

Immigrant Men, Nonwhite Sex, and the Making of the (Other)

Chinese American Family

They are seen in different
parts of town scanning windows
for something of interest to
pass the evening time. Unmarried
or married it is hard to tell
when these Chinese men wear no
wedding rings and show no sign
of being in or out of love. I
saw a man waiting for a bus
tonight. Womanless.

—Frances Chan Chung, *Crazy Melon*

Despite being legally prevented from freely moving between lives in China and labor opportunities in the United States and taking part in such civil liberties as marrying or engaging in sex with women of their choice, Chinese immigrant men during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found ways to not only have broad sexual lives with a wide variety of women but to create families. This however is where the confusion begins as much of the discourse that has occurred around the topic of sex and

early Chinese America seems to be limited to cribbed prostitutes and lonesome, asexual men.

When treated together in American popular culture, African Americans and Chinese were often depicted as a seemingly happy couple en route to wed or staged together in scenes of supposed domestic bliss.

In a postcard image titled “Honeymoon of the Chinee and the Coon,” a heavysset African American woman dressed in a head rag and evoking the stereotypical mammy figure while smoking a pipe stands close to her supposed “Chinee” husband who is dressed in a laborer’s uniform: hat, coat, trousers, and boots. A young Chinese boy appears to the left of them, leaning against the wall of their house, and adds to an unusual family portrait in San Francisco Chinatown’s highbinder quarters.

Perhaps the man is himself a highbinder. Perhaps he isn’t. Regardless, the three figures in the postcard not only signal deviance—Chinese criminality and nonwhite interracial sex—but signal family as well with the black woman bound to the Chinese man romantically through the text “Honeymoon of the Chinee and the Coon,” and the boy (his son?) standing close to the newlyweds. Still, one would be moved to question whether this scene was yet another Chinatown scene that was most likely staged and produced for the consumption of whites as most images of black and Chinese people during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were.



Postcard titled "Honeymoon of the Chinee and the Coon."⁹²

[California Historical Society, San Francisco. SF Social Groups: postcards: 32817]

⁹² The image shows an African American woman, Chinese man, and young Chinese boy standing in front of a building (their home?) in the so-called Highbinder Headquarters of San Francisco Chinatown. While the nature of the black woman and Chinese man's relationship is clearly implied in the postcard's title, the actual nature of the relationship between all three persons present in this image is not so clearly readable. No date provided.

In postcards and sheet music from the nineteenth century, gross caricatures in which both were shown foolishly attempting to imitate white middle class American customs and domesticity actually reflected very real social anxieties over the “Chinese question” and the “Negro problem.”⁹³

From politicians to the everyday working man, white Americans felt that it was necessary to control the movement and growing collective threat of freed blacks and Chinese immigrants within the country. But while immigration exclusion and racial segregation laws were put into effect, both African Americans and Chinese managed to find ways around them, at least some of the times.

In the end, the least white America could do was laugh about it: *The honeymoon of the Chinese and the Coon.*

But what if we could imagine these images beyond stereotypes and racist jabs at the humanity of those who whites believed to be subhuman but in real life, as in actually having happened historically beyond the postcard image and sheet music? For those who believe it would require more than imagination, my question would be: if there were hardly enough Chinese women present in early America due to immigration restrictions aimed at the Chinese and making the gender ratio horribly unbalanced, how do we account for Chinese American families three, four, or five generations later?

⁹³ Both the “Chinese Question” and the “Negro Problem” were terms coined by white American politicians, scholars, and critics who were determined to figure out what to “do” with the Chinese and African Americans who they viewed as subhuman yet felt compelled to incorporate into the American fabric somehow. It was the incorporation part that created the “problem” in regard to blacks who most whites argued did not deserve the same freedoms, rights, and privileges as themselves but who were adamant on fighting for them. The question about the Chinese was geared toward answering to the anger of those against foreign labor competition in California. It was through this door that further questions about whether or not, like African Americans, the Chinese could be assimilated into the American fabric were also posed. Both black and Chinese problem and question were based largely on anti-Chinese and anti-black attitudes, rhetoric, and politics of the time.

Certainly these were not all descendants of Chinese merchants or those Chinese wealthy or connected enough to bribe their wives and children into the United States. And on an even more basic human level, why are we not talking about Chinese people and sex? Who did they do it with? What did it sound like? Was there a word for it in Chinese? *To fuck*. Where is the history of Chinese immigrant men expressing agency in defying a racist system meant to exploit their labor and punish their bodies, being courted to work cheaply but barred from being able to fuck or reproduce?

And in the context of looking at their relations with nonwhite people, how did existing laws prohibiting interracial sex with white women and the entry of Chinese women encourage Chinese male bodies to intersect with other brown or black bodies? Where did my family history belong in all of this so many decades later?

I would actually stumble upon the answer to many of my questions by accident during my second year as a graduate student at the University of Maryland. After settling on a topic for research, I began amassing an archive of Chinese American history, an archive that included Paul C. P. Siu's sociological study of Chinese laundrymen in 1930s Chicago which was first submitted in 1953 as a doctoral dissertation.⁹⁴ His research which would eventually become a book interested in the

⁹⁴ Seen as Siu's seminal work, historian Henry Yu would pose later that *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation* was in itself a performance, scripted to fit what his white academic mentors would find most interesting and salacious as it was understood that they valued, in a very Orientalist way, the content rather than the academic analysis of his research. And that the quoted portions of his work were purposely chosen to be included—the most bawdy, illicit conversation and observations he could take from his time as a participant observer in Chicago Chinese laundries in the 1930s. Reading Yu's interpretation makes me wonder if much of the early scholarship on Chinese American history and experience was not only a personal exercise by Chinese American scholars who felt the need to appease the Orientalist views of their white mentors by over-enunciating certain racial, social, or stereotypical representations of their Chinese American subjects but was in addition a political move in which only the "right kind" of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans (those who could assimilate into white America) got placed in the forefront for white readers, critics, and fellow academics.

social interactions of immigrant Chinese male launderers and would, at least to me, read like a very dirty soap opera in desperate need of sexual and racial deconstruction.

Because who knew Chinese men talked like this when no woman was around? Or that the institution of the Chinese laundry could serve as a site of power, where Chinese men, prevented from asserting their masculinity and sexuality in public were able to do just that in between working, taking breaks, socializing, passing important and not so important news, and shooting the shit about women?

And the way they talk so candidly about women with Siu, the observer—frequenting prostitutes, paying women at nightclubs, feeling detached from their long distance wives in China, feeling frustrated by their non-Chinese wives in the States, teasing about each other's sexual exploits, and half joking about the interracial sex and less than wholesome reputations of American born daughters of other Chinese immigrant men's—you would have a hard time crying crocodile tears for a Chinese America that supposedly began as a community of prostitutes and bachelors.

In reading Siu's book, he actually puts into conversation through notes he took from his many observations the fact that many of these Chinese immigrant men who might or might not have had wives in China, certainly did exercise agency once in America despite living in a society that worked hard to exclude them in all possible ways. And like the Chinese grocery store in the Mississippi Delta, the case of warm bodies put into close proximity in a Chinese laundry worked wonders in establishing short or long term sexual relationships between Chinese men and African American women, some of which turned into marriage proposals and families.

Preceding the Great Depression, about a hundred Chinese laundries in Chicago, Illinois were known to employ African American women who worked as hand ironers. However, during the Depression when business declined, many of these jobs were taken up by family members or countrymen of the Chinese owners.⁹⁵ Still, in the majority of the laundries Siu visited in Chicago, he found that most employed African American women who assisted with daily tasks, a few of whom had become so culturally inclined that they preferred to eat Chinese food. At one Chinese laundry a black employee had even learned how to “mark the laundry ticket, writing Chinese characters on it.”⁹⁶

It was also during his time spent as a participant observer at various laundries, that Siu began hearing rumors “that so-and-so has lived with his Negro helper, and so-and-so keeps the girl as a mistress as well as worker.”⁹⁷ This was to be the beginning of my interracial Chinese American sex study, the beginning of the next region in my map of where black and Chinese America intersect.

From Siu’s laundry room observations, the sex talk that would have been considered taboo in my family was openly discussed among the laundry’s workers. At times the workers would look on as a fellow co-worker solicited a female visitor who was known to perform sex work on the side. Sometimes they would tease each other about certain sexual encounters in which race and women’s bodies, especially black

⁹⁵ Joan S. Wang, “Race, Gender, and Laundry Work: The Roles of Chinese Laundrymen and American Women in the United States, 1850-1950,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 24:1 (2004): 82; Paul Ong further explains that the relational terms used by many Chinese immigrants in the laundry business tended to be “based on familial ties since kinship loyalty was usually the strongest and most trusted.” That being so, business partners who were either members of the same clan or who shared the same last name were usually referred to as “cousins.” See Paul Ong, “Chinese Laundries as an Urban Occupation in Nineteenth Century California,” *The Annals of the Chinese Historical Society of the Pacific Northwest* 1 (1983): 77.

⁹⁶ Paul C.P. Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 84, 263.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 263.

women's bodies, were frequently used as a racial canvas onto which the joke and the derogatory insults that followed were launched.

One incident, recorded by Siu on the evening of June 20, 1940, took place between an older Chinese traveling food vender, referred to by employees at one laundry as "Old Indian," and a laundry worker. After stopping by and exchanging a few words, "Old Indian" soon found himself the source of one of the laundry employee's taunts, the employee, Tong, making a comment about the vender's daughter, referring to her as his "sweet-little-bride-to-be." "Old Indian" responds defensively, countering with a joke of his own, about bringing Tong an old black woman instead of his daughter, the replacement of his daughter with an old black woman clearly intended as an insult:

"Ah! Here comes my future father-in-law," joked Tong with the man.

"Didn't I tell you to bring my sweet-little-bride-to-be, too?" "Old Indian" was trying to ignore Tong. The others laughed.

"Del-ka-ma!" "Old Indian" finally retorted, good humouredly, "I am going to bring you an old Negro woman, like it?"

"What is that?...So you changed your mind?" responded Tong. "All right, don't forget to bring my bride-to-be next time. *Del-nea-ma [diao nima]* (fuck your mother)...."⁹⁸

While he was there as a participant observer, standing in the corner of the laundry and watching in silence was not always on the agenda and at times Siu would engage with the men in casual workplace dialogue, informally ask them workers about their sexual lives. Their responses would vary with some of the workers volunteering

⁹⁸ Ibid., 74-75.

information on how they or someone they knew regularly frequented street walkers and where would be the best place to find sex if one was in the mood:

There are some night clubs in the “Black-Devil’s Nest” [Negro area] at Fifty-fifth and State Streets. There are two around the neighborhood. One is better than the other. I have been in both of them many times. Sometimes I just pick up black girls on the street corner. They are walking back and forth on the street, looking for a man. I would rather starve than not see a girl and have a good time.⁹⁹

This same man who would “rather starve than not see a girl and have a good time” surprisingly (or not so surprisingly) reveals to Siu that he has a wife and while he recognizes his marriage, he insightfully reveals how the exclusionary laws aimed at punishing Chinese immigrant men also punished their families in China, some of whom they would never again see:

My wife in China? Oh, she can go out and look for a lover, too. I can’t blame her. Of all the things I am doing here, I have no right to blame her if she does the same. She is also human, see. So I don’t care if she has a lover in China.¹⁰⁰

But of all the conversations referencing women, the best part of Siu’s observations was when some of these women would occasionally show up in the flesh, visiting laundries to flirt with the employees or solicit sex or money.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 276.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 267.

At the laundry in which Siu recorded having observed the playful exchanges between “Old Indian” and Tong, a mulatto woman in her twenties by the name of Dotty came by one day at 4 p.m. to look for a launderer named Lum:

LUM: Here she comes—lo-kai [sweetheart]!

DOTTY: Hello, honey. Hello [to others in the house].

PARTNER: Hello, honey. What do you want? Come to sleep with me?

[Dotty ignored partner but turned to Lum.]

DOTTY: Lum, give me five dollars, dear.

LUM: What? No money. I haven’t got it. No money.

DOTTY: Come on! Before the store closes. I want to buy some stockings and a handbag. Come on, give me the money.

LUM: Del-nea-ma! You don’t let me *del-hoy** [literally “fuck you”] and just come to get money. I haven’t got it.

DOTTY: Come on, before the stores close. Hurry up. Give me the money.

LUM: No, no money. You kiss my *lin joy** [penis] and I will give you three dollars.

DOTTY: Oh! You bad boy! What do you think I am. I’m not that kind of a girl. I’m no street walker. Kiss you...nothing! Come on, Lum.¹⁰¹

This banter would continue until Lum gave Dotty three dollars and Dotty left the laundry. She would return a little while later with a pair of boxed stockings and retreated into the back room with Lum where they were alone for about half an hour.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 267-268.

In re-reading this particular passage years after first discovering it, I realize that at the point when Lum playfully teases/negotiates that he will give Dotty the money if she performs oral sex on him, it seems that Dottie herself either knew and understood a few vulgar terms in Cantonese (*del-hoy* and *lin joy*) beforehand or is just assuming what it was that Lum was saying in Chinese.

Black women and sex workers were not always the only ones at the center of the derogatory jokes or racially vulgar references made by Chinese laundry employees. Two Chinese American sisters became the height of one afternoon conversation between Siu and four Chinese men at the laundry—Chang Ming-lung, 40, Chan Ming-hong, 44, Chan Sai-kong, 55, and Fong Fook, 60—after it was rumored that they frequently engage in sexually promiscuous behavior with black men.

The conversation begins with Ming-lung referring to one of the Chinese American sisters, Sue, as Fong Fook's daughter and teases Fook about never bringing her around to which Fook gets defensive causing Ming-lung and another man, Ming-Hong, to tease even harder:

MING-LUNG: Del-ka-ma! I told him to bring Sue, and he has never kept his promise. He said she is his daughter. Sue is his daughter, and she is pretty. Oh, I don't believe him [*laugh*].

FONG FOOK: Del-ka-ma! Go you to die. [*Qu si la*].

MING-LUNG: *Chot-chow!** [literally, "stupid as a pig"]. Is not it bad enough that she goes with black devils [Negroes]. Would you rather let the black devils have her. What about us Chinese?

MING-HONG: Del-ka-ma! She always goes to the dancing hall at Thirty-fourth Street, dancing with black devils. Both of the sisters do the same thing. This other one's name is Kitty, isn't it? You know them, don't you?

After a short digression during which it was mentioned that the father of Sue and Kitty owned a chop suey restaurant in the neighborhood, the talk became directed toward the bodies of the Chinese American sisters, sexualized by their interactions with black men, "ruined" in the perception that the super large sex organs of multiple black men was more than two young Chinese American sisters could handle:

MING-HONG: Sue is better; I heard she is very hot...

MING-LUNG: Always like to be fucked. Black devils' "big thing."

Del-ka-ma! Hers must be broken already!

MING-HONG: Oh! No [*laugh*].¹⁰²

Historian Henry Yu would figure in retrospect that much of this dirty laundry talk that Siu spent hours transcribing was a function of belonging for "lonely immigrant men, many of them old and weary from work and isolation, [and for whom] cursing was a private language of community." These very sexual conversations, jokes, and encounters, including the few I have reproduced here, not only constituted "a language of ultimate intimacy and bonding between males" but at times included same-sex references within the taunting—either questioning one's heterosexuality or masculinity—due to anxiety felt around this same "ultimate intimacy and bonding."¹⁰³

¹⁰² Ibid., 141-142.

¹⁰³ Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 169.

In using Yu's analysis, women in this context are both physically absent and constantly present, used by men working long hours in a space where women were not normally present to demarcate the appropriate heterosexual boundaries between them. But I wonder about the two Chinese sisters—Kitty and Sue—and their role in the sexually tinged banter among the laundry employees and Fong Fook. And I wonder if there was not more actually being said in Ming-Hong and Ming-Lung's crude remarks about the sisters ("Always like to be fucked."), their social proximity to African American men ("Would you rather let the black devils have her."), and what this meant to the single or married Chinese men in that laundry ("What about us Chinese?").

From this angle, what reads as gossip and jokes are actually forms of community policing by Chinese men of Chinese American womanhood, made clear by the implied ruinous consequence ("Hers must be broken already!") of the two sisters and their behavior—dancing with black men—which gets read sexually by both Ming-Hong and Ming-Lung as more than just dancing.

I pause here to wonder if this was the same assumption that was thrown at my mother when she went with my father, shamed down by the eyes of other Chinese over the speculation of her black boyfriend's "big thing." Years later, that same shame would be hurled back, slapping the black into her daughters at the punch of a father's cock at the end of a joke. Because only bad Chinese girls "go black," assuming fast reputations within their respective communities for doing so. The good ones stay out of gossip, at least they did in one elderly Mississippi Chinese woman's opinion. According to her, taking birth control pills, having sex before marriage, drinking, and

engaging in other forms of public social entertainment fell into the realm of “bad Chinese girl”:

Many of the young women who are still here in the Delta will find good Chinese boys to marry. They have remained Chinese, stayed at home, and have been good Chinese girls. Then there are some others who these days lack dignity. Some of them, you know, *san lai* [act primitive]. Some drink alcohol, and some smoke cigarettes in public. No real Chinese man would want to marry that kind of woman. Some young women even take baby pills [birth control pills] and they are not married! I can’t understand that...A Chinese woman must save her dignity, look and act like a lady, be proud to be a woman—not a man. This is the way she must follow if she is to attract a decent man. But some of the young ones have taken another path. Thank God many are still good Chinese girls and wear bras and save themselves for marriage.¹⁰⁴

For men, things were a bit different.

Womanless in the States, Chinese men of all ages often frequented nightlife venues such as clubs and taxi-dance halls seeking a sexual or social outlet. These venues offered men opportunities to engage in conversation, flirtation, and casual sex with both white and nonwhite women often in the company of other men, white and non-white, Chinese and other. In his description of a common scene in most Chicago taxi dance halls in the late 1920s, sociologist Paul Goalby Cressey writes:

The patrons are a motley crowd. Some are uncouth, noisy youths, busied chiefly with their cigarettes. Others are sleekly groomed and suave young men,

¹⁰⁴ Robert Seto Quan, *Lotus Among the Magnolias: The Mississippi Chinese* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1982), 66.

who come alone and remain aloof. Others are middle-aged men whose stooped shoulders and shambling gait speak eloquently of a life of manual toil.

Sometimes they speak English fluently. More often their broken English reveals them as European immigrants, on the way toward being Americanized. Still others are dapperly dressed little Filipinos who come together, sometimes even in squads of six or eight, and slip quietly into the entrance.¹⁰⁵

Chinese men regularly made up part of the audience at taxi dance halls and mixed nightclubs, sites rife with the opportunity for both white and nonwhite men and women to participate in leisure and desire with and alongside each other, a preference that would have been racially inaccessible and seen as dangerous had it happened anywhere else. And it was the presence of Chinese men along with the presence of other nonwhites that sometimes provoked the rage and violence of white men who felt threatened in having to share the gaze of a white woman who might just pick a Filipino or Chinese over them.

One white man justified such aggression, stating, “you have these young girls being exposed to Chinese and Japs, and Filipinos, and to those even worse among the white race.”¹⁰⁶ These attitudes, mixed with an explosive enough reason, would sometimes result in what was an act of vandalism and attempted murder on Chicago’s South Side when “whites who frequented the [Golden Lily Cage] club, owned by the Chinese,” detonated a bomb in the kitchen, perhaps to scare out (and possibly kill in the process) African American patrons who had begun frequenting the place.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Paul Goalby Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Studies in Commercialized Recreation and City Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1932), 4-5.

¹⁰⁶ Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 66.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

But where the white men failed to control the sexuality and agency of men of color in the name of protecting white female virtue, white women were clearly capable of managing their own hustle. At taxi-dance halls, establishments where white and non-white male patrons are required to pay white women a fee to dance with them, white women would typically entertain white men early on in the evening, quickly changing over to entertain the Filipino, Chinese, and other non-white men as the night wore on.

These women played the men out of their money in exchange for the illusion of sexual desire and companionship, something non-white men were willing to pay due to its forbidden nature; the romance of a white woman denied to them by law. But it was all just a game to the women, referred to as taxi dancers because of certain arrangements with the dance hall in which they were expected “to dance with any man who may choose her and to remain with him on the dance floor for as long a time as he is willing to pay the charges.”¹⁰⁸

One young woman remarked about the men who paid per dance: “Oh these Niggers (Filipinos) and ‘Chinks’ (Chinese) are just ‘fish’ to the girls.” Another taxi dancer who was covertly being interviewed by an undercover agent mentioned to him, “We mustn’t go far away. My fish might get jealous!” When asked by the agent, “What is that?”—a question regarding the term “fish”—the woman replied, “Oh, that Chinaman over there.” To which the agent inquired, “Why do you call him your ‘fish’?” She answered haughtily, “He gives me about twenty dollars every time I ask, and he only spends two evenings a week up here.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Paul Goalby Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall*, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Kevin Mumford, *Interzones*, 62-63.

Just an easy fish lured to the hook.

For their company, white women were given cigarettes, candy, sodas, and whatever else they asked for. If the men wanted to do more than dance and could afford it, Chinese and other non-whites were sometimes given the opportunity to do so in private. One agent reported having overheard a Chinese man asking a white woman to spend the rest of the night with him. This particular woman who usually charged about fifteen dollars per encounter of that nature insisted instead that he pay a higher price, a deal that would “cost him one hundred dollars,” to which the man agreed.¹¹⁰

With stories that suggest something different—immigrant men owning their own sexualities—it becomes hard imagining early Chinese men as strays, womanless and loitering in Chinatown streets. But according to the dominant version, this is what they did: lived in their own manly world after having been castrated symbolically and literally from any kind of sexual or domestic participation in white American society and divorced from wives and families in China, left to fight over the few Chinese women made it past the gates, many of them prostitutes, some of them not.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 63.



Men in Chinatown reading bulletins posted street side on the walls of buildings.¹¹¹

[The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. BANC PIC 1905.17500 v.29:29--AX]

In reading paid or unpaid sexual encounters Chinese men had with white and nonwhite women into the discourse, we begin to see a reshaping of this largely false stereotype of asexual Chinese men who in pursuing and having sex with American women, defied both sexual and racial exclusion.

Beyond that, accounts of—if not entirely blissful—functioning marriages and family lives with nonwhite women give us an alternate picture of family in early Chinese America. And returning back to the institution of the Chinese laundry, many

¹¹¹ These bulletins, written in Chinese, often relayed news from China. In many of the images of Chinatown, women are noticeably absent with their photographic absence being read as a reflection of their physical absence in major Chinatowns and smaller Chinese quarters. But some photographers—most of them white and male—chose solely to photograph the men of Chinatown, and so purposely avoided taking photographs of women, children, and the elderly.

interracial relationships first developed between the washing and folding of other people's dirty garments.

In his thesis submitted in 1943, Catholic University graduate student William Edward Hogan interviewed a number of District of Columbia couples who either met or resided together with their children at or within the vicinity of a Chinese laundry and whose marriages had occurred between the years 1938 and 1943. Initially faced with difficulty locating informants, Hogan went through persons "whose business brings him in contact with the Chinese families" and found particular assistance from a District wholesale salesman who dealt with Chinese merchants.¹¹² Then it was a run around Chinatown to find couples to study.

In a community started by men, many of whom ran hand laundries, the sight of a Chinese woman in the District of Columbia Chinatown would be a rarity with an article in the *Evening Star* on January 8, 1898 reporting no women. Following reports in 1908 and then in 1927 would mention a handful of women never exceeding fifteen.¹¹³

It was in this climate that William Edward Hogan conducted his research detailing the intimate family lives of Chinese working men in the District, many of whom ran their laundries as partnerships and the majority operating with at least one hired African American woman as help.

Going through the extensive online digital collection at the Library of Congress, I was able to find one such example of a Chinese laundry with hired black help taken in 1942 by famed African American photographer and writer Gordon Parks. In the

¹¹² William Edward Hogan, "A Sociological Study of Interracial Marriage by the Chinese in the District of Columbia," (M.A. diss., Catholic University of America, 1943), 2-3.

¹¹³ Marc Fisher, "If the Price Is Right, We Sell," *The Washington Post Magazine*, January 29, 1995.

following set of photos, one can view the interior of Johnnie Lew's laundry in the District of Columbia. The laundry, perhaps photographed because of its location under the apartment of District of Columbia charwoman, Ella Watson, an African American domestic whom Parks spent some time documenting, seems to be just like any other Chinese American laundry during this period.

In one image, the proprietor Johnnie Lew, a young handsome looking Chinese American man, is posed coolly with a cigarette in his mouth. Behind him to the right is a miniature American flag, a show of his patriotism and Americanness, while all around him are bundles and bundles of packed and wrapped parcels of laundry. Johnnie looks directly into the photograph, a gaze he is entitled to as the proud proprietor of this District of Columbia laundry.



Johnnie Lew, the owner of a Washington, D.C. laundry located under the apartment of Mrs. Ella Watson, a government charwoman, August 1942.

[Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-T01-013510-C DLC (b&w film dup. neg.)]

Not entitled to any gaze or even an identity is the figure of a black woman in the image Parks titled “Johnnie Lew’s Chinese laundry on Monday morning.” Viewers are introduced to a figure diligently ironing sheets in the back room, as useful as the constant presence of the steel washing tub which is hidden behind Johnnie Lew. And in a sense, this woman, Johnnie Lew’s employee is also hidden as we are confronted by her back and only privileged in viewing her labor while her face, any indication of her age, and name kept anonymous.



A black female employee in Johnnie Lew’s Washington, D.C. laundry, August 1942.

DLC (b&w film neg.)]

It is by her skin and her hair that one can assume that the woman is black but aside from this, viewers are led to see the woman as just another object in the laundry. For the many reasons why this woman refused to show herself to the lens of Gordon Parks's camera, I wonder if she was perhaps embarrassed of being caught, not knowing who would be looking at her photograph years or decades later or even if she had been directed by Johnnie Lew himself not to get in the way of Parks's photography.

This invisibility of the women in the lives of District Chinese men was in part what William Edward Hogan was interested in studying, curious as to why there was so much secrecy and shame around those Chinese married to non-Chinese women, especially if the women happened to be black. And it was only after finding "two gentlemen who should have a good view of the life of the Chinese here" that Hogan was given the estimated number of around 175 Chinese who were assumed to be living with a non-Chinese woman.¹¹⁴

In all, fifty-five marriages in the District were surveyed, in which a number of the wives hailed from other states, half of them having independently earned their own income before living with or marrying their current partners. Their occupational backgrounds ranged from government worker to prostitute while out of all of the Chinese male informants involved with his study, only three were employed in another field outside of restaurant or laundry work: two of them relied on an income made from gambling and the other worked as a laborer for the Capital Transit.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ William Edward Hogan, "A Sociological Study of Interracial Marriage by the Chinese in the District of Columbia," (M.A. diss., Catholic University of America, 1943), 10.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

In looking at the parts of Hogan's thesis that fall in line with my interests, there were the five marriages that consisted of a Chinese husband and a "Negro wife." These five couples lived in a black neighborhood with three of the wives having met their husbands while employed as a waitress in Chinese restaurants. Two of the other wives had worked in the same laundry as their husbands who had been their employers.¹¹⁶

After hearing about these couples, Hogan went looking for them, following the leads of his informants. But upon arriving at four laundries where "a Chinese-Negro relationship considered more than a casual affair" was said to have been happening by his informants, he was told by each owner that the woman "just works for me."¹¹⁷

Hogan was eventually able to locate and interview a few couples and observe their daily rituals, their work habits, noting that one couple who owned a Chinese restaurant in the "Negro section" near the Government Printing Office was financially well off enough to afford an automobile, giving the impression that a good quality of life between a Chinese immigrant man in the restaurant business and an African American woman during the 1930s and 1940s was indeed possible.¹¹⁸

However, most of the marriages between Chinese men and black women seemed fraught with tension and discord, being based less on common values and attraction than convenience and gain. In private interview sessions, Hogan was able to collect data that revealed the complexities in many of the women's choices to marry Chinese and how this had affected their lives.

One black informant whose father was "partly Indian" and who was married to a Chinese laundryman, expressed disinterest in dealing romantically with black men

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 30.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 37.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 39.

because they “never seem to get anywhere.” She lived with two of her surviving children out of six above the laundry where two other African Americans were hired to do the ironing. She herself was not responsible for any of the work in the laundry.¹¹⁹

Two other informants Hogan interviewed lived with Chinese men at least twenty years older than them with one couple consisting of a wife who was twenty and a husband who was forty-nine.¹²⁰ In the case of these latter two informants, both women had an African American man waiting to take them in if they ever decided to leave their Chinese husbands with one having begun that process only to have it interrupted after her Chinese husband went after his wife’s suitor, a black barber. The attack would land him in jail.

After his release, the Chinese husband was still very shaken by the thought of his young wife’s inevitable leaving. And during a visit that Hogan paid to the couple’s household, the desperate man mistook Hogan for a social worker and promptly reported that his wife, with whom he had two children, had recently quarreled with him over his wish to have another child. The topic of the quarrel had also included his wife’s tendency to openly show her affections for other black men and her spending of the couple’s money on her friends.¹²¹

As it is a scholar’s job to observe rather than intervene, Hogan recorded these accounts before making his final assessment of the visits: that the “troubled” marriages between black women and their Chinese husbands had probably been prearranged minus love and with the express interest of financial security. Hogan also noted that

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 33-34.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 58.

¹²¹ Ibid., 62.

some of the couples had gotten together after the woman fell pregnant and demanded support for the child which resulted in hapless marriages for both.

In completing his thesis, Hogan argued that Chinese and black marriages were arrangements that seemed to benefit the female partners with the promise of financial security and an improved racial status and respect from whites. This contrasted to those marriages occurring between a Chinese husband and a white wife in which the wife jeopardized her racial status, no amount of financial gain being able to compensate for the loss of whiteness. Hogan further predicted that “Negro and Chinese marriages seemed to offer less hope of continuation” as the majority of his informants suffered total isolation from other Chinese and made little attempt to integrate into the racial community of his black wife.

But not all Chinese needed integration and found ways to create small spaces for themselves that perhaps allowed for more room to create family, to be human outside of the expectations and requirements set by community.

In 1927, the story about a Jersey City Chinese laundryman Lemon Lee Sing who went to court to follow up on legal matters including his right to adopt an eight-year-old African American boy named Firman Smith made the *New York Times*. Sing, who had cared for Firman since the boy was a year old, had paid a visit to Judge Thomas F. Meaney on matters regarding a reimbursement of a ten dollar payment he had made in 1920 for a bond of the Irish Republic. It was during this visit that he also inquired about his right to adopt Smith who had been abandoned by his mother as a baby and had been taken care of by the laundryman ever since.

In taking in Firman, Sing had “lost no face” as Smith had quickly become one of the brightest students at Public School 30. Sing, a sixty-one year old man from Canton with “no relatives either in the Celestial Kingdom” or the United States was also mentioned to a reporter for the *New York Times* that depending on the favor of his joss, he planned to send Firman to college after the boy had completed high school.¹²²

Filling in the facts was the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a black newspaper that after some initial investigation discovered that Firman Smith was actually the son of a fourteen-year-old girl who had worked for three months in Lemon Lee Sing’s laundry before quitting to give birth. Sing had paid for the young girl’s medical fees and when a sore had developed on baby Firman’s neck, Sing called for his own doctor to treat the boy.

Eventually, after falling ill and unable to care for her son, Sing’s ex-employee would send Firman along with his clothes to Sing’s laundry at 111 Ocean Avenue. The *Courier* would also mention that “so far as anybody could prove [Firman Smith] ... never had a father.” At least a biological one on paper. As far as Sing was concerned, he was the boy’s father, having raised Firman. And legally asserting his paternal rights, Sing hoped to gain custody to prevent Firman’s mother from coming back to claim the boy, and to secure the laundry’s savings and a \$2,000 insurance policy taken out on behalf of Firman.

However, just to show that his ties to Firman extended beyond the financial investments made in the boy’s name, Sing replied asked about what he would do in the

¹²² “Judge to Help Chinese Adopt a Negro Boy,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 1927.

event that he was denied legal custody: “If I miss him, I would drop—I couldn't stand.”¹²³

These were clearly the words of a father concerned with losing his son, and when read alongside the narratives I have provided in this chapter, Sing's words begin to offer a different picture and discourse around pre-Second World War Chinese American families in the United States; an alternate model to the children and wives of wealthy or privileged Chinese merchant and officials or fictitious families built on “paper fathers” or “paper sons,” individuals who bought their families and became kin through the use of fraudulent immigration papers.

Entering into a foreign territory and crossing paths with Native, Mexican, African American, or white women, Chinese men were able to seal the deal despite laws and constant policing of racial boundaries by whites. Exercising their agency, they created as normal sexual, marital, and family lives as they could in the midst of such a highly racist and sexually prohibitive landscape.

But as interracial sex, mixed race families, and the conditions that created them became smaller and smaller islands in the larger scheme of the racial shifting that took place in various Chinese American communities after the Second World War, Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans would have to create new spaces in which to participate as more credible actors in the increasingly fractured racial dialogue between black and white America.

¹²³ Grace Robinson, “Chinese Would Adopt Race Boy,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 22, 1927.

Chapter 4: Chinese Restaurants and the Negotiation of Racial Place in America

This town is white. When I say “white” I mean WHITE. The closest thing they have to something “colored” is the Chinese restaurant.

– Toi Derricotte, *The Black Notebooks*

If not in plain sight anywhere else, there had to be something in the food or the space in which we ate, some kind of cultural reference between my mother and my father, both of them on their good nights talking about some minor thing—the weather, household needs, the kids—and on their worse, arguing between languages before murdering each other, my mother running off like an injured coyote licking the resin from its own shot leg, my father the gun.

It was from them, the dull knife and the tough steak that I first learned about the wide range of satisfactions and dissatisfactions in life, what pleased and wounded the body, the various meanings of food, and the sacredness of sitting and eating together.



Eating at 17th Avenue: unknown dinner guest, the author's mother, the author as a child, and author's father, and the author's maternal aunt, date unknown. Courtesy of the author.¹²⁴

In this same way, Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans learned race through their various interactions with both white and nonwhite Americans, lessons that helped them determine their place in the social, political, cultural, and racial American landscape, their place in the national body. And while this place would never be stable with Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans finding themselves thrust closer or further away from the white American normative reality depending on the racial, economic, and social politics of the moment, there would be some things that remained a constant in their lives, like food and places of eating.

¹²⁴ This image of the author and her parents eating at the extended Chinese American family dinner table was one of the three sites in which the author's family consumed Chinese food; the two others being a restaurant in Oakland Chinatown that specialized in dim sum or Chinese brunch and a hot counter in the back of a liquor store in a poorer predominately black neighborhood West Oakland. The latter of the three was most preferred by the author and one of her younger sisters as children although the food that was bought—pork fried rice and hot links for daddy—were utterly denounced by the author's mother as Chinese food for blacks.

In this chapter, I discuss how Chinese restaurants were not only important cultural foundations in Chinese life in the United States but were also a form of gold to many Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans who, at the edge of not being offered adequate work or pay, went into the restaurant business, feeding American mouths in addition to Chinese for profit.¹²⁵

It was in this role, providing sustenance for familiar hunger and excitement to the culturally curious, that Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans were able to participate in larger conversations about race and power in America. Faced with the racial realities of their African American customers and racist expectations of their white customers, those who owned restaurants became more aware of the hostile climate in which they lived. And it was from this encounter that many of them came to inherit an enormous amount of power.

This power usually unfolded three ways: the decision to participate in upholding the dominant racial order by enforcing racial segregation and barring blacks from their establishments, the choice to defy white demands and allow African Americans the opportunity to enjoy leisure in the same way as their white peers, or finding subversive ways to take money from both blacks and whites, uninterested in getting any more involved than necessary in American racial politics.

¹²⁵ While I use the term “Chinese restaurants” widely and fairly frequently in this chapter, I would like to acknowledge that there are clear differences and in no way is this term all encompassing. Rather, “Chinese restaurants” have historically referred to everything from “chop suey joints” to multilevel palatial dining rooms and the food being served ranging from Americanized fare to traditional Cantonese. The restaurants I describe in this chapter for the most part fall into three main categories: 1) restaurants catering primarily to fellow Chinese which were usually located in Chinatown or in a Chinese quarter and served “traditional” regional foods, 2) smaller restaurants with little ambiance that were sometimes called “chop suey joints” which offered cheaper fare that catered to a mixed working class clientele and were located in Chinatowns or in working class neighborhoods, and 3) larger restaurants catering to a middle class clientele which was predominately white with a few Chinese Americans and which were sometimes located outside of Chinatown in trendier, posh city spots.

Once thought of as sites of filth serving meals that were inedible for whites, we have now moved into an age where eating Chinese food and having a favorite local Chinese restaurant are normalized parts of everyday American experience. According to journalist Michael Luo, in 2004 Chinese restaurants numbered “close to 36,000,” a figure that outnumbered all of the Burger Kings, Wendy’s, and McDonald’s franchises combined. Luo also added that in a survey conducted by the Center for Culinary Development, “39 percent of children between the ages of 10 and 13 who were surveyed said Chinese was their favorite type of food, compared to only 9 percent who chose American.”¹²⁶

But what part of that statistic included black Americans? And in what ways have we entered into similar love affairs with Chinese food? While sitting and thinking about how to begin writing this chapter, the first thing that kept coming to mind were the words of the Philly-born African American brother-in-law of one of my ex-boyfriends, him teasing me relentlessly every time I came to visit about Chinese restaurants serving cats and how this had everything in the world to do with me because, you know, I was half Chinese.

Dogs, rats, cats, half Chinese girl, Chinese food.

Apparently he wasn’t the only one fixated over the stereotype.

In 2007, New York City’s CW11 television station aired a story in which Chris Glorioso interviewed an African American woman by the name of Deisha Dodd. Dodd claimed to have found a deep fried mouse in her chicken and broccoli from the New Food King Chinese takeout on Rockaway Parkway in Brooklyn, a claim that brought Glorioso out to investigate. And after confirming with two other customers at the

¹²⁶ Michael Luo, “As All-American as Egg Food Yong,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2004.

restaurant that the piece of food in question looked like a mouse, Glorioso reported the story, despite a New Food King employee insisting that the allegation was false.¹²⁷

In a follow-up, Glorioso took the “mystery meat” to a professional to be inspected, an act that many local Asian Americans along with New York City Councilman John Liu interpreted as racist as it only perpetuated already popular beliefs regarding the unhygienic practices of the city’s immigrant Chinese. The news story of the New Food King serving fried mice simply added to the long line of stories—most of them fiction—stemming from historical and racist American beliefs that the Chinese ate rats and other furry, four-legged critters.

In the end, Glorioso and the entire CW11 station denied any wrongdoing, claiming that their report was based on an isolated incident at the New Food King and even after facing protest, refused to apologize.

But the reason why an apology was demanded lies in a history of anti-Chinese propaganda, much of which relied on sensational and sordid claims of Chinese racial and cultural difference to produce xenophobic hostility and violence needed to run the Chinese out of jobs, industries, families, and towns that native men felt had been reserved for them.

This was certainly the case in Sonora, Mexico during the 1920s when virulent anti-Chinese propaganda meant to rile up local Mexicans included a reference to Chinese restaurants and the food they served:

In their restaurant kitchens they have various receptacles, generally covered with filth, where they deposit all the scraps left on plates by customers, only to

¹²⁷ “Rodent TV Exposé Irks NYC APAs,” *AsianWeek*, February 9, 2007.

return it all, newly heated, to the next customer who arrives. ...The Chinese make sausages of dogs, cats, rats, and other animals...¹²⁸

Not only was the propaganda aimed at hurting local Chinese restaurant businesses by persuading Mexicans not to frequent them where it was presumed they killed and ate pets as well as vermin, the propaganda also left a bad public taste regarding the Chinese and their supposed lack of sanitation.

This depiction of the Chinese as dirty would also emerge in the United States where among the anti-Chinese sentiments being espoused, portrayals of the Chinese living in squalor and eating rats would show up frequently in political and public commentary and popular culture.



¹²⁸ Philip A. Dennis, "The Anti-Chinese Campaigns in Sonora, Mexico," *Ethnohistory*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1979, 76; Original literature written by José Angel Espinoza, *El problema chino en México*, 1930 can be found in the University of Arizona Microfilm Collections, Sonora film 811, roll 27.

“A Picture for Employers—Why *They* can live on 40 cents a day, and *They* can’t.”¹²⁹

[Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC2-1242 DLC (color film copy slide)]

The association of Chinese with rats and filth worked to further dehumanize them and support the argument that they deserved nothing more than to be permanently held from American privileges and rights.

That their food and eating establishments were depicted and perceived as filthy and utterly foreign in comparison to the white normative culinary preferences of American men only further served to dehumanize them. But not all Americans with an ear open to anti-Chinese rhetoric were put off by the Chinese or their food.

Writer Mark Twain who in the 1860s was working on a newspaper in Virginia City, Nevada was privileged enough to witness the arrival of about 1,000 Chinese into town. Acting out of journalistic curiosity, Twain made it a point to visit the Chinese quarters at night where “in every hut one could see ‘two or three yellow, long-tailed vagabonds’ smoking opium.” He stopped by the grocery store of Mr. Ah Sing on 13 Wang Street where he was offered “a mess of birds’-nests; also small, neat sausages.” And after having “chow-chow with chop-sticks in the celestial restaurants” with a fellow newspaper reporter, Twain established that “the Chinese were ‘a kindly disposed, well-meaning race,’ and that it was only the scum of society who abused or oppressed them.”¹³⁰

¹²⁹ First appearing in *Puck* magazine in 1878, this illustration contrasts the living conditions and moral priorities and values of Chinese immigrant men and white ethnic immigrant men. While the Chinese are depicted living in a squalid, overcrowded opium den, eating rats and smoking, the white man, having happily returned home from work, is greeted by a warm, normative, middle class domestic scene complete with a wife, three children, and a pet cat. Through the comparison, the argument is made to employers that while the Chinese would be willing to work for less, there was nothing more precious at stake than the white family which would suffer at the expense of employers choosing to hire a Chinese over a white man.

¹³⁰ J.A.G. Roberts, *China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 137.

Plenty of other Americans didn't mind and at times even preferred the taste of Chinese food. In fact, in Butte, Montana where the population was comprised of primarily transitory men of Welsh, Irish, French Canadian, Italian, and Slavic descent, the Chinese ran eateries "specializing in preparing miners' lunch pails, serving them breakfast and dinner, and extending credit from one pay-day to the next."¹³¹

The feeding Americans, whether in rural boarding houses, mining camps, fancy hotels, or vacation homes became a stable economic venture for many Chinese immigrant men. Seen as a domestic and therefore feminized role, cooking was nonetheless a occupation that provided Chinese men safety from hostility in that it didn't directly position them as economic competitors to either white or black American men. It was with this in mind that a number of Chinese men lent themselves out as domestic servants and cooks, learning how to please the American palate for a living.¹³²

¹³¹ Rose Hum Lee, *The Chinese in the United States of America* (Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 59.

¹³² Compared to laundry work, however, Paul Ong argues that domestic work for Chinese immigrant men "exacted a social cost" as it "demanded prolonged contact with the bok kwei (Chinese for white devil), and required the servant to alter his behavior, acquire a new language, and assume a continuous subordinate role." See Paul Ong, "Chinese Laundries as an Urban Occupation in Nineteenth Century California," *The Annals of the Chinese Historical Society of the Pacific Northwest* 1 (1983): 73.



Portrait of “Jim,” a cook for the LeConte family, taken between 1850 and 1900.¹³³

[The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. BANC PIC 1966.051:10--PIC]

That is until the trend of slumming began to change everything, from American perceptions of the Chinese and Chinese food to the role of Chinese cooks appeasing white and black American mouths with a hybrid form of Chinese American cuisine rather than the expected American fare.

Initially originating in Britain in the nineteenth century as a form of compassionate observation and benevolence by social reformers, philanthropists, clergymen, scholars, and writers to better understand the poor, the practice of slumming quickly turned into “a form of urban social exploration” in which “sensationalism, sexual transgression, and self-seeking gratification” were discovered by young

¹³³ The LeConte family was a prominent white southern slave owning family whose members relocated to California in the mid-nineteenth century. The LeConte family also had another Chinese cook by the name of Lum Ting.

fashionable whites who ventured—gawking at, tasting, touching, and smelling the world of the poor, queer, and nonwhite—in awe and disgust.¹³⁴

In 1884, the *New York Times* ran an article about travelers who came all the way to New York City in search of new sights:

“Slumming,” the latest fashionable idiosyncrasy in London—i.e., the visiting of the slums of the great city by parties of ladies and gentlemen for sightseeing—is mildly practiced here by our foreign visitors by a tour of the Bowery, winding up with a visit to an opium joint or Harry Hill’s.¹³⁵

Yet true to the nature of a trend, slumming wouldn’t only be enjoyed by Britons alone who seemed eager to travel to wherever there were “slums” to be seen. White Americans would soon follow in their footsteps, indulging in the craze and venturing into working class, poor, and immigrant enclaves making it a social sport for the sophisticated class.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 8.

¹³⁵ “Slumming in this Town,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1884.

¹³⁶ Apparently poor and working class whites were no stranger to urban American Chinatowns because in “the last three decades of the nineteenth century, white men of the laboring class were regular clients of the whore houses, gambling joints, and opium dens which flourished” according to Paul Ong. It is not clear as to whether or not they were also clients in Chinese restaurants. See Paul Ong, “Chinese Laundries as an Urban Occupation in Nineteenth Century California,” *The Annals of the Chinese Historical Society of the Pacific Northwest* 1 (1983): 79.



A scene on Mott Street in New York City Chinatown taken between 1900 and 1910. Note the presence of two well dressed white women in what looks to be a largely male dominated landscape.

[Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Detroit Publishing Company Collection.]

Sensationalist newspaper reports about vice, immorality, and squalor in American Chinatowns did little more than encourage the dangerous image and exotic appeal. And this was exactly what aroused the curiosity of middle class whites who were offered tours of Chinatown where one could “get a first-hand glimpse of the filth and depravity they expected to find.”¹³⁷

And while cribbed prostitutes, warring underworld gangsters, indisposed drug addicts, and gamblers in action were all promised as part of the tour, so were scenes of

¹³⁷ Ivan Light, “From Vice District to Tourist Attraction: The Moral Career of American Chinatowns, 1880-1940,” *The Pacific Historical Review* 43:3 (1974): 368.

everyday life: the interior of certain Chinatown buildings, people running errands, and children playing in the streets.

As American Chinatowns increasingly began to be viewed as tourist attractions and visited by tourists during the early twentieth century, some Chinese realized the potential of investing in a tourist based economy. In particular, curio store and bazaar merchants as well as restaurant owners took steps to make their shops more appealing to whites. But as appealing as they tried to make themselves, Chinese restaurants seemed to be the final tourist frontier, pulling less customers than the curio stores and bazaars where tourists tended to flock hoping to purchase a little exotic Chinese ornament or memento.

Early on during the rise in the popularity of Chinatown tours, only a few of those signed up for the tour would dare to order or taste a dish in a Chinese restaurant, preferring to observe the food from a distance. However during the 1890s things began to change with an increasing number of white tourists curiously visiting Chinatown intent on ordering something beyond tea and sweets. It was during this time that eating at a Chinatown restaurant became quite popular and “nice white people actually frequented Chinese restaurants because they liked the food—and the ‘bohemian’ atmosphere.”¹³⁸

Not so bohemian and perhaps more appealing to “bad white people” were the less fancy chop suey restaurants. Unlike the so-called respectable Chinese restaurants, chop suey restaurants served cheap food and operated long hours, often extending well into the early morning to accommodate a non-Chinese clientele that grew increasingly

¹³⁸ Catherine Cocks, *Doing the Town: The Rise of Urban Tourism in the United States, 1850-1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 202.

of the rowdy set as the night wore on. To add to their already borderline reputations, stories began coming out—in the form of someone’s rumor that got too wide or a sensationalist newspaper account that got too real—that chop suey restaurants sometimes doubled as houses of vice, sexual immorality, and miscegenation.

This led to many chop suey restaurants in New York City’s Chinatown becoming targets for police raids and surveillance, some giving law enforcement more than enough reason. In 1901, a report filed by an investigator by the name of W. C. Steele, Jr. found that a chop suey restaurant located at 568 Seventh Avenue was “full of Negro and white prost[itutes] soliciting.” And in another report filed in 1905, it was discovered that a restaurant located at 94 Third Avenue not only provided liquor to patrons but opium if one so desired it. Furthermore, no “decent person” dared to frequent the establishment after midnight.¹³⁹

Much of the concern stemmed from the duty and desire expected of and thrust upon white men to perform the job of protecting the white American family, particularly white American women from the corruption and evils of undersexed Chinese bachelors who might bring dope and depravity, “dragging young girls into their dens and stupefying them with the drug,” or doing what twenty-five year old Yee Kin Wah in Manchester, New Hampshire did: kiss you twice in the restaurant owned by his brother while you waited for your order, those two kisses outraging you enough to complain to authorities who would arrest then release him.¹⁴⁰

Where a white girl finds trouble, the police will come.

¹³⁹ Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 65.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 28, 77.

But then again, the cry of a white girl in trouble wasn't what brought out several policemen from the Elizabeth Precinct under the command of the New York City Police Commissioner James C. Cropsey and First Deputy Police Commissioner Clement C. Driscoll in 1910. Rather, the men had organized with the express intent "to inspect the various tourist attractions in the [Chinatown] neighborhood, targeting 'opium joints' and 'chop suey' restaurants...[in order] to determine what white people remained in the Chinese section after midnight and to learn what business they had there."¹⁴¹

In contrast, the business that black people had in shady Chinese restaurants or American Chinatowns after midnight or was more or less a non-issue to law enforcement as black public order, decency, and morality was of little concern unless it posed a threat to whites. Still, black presence in Chinese restaurants did not go completely unnoticed.

In his book *New York's Chinatown: An Historical Presentation of its People and Places* published in 1898, Louis Beck wrote that "black Americans were among the earliest fans of eating Chinese" and usually contributed to \$25 of a Chinese restaurant's typical \$500 daily profit.¹⁴² And in 1901, a writer for the *New York Tribune* reported that a number of "blacks frequently took their meals at downtown Chinese restaurants and were present in 'disproportionately large numbers.' The writer concluded that the black patrons 'seem to like the Chinese' and that the restaurants

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁴² Haiming Liu, "Chop Suey as Imagined Authentic Chinese Food: The Culinary Identity of Chinese Restaurants in the United States," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1:1 (2009): 6-7.

were familiar spaces for blacks as ‘the noise of the kitchens reminds one of the similar condition of Southern kitchens under negro management.’”¹⁴³

But beyond the familiarity of noise was the food. In the Chinese area called Hop Alley in St. Louis, Missouri, Chinese, African American, and white patrons all ate together at chop suey shops. This differed slightly in the case of the restaurant opened by the father of St. Louis resident Richard Ho in the early 1930s. He found his restaurant attracting a predominately black clientele for whom he would eventually hire a black wait staff to serve. The black staff tended to customers who commonly ordered “fried rice and duck noodles” which they ate with forks instead of chopsticks and business would continue to thrive well after the Second World War when African American soldiers returning to the states would bring in their Japanese wives.¹⁴⁴

Similarly, from observations made in Harlem, New York during the 1930s and 1940s, Caribbean American journalist Roi Ottley would report that “Chinese restaurants are very popular with Negroes, though Chinese chefs complain that Negroes pass up Oriental delicacies to eat pork and fried rice.”¹⁴⁵ And the taste was even better if you could get a seat.

During Jim Crow, racial segregation was the law in many states, requiring individuals who identified as colored or black to either dine in a back room or be barred from an establishment that was white only serving. In this landscape, Chinese restaurant owners were faced with the hard decision to either lose white customers by continuing to serve African Americans or follow the racial order of the day which saw

¹⁴³ Shirley J. Yee, “Dependency and Opportunity: Socioeconomic Relations between Chinese and Non-Chinese in New York City, 1870-1943,” *Journal of Urban History* 33:2 (2007): 261.

¹⁴⁴ Huping Ling, *Chinese St. Louis: From Enclave to Cultural Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 48-49.

¹⁴⁵ Roi Ottley, *‘New World A-Coming’: Inside Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), 53-54.

to it that whites inhabit a social place of superiority relegating blacks to a place of abject inferiority. Many would choose to survive, denying blacks service in an attempt to appease their white or fellow Chinese customers.

On January 8, 1927, the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that the infamous New York City hangout of “colored Harlem,” the Bamboo Inn, temporarily shut its doors to black patrons at 2 a.m. on Tuesday morning. The doors were reopened at 2:30 but only to white and Chinese patrons. The article would add criticism, claiming that while the Bamboo Inn, “famous for its gold digging methods,” had profited greatly from the business of black Americans, the “Oriental employes [sic] of the inn have constantly slurred their colored guests”¹⁴⁶

The fact that the incident made the news suggests that there was once a time when the Bamboo Inn did not discriminate against its black clientele. However, this would all change with the adoption of a new policy, apparently the shutting of doors afterhours and only allowing in certain guests. And from this point on, the Bamboo Inn would find itself operating like other establishments that hoped to safely capitalize on the white and black dollar by providing segregated, second-class service to African Americans through the back door away from the eyes of whites.

Kansas resident Wong Wing Lock, the paper father of Wayne Hung Wong, did just that in the Chinese restaurant he owned with business partners in Wichita, Kansas. And after arriving from the West Coast in 1936 at the age of thirteen, Wayne would learn firsthand how such “a large, well-furnished restaurant” was able to function, including what to do with its black clientele:

¹⁴⁶ “Bamboo Inn, Harlem Night Life Center, Bars Race Patrons,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 8, 1927.

Most customers were white Americans. A number of them were transients or city visitors, while others were local regulars. Occasionally blacks showed up. They always entered the premises through the rear door that led to the kitchen. No waitresses took their orders. Instead they just told the kitchen staff what they desired, and they would be served at a short counter set up in the kitchen just for them. When they were finished eating, they dropped their money into a tin can; typically the prices of a black American's meal was half what customers in the dining room paid.¹⁴⁷

For many black Americans, it was typical: eating in a restaurant kitchen or tucked away somewhere in the back behind a wall, no luxury or fine dining, the kind of treatment that some would tolerate just for the sake of having always lived that way; the kind of thing that would drive others to spit outright in protest, pick up their dollars, slap their wallet closed, and head back home.

On at least one occasion it became the reason for public protest to which a few Chinese Americans made an attempt to try and reconcile. In 1943, during a decline in business received by local area Chinese restaurants, a common belief that a boycott was underway in the District of Columbia brought on a sense of nervousness. One man, Chen Sheng, wrote into the *China Daily News* with what he supposed might have been the reason for the boycott, stating that, "a black customer 'frankly told me that blacks are really disappointed at the Chinese.'" And that even after having supported Chinese Americans against Japanese imperialism in China, "some Chinese discriminated against blacks, 'sometimes worse than the whites.'"

¹⁴⁷ Wayne Hung Wong, *American Paper Son: A Chinese Immigrant in the Midwest* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 36.

Chen wrote that after hearing his customer's reasoning, he had tried to ease things, claiming no racial prejudice on his part and assuring that if other Chinese were discriminating against blacks at other restaurants was because "white customers discriminated against blacks" and they were only complying with the wishes of white customers from a business standpoint.¹⁴⁸ This however did nothing to change the opinion of his customer who felt that the Chinese were prone to racial discrimination and racial prejudice toward black Americans, and it was this viewpoint spoken with such conviction that drove Chen to write to the *China Daily News* and plead with the editor to address it as a problem.

What followed were two editorial pieces directed at Chinese immigrant and Chinese American readers to display the "correct attitude" toward African Americans despite "some individuals in the Chinese community who were influenced by the general contemptuous attitude to blacks in American society." Furthermore, fellow Chinese who ran restaurants should not overreact or "try revenge" against blacks in response to the loss of business which seemed to coincide with the circulation of a "rumor that the Chinese chop suey restaurants used cat meat to replace beef and pork" but instead "be friendly to black customers and especially to lower-class blacks."

The editorials even made the point to suggest that Chinese restaurant chop suey shop owners in black neighborhoods should organize and elect a spokesperson who could meet with "leaders of black religious and other organizations" to mediate both sides of the problem.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Renqiu Yu, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 122-123.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

Whether the commentary printed in the *China Daily News* sparked any change in the business approach of Chinese restaurants in the District of Columbia is unclear but it did not prevent one local Chinese restaurant, decades later, from becoming the setting of camaraderie and the calm before the storm on May 3, 1961 among a racially mixed group of thirteen people embarking on a Freedom Ride the next day. All thirteen had attended an orientation earlier, having been briefed on their legal rights and engaged in role-playing of the possible scenarios they might be confronted with, devising ways of reducing “the probability of serious and permanent damage in the real-life situation.”

In that downtown Washington, D.C. Chinese restaurant, the Freedom Riders dined and perhaps in a mix of humor and morbid knowledge of the things to come, “Someone referred to the meal as the ‘last supper.’”¹⁵⁰ John Lewis, one of the embarking riders in attendance would later write in a memoir that he had “never been in a restaurant like that, other than to protest for my right to be served.”¹⁵¹

Given the opportunity, Chinese restaurant owners and staff were able to negotiate and exercise racial place and power in Jim Crow America, choosing to serve or refuse service to African Americans according to personal choice. In making that choice, many either defied white racial order by objecting publicly to the institutionalized practice of segregated dining or complying by hanging up the “white only” sign with little hesitation. However, without written accounts from cooks, wait staff, or owners, we are left without details as to the kinds of intimate or interpersonal

¹⁵⁰ James L. Farmer, Jr. *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, NY: Arbor House, 1985), 197-198.

¹⁵¹ John Lewis, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 139-140.

relationships had with black customers that might have influenced a Chinese restaurant owner's decision to resist or give in.

What we do have and what we can begin to see are ways that cultural and culinary exchanges and overlaps between Chinese and African Americans were affected by the various social and racial shifts of the twentieth century. In this context, the Chinese were given the opportunity to negotiate a greater role in the defining and maintaining of American racial politics while African Americans, through frequenting Chinese restaurants, were able to take part in the same leisure and consumer culture as white Americans, an important reminder of one's humanity during the constant restriction of black mobility, black spending, and black amusement.

The twentieth century would also see the entry of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans into an American racial system designed to punish and prevent alliances made with other nonwhite individuals and communities while rewarding acts of denunciation and distancing, the further away from blacks the better. This was done to discipline black bodies and black communities, by constantly using the Chinese as a comparative marker of success, as if to say, *Look, racism did not hinder them*, while remaining dishonest about a system that is fundamentally racist and unequal.

That any kind of racial intersection could survive this, it would have been deeply fractured.

Chapter 5: Historical Erasure

Had I the ability then, I would have created my own language in childhood for bringing together home, community, family, and race. I would have begun to lay the seed for thinking about a common cultural history and human geography between Chinese and black America. Perhaps it would have prepared me for growing up in the California Bay Area, running with the same knees as the white and Asian kids and never having before recognized the striation of ashy skin or brown pigmentation that collected at the edges of my body until the day we all found ourselves tangled in a dance of hooked bones and the snarl of my inner Dark Continent hit the freckled palm of the nearest pale skinned chest.

But all I had was silence when it came to dealing with the racism that unfolded from the warmest part of a maternal aunt's arm. Without a clear shape of my history or an integrated understanding of where I came from, I would also have no response for an older male cousin from the same side who once insisted that he would never consider me Chinese, a point which I took to mean never consider us family.



The author with her maternal first cousin, Oakland, CA, date unknown. Courtesy of the author.

This older maternal male cousin would go on to live a life of protein shakes, weightlifting, car shows, and a barrage of terribly pretty and feminine Chinese American girlfriends, most of whom I heard about through family stories; gossip really about how his difficult personality drove away yet another chance at a potentially promising Chinese American coupling. In contrast, my identity would be understood at least among my Chinese relatives as a queer and aberrant thing made acceptable only by my pursuit of a doctoral degree, the acceptance being voided by my inability to secure the hand of a decent enough Chinese American man.

I use this example of my life and the life of my cousin, two different representations of the Chinese American experience within one family to illustrate how

wide and diverse Chinese immigrant and Chinese American life is and always has been despite a canonical history that has been written for us in which parts of our individual and collective experiences have been distorted or repressed. Chinese America certainly begins to appear very different when looking in from the margins, from queer and abject spaces.

This was what I wanted to ultimately do, to argue that not all Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans desired to live lives framed by white American middle class picket fences. How instead many lived content in rural communities, some in predominately black neighborhoods or towns, others growing up poor or working class, all having very real and very different kinds of cultural experiences despite no one then and no one now really wanting to talk about it.

People will talk however about the canonical points of Chinese American history—Gold Mountain, Angel Island, railroads, gold mining, Chinatowns, paper sons, prostitutes—the symbolic power of these icons able, ready, and willing to speak for all of Chinese America. It was what kept us looking west all this time. Kept looking at our beginnings of gold, our long Angel Island detention years and poetic fortitude, our everyday American Chinatown lives that saw hardships and racial discrimination, the moments when we asserted cultural resistance, and the moments in which we acquiesced.

But who was looking in the direction of Chinese frontier encounters with Native people that left Apache or Pima permanently drawn in the tongue or at Chinese laundries and restaurants that hired black help? Who was talking about the Mississippi

Delta? Who was remembering a time when Chinese and black Americans shared kinship, romance, and a language of trust?

It is in this near absence of cultural memory that I situate the artwork of Chinese American mixed media artist Flo Oy Wong. In her “Baby Jack Rice Story” series, Wong threads through the rice sacks, the text sewn around the margins serving as a frame to the images of young black men and a Chinese boy.

One rice sack that Wong has threaded through reads “They weren’t supposed to be friends.” And taken together with the images, this sewn statement refers to a friendship between her Chinese American husband Edward K. Wong who grew up in Augusta, Georgia in the 1930s and 1940s and two African American brothers, Boykin and Cush Cade who “lived around the corner on Hunter Street” near Wong’s father-in-law’s grocery store. The boys met when Edward was seven.¹⁵²

There was a taboo interracial friendship during the time of Jim Crow when the Chinese, especially in the South, were expected to take racial sides. In giving an historical context to her rice sack series, Wong states, “I am telling about a time when African American men provided leadership. In the 1870s, when the Chinese moved to the South, it was African Americans who helped them acclimate to their neighborhoods. During segregation in the 1940s, the city fathers designated the Chinese as ‘honorary Whites.’ As such, they attended White schools, but they had to live and work with the Blacks.”¹⁵³

The shame and stigma that followed—a shame and stigma in being racially positioned so close to blacks while remaining far from whites—led many southern

¹⁵² Amy Ling, *Yellow Light: The Flowering of Asian American Arts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999): 187.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 186-187.

Chinese to distance themselves from their neighbors, erasing from public memory a time of kinship with African Americans. It is in response to this strategic communal distancing from blacks that Wong created the “Baby Jack Rice Story,” allowing the experiences of her husband and the Cade brothers to serve as powerful reminders of a time before.

Viewers are encouraged to imagine the childhood of Ed Wong, a childhood in which a young Chinese American boy “idolized” two African American brothers who were “older, wiser, [and had] more experience.” Boykin was the one who was “quite charismatic” and both Cade brothers taught Ed to fish and brought him into the business of selling bootlegged whiskey for a short time.¹⁵⁴ Through this friendship, Ed was introduced to a different kind of boy and manhood, extending beyond the grocery store experience of his Chinese immigrant father. And it is through being permanently archived onto sacks of rice that Wong begins to create a blueprint for telling us this story, this past, with a hand stitched narrative acting as a guide to how we should read the images.

Of course the southern Chinese American experience included many other events that should be read alongside Wong’s “Baby Jack Rice Sack” series. One event in particular was the barring of Martha Lum, one of the daughters of a local Chinese Mississippi Delta resident and grocery store owner, Gong Lum, from attending an all-white high school in Rosedale, Mississippi. This decision would set off a series of subsequent lawsuits starting in 1924 that were heard from the Mississippi Circuit Court all the way up to the United States Supreme Court with a ruling being ultimately issued against the Lum family defending the right of the Bolivar County School district to

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 187.

disallow all non-white students from attending for the purpose of upholding white racial purity and integrity.¹⁵⁵

From that point on, many Chinese families either moved out of the area or held on. Those who chose to do the latter placed their children in private schools and lived bitter with the embarrassment of having seemingly done everything right. In the Lum family's case, this meant befriending some of Gong's white customers, attending a white Presbyterian church, and inviting a white church couple to become the godparents to their two daughters, Martha and Berda.¹⁵⁶ Undaunted by the court ruling and all that it implied, community leaders continued to court the social affections of whites who in turn advised them, among other things, to "curtail their unconcealed sexual liaisons with African Americans."¹⁵⁷

This is when the small Delta Chinese community began to turn in on itself rejecting those residents who were involved with a black partner romantically or were of mixed black ancestry themselves. It was a longing for partial equality with whites following advice given by trusted white locals that set community members on a path of prayer and repentance in white Baptist churches to clear their hearts while Delta Chinese women were encouraged to take night school classes that taught them how to prepare southern dishes and tidy their homes like real genteel southern white ladies. Still, in an effort to show that they recognized they would never achieve full equality,

¹⁵⁵ Sieglinde Lim de Sánchez, "Crafting a Delta Chinese Community: Education and Acculturation in Twentieth-Century Southern Baptist Mission Schools," *History of Education Quarterly* 43:1 (2007): 79-80.

¹⁵⁶ Jeannie Rhee, "In Black and White: Chinese in the Mississippi Delta," *Journal of Supreme Court History: Yearbook of the Supreme Court Historical Society* 117 (1994): 122.

¹⁵⁷ Sieglinde Lim de Sánchez, "Crafting a Delta Chinese Community: Education and Acculturation in Twentieth-Century Southern Baptist Mission Schools," *History of Education Quarterly* 43:1 (2007): 79.

Delta Chinese made it a point to always use the customary terms when addressing whites: “Yes, Sir” and “No, Ma’am.”

Resident Jack Chow remembers a visit one summer day from white Baptist churchwomen to the family’s home. Bearing Coca Colas, the women gave his mother advice on how becoming American and a devout Christian would benefit her children. To which, Chow says, “It didn’t take much convincing my mamma. As soon as she heard it might help us, she was learning how to make catfish and collard greens and how to set up a dinner table with forks and knives. She learned a little English there, but most of the women spent the nights gossiping to each other in Chinese.”¹⁵⁸

I can’t help but think that some of these same women would be the first to gossip about other members of the community, their words often reflecting larger anxieties within communities, eventually coming to stigmatize people like Arlee Hen so that in the end, she and others like her would find themselves rejected. Hen’s experience was particularly harsh in that even in death she would be refused by the community, her body restricted from burial in the same Chinese cemetery as her father and husband.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 81.

¹⁵⁹ Ted Shepherd, *The Chinese of Greenville, Mississippi* (Greenville: Buford Brothers Printing Company, 1999), 5. Arlee Hen was born to a Chinese Mississippi Delta merchant by the name of Wong On who arrived in the American South after a series of transient pursuits in various occupations. At one point he worked in New Orleans in fisheries and shrimp farms. In 1875, he and thirteen Chinese men traveled to Mississippi by steamship to pick cotton in the Delta. It was there that upon finding themselves unable to earn enough money to send home to China, Wong On and the men decided to forge a partnership under the name of Shing to rent land for growing cotton and pool moneys derived from this venture. The Shing partnership rented a boat and sold cotton in New Orleans. They also made some earnings by selling candy, cloth, combs, and other small items to a black sharecropping clientele. But in 1880, the partnership soon expired and the friends disbanded to search for other job opportunities elsewhere. Wong On stayed on as a sharecropper at California Plantation where he met Emma Clay, a young African American woman twenty years his junior who had been born right after emancipation on the plantation. A year before Wong On’s marriage to Emma Clay, he had opened up a small store in Stoneville where he sold basic necessities—meat, molasses, tobacco, canned goods—to local black laborers. With this he was able to support a family of twelve children, one of whom was Arlee Sing, born in 1893. Arlee was supposed to be sent back to China to attend school but the plans did not go through. Her father had also attempted to teach her Chinese

But beyond small circles of women's gossip, matters of community exclusion and erasure would become part of institutionalized life in many Chinese American communities, with each historically specific moment of racial restructuring eventually shaping how contemporary Chinese American communities have come to look like and be remembered. Take for example the very public and symbolic act of racial regulation that happened in 1960 when pageant judges decided to eliminate the incorrect kind of contestant during the national Miss Chinatown pageant.

Arlene Scott Sum, the reigning Miss Los Angeles Chinatown, had entered the national competition that year to try her luck at winning the crown. And having been born in Trinidad with some African ancestry in her family, she could not have known how her racial heredity would affect her. Before the competition even began, Sum was quietly expunged with only her printed biography serving as a testimony to her existence in the program booklet. Without any explanation from pageant officials, Sum would never have her photo published in any of the pageant materials and would be absent from the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. stage despite being named as a contestant.¹⁶⁰ In the end, Arlene Scott Sum had simply been erased.

To make public this erasure, the fact that there was even a need to erase, is where I see my work intervening, breaking the silence around an at times violent American racial history in which nonwhite communities were made and broken in their attempts to negotiate status and racial place with white America. To trace and make public a racial reality which saw Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans moving

which she did not pick up. But being her father's favorite daughter with whom he had taught to cook Chinese food and grow Chinese vegetables, Arlee grew to consider herself Chinese and unlike other blacks in the South, Arlee was on few occasions allowed to enter through the front door of establishments and even kept a few white friends who let her read their schoolbooks.

¹⁶⁰ Chiou-ling Yeh, *Making an American Festival: Chinese New Year in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 71.

through white America alongside Native people and invested in livelihoods with African Americans is to fundamentally shift the grounds on which contemporary Chinese American history has been constructed.

When asked why this is even an important issue of discussion, I would argue it is important because it gives us greater knowledge about not only the conflicted cultural processes that immigrants have undergone and continue to undergo once brought into a racist American racial order in which they are expected to participate but reveals the ingenuity, reliance, and hunger between immigrant and native citizen, between various nonwhite people in a nation that tries so hard to keep us divided over differences. It is important because we need to know what came before in order to have a context for those cross-racial kinships that are seemingly absent today.

How we begin to imagine the integration of Chinese and African Americans through companionship, trade, shared geography, food, conflict, the body, sex, and public dialogue in the present cannot fully take place until we acknowledge that such an intersecting road existed before. Our twenty-first century yearnings for an understanding of why a cultural framework doesn't or can't begin to exist between a group that today represents in part the "model minority" and a group that has always embodied racial abjection, should not be so loud as to obscure a history that has seen cultural overlap and intersection between Chinese, African American, and other nonwhites before.

Only once we begin to view the construction of Chinese America as a racial and social process in which both external and internal economic, legal, political, and human forces worked systematically to at times violently alter the myriad of ways Chinese

Americanness is and has been constructed, can we begin to move forward and create new directions in the dialogue.

This is not the beginning but a continuation, after all, our full circle stories spiraling back toward us.

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