Black/White/Yellow

Elizabeth Chin[1]

For some time now, I have imagined making a series of quilts that meditates on the question and problem of my daughter's racial makeup. According to the US-based racial reckoning that both calculates racial proportions and measures color, my daughter is half black, one-quarter white, and one-quarter yellow. And yet she is a whole person, seamless. It is a fiction that she is fractions of this and that stuck together. As a person who is half white and half Chinese, I know that to be racially mixed in the United States (US) is to fight for wholeness, to struggle to feel complete as a person. At every turn our wholeness is picked apart, divided into bits. Just as I was confidently told by other people's parents that "you must be adopted" because they could not imagine my dark hair and being birthed by the body of my milky white-skinned, blonde-haired, blue-eyed mother, neither could my daughter's childhood friends see me, yellow as I am, as the mother of a Black child.[2] There is a special sort of rage generated by the daily wear and tear on family fabric that too many of those around you snip away at with their pointed ignorance. Some things get worn out and do not survive the thousand cuts.

In the abstract, the concept of the quilt is like my daughter, is half black, one-fourth white, and one-fourth yellow. For the sake of illustration, let's say two yards of black, one yard of white and one yard of yellow. The first step is to stitch them together to create a starting place. The process is one of cutting the whole and restitching it together.

[1] I am so grateful to the editors of this volume for inviting me to write. That invitation sparked this work and brought to life a project that had laid dormant for far too long. An Pan shared thoughts and resources with endless generosity and enthusiasm. Laura Ng, who knows much more about Chinese migration than I do, patiently schooled me with her expertise. Josh Berson gamely assisted with the phonetics for various pronunciations of Los Angeles.

[2] It is now common editorial style in the United States to capitalize the words black and indigenous when they refer to people. The color black is not capitalized. For further discussion of this question, see: Wong, B. (2020), 'Here's Why It's A Big Deal To Capitalize The Word 'Black',' *HuffPost*, 3 September. Available online: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-capitalize-word-black_l_5f342ca1c5b6960c066faea5 (accessed 17 February 2022).

One cut, restitch. Two cuts, restitch. Three cuts, reconstruct. Four cuts, make it whole again, continuing like this through twenty-three cuts: the number of chromosomes (a nod to the biology of humanness). Within this process of cutting and remaking, the original proportions stay the same: at the end the resulting quilt will still be half black, one-quarter white and one-quarter yellow and yet we have no idea what it will look like. I imagined a series, all beginning with the same basic foundation, resulting in many different outcomes.

As I was researching quilts and quilting, I realized that it was essential for me to use the clothing of my own loved ones, my daughter's ancestors. This realization came as I was thinking about African American quilting, specifically, the much-celebrated quilts made by women from Gee's Bend, Alabama.[3] The quilters of Gee's Bend have used quilting – among other techniques of remaking and survivance – as everyday practices of creating lives of wholeness in the afterlife of slavery. Most of the quilts are improvisationally constructed, and the piecing, similarly, tends to be freehand rather than undertaken with the precisely measured templates more commonly seen (and valued) in pieced quilts in the United States. Gee's Bend quilters employ considered practices of composition that "demonstrate the power of needle as pen" (Sohan 2015: 296), both drawing from and contributing to improvisational forms distinctive to African aesthetic production throughout the diaspora.

Mrs. Missouri Pettway was one of the women from Gee's Bend who responded to her husband's death, as her daughter remembers it, by saying "I'm going to take his work clothes, shape them into a quilt to remember him, and cover up under it for love" (cited in Beardsley et al. 2002: 67). In deconstructing her husband's work clothes, Missouri Pettway was refashioning the garments that had held her loved one's limbs, absorbed his sweat and scent, so that at night she would still lie with him upon her. It was an act of mourning, a stitching through of grief, creating seams between life and death, love and loss. Sohan's (2015) own analysis of these

[3] Gee's Bend, formally known as Boykin, is an isolated area in a large bend of the Alabama River in Wilcox County, Alabama. The quilting tradition of Gee's Bend may go back five or six generations as women slaves used strips of fabric to make bedcovers (Beardsley et al. 2002). Exhibited in museums across the United States, the quilts are seen as a major contributor to African American art, design, and culture (Sohan 2015).

women's work seeks to trouble the distinction between language and craft, between making and speaking. She argues that the quilts constitute a form of discourse, and that they can be understood as compositions that address numerous issues including family life, labor, and racial injustice.

It was at this point that working on the quilt moved from being just quilting to being a much richer, complex project in research-creation. The term has emerged especially strongly places that have developed new PhD programs in the arts. Because the signature accomplishment of the PhD is the creation of new knowledge, these programs must answer the question: What does it mean to produce new knowledge through creative practice -- as a painter, designer, dancer (Barrett and Bolt 2013; Elkins 2014)? What constitutes research in these areas?[4] People wrestling with these questions are generating practices and methodologies that cross boundaries in a way that Natalie Loveless (2019: 59) describes as "polydisciplinamory" in her book *How to Make Art at the End of the World*. Similarly, digging into research-creation asks new and exciting questions about methodology (Sheller 2015; Truman 2021). While research-creation writer-thinkers are savvy about race, the majority are white. The Black feminists Tina Campt (2017) and Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2020) bring distinctively politicized attunements to body politics as they encourage us to "listen to images" or to write in ways utterly outside scholarly boundaries. Saidiyah Hartman (2008), for her part, delves deeply into the dispossessions of slavery in her genre-bending writing. Their work is a reminder that structures of knowledge, and of the academy, have long silenced Black women and seeks not simply inclusion, but a shifting of the structures of knowledge and the rituals through which it is legitimated.

As a material experiment with ethnographic knowing and writing, the quilt is piecing and memory-work, making by using garments from my own family as the ground of exploration. Working back and forth between constructing the quilt, researching the worlds into which each garment and textile leads, and writing this paper has involved looping meanders where sewing

[4] In the UK, these PhDs are research by practice. practice-based and/or practice-led research where creative practice forms part of the contribution to knowledge supported by a shorter written thesis.

inspires research investigation and vice-versa. The resulting writing is a patchwork, in part because the material experiments that it has been generated alongside have resulted in a patchwork quilt, albeit one that is at this point unfinished. The writing is also a patchwork as a way to take apart and piece together the three historical threads represented by the materials from which the quilt is made. As with the autoethnographic work I undertook in my book, *My Life With Things: The Consumer Diaries* (Chin 2016), the method of inquiry is at once deeply personal and broadly ethnographic.

These are fabrics from which the quilt is constructed:

- Black. A length of Swiss lace I bought in London a few years ago in an African textile shop.
- White. The skirt portion of a two-piece Chinese outfit that belonged to my white grandmother, Jessie Gorham Toll.
- Yellow. A cheongsam that belonged to my Chinese grandmother, Lilac Bow Yoke Chin.

Figure X.1. Two garments and a textile. © Zoë Jackson 2022. Reproduced with permission.

This project, then, as making/thinking/writing, is a composition that works at the seams of racial histories, racial mixing, family, and notions of belongingness in the United States. What I learned from Mrs. Pettaway is that the project required me to take apart clothing of loved ones in order to properly make my ideas material. Retrograde notions about blood and purity still circulate as a kind of folk wisdom even among people who think of themselves as good and

true, as generous and loving, as fair and thoughtful. Education is no protection against entertaining racial beliefs that are, quite simply, wrong. In my experience, education merely provides cover for racist acts under the cover of science, good intentions, or both. A 2016 study asked 418 medical students and residents to evaluate the truthfulness of statements such as "Black people's nerve-endings are less sensitive than White people's nerve-endings" (Hoffman et al. 2016). About fifty percent reported that at least one of the false belief items was possibly, probably, or definitely true. For me this statistic translates into the fervent hope that not one of those medical professionals who believes such things ever lays a finger on my child.

Figure X.2. The starting point. Author's own photograph.

Black

Figure X.3. First cut. Author's own photograph.

My daughter's father, Robert, born in Washington D.C., remembers going to segregated beaches as a child. When we met, his father had long ago passed away, as had his sister. His mother said, as he recounted it, "If you're going to marry one of them, I don't want to hear from you anymore." My daughter has no mementos, no inherited items from them. Her flesh is her inheritance. In this way, she lives the afterlife of slavery with doubling and redoubling of the losses and dispossessions specific to the descendants of enslaved Africans in the Americas relatives she will never meet, ancestors whose names can never be known because they were likely never recorded, it's a long, long thread to pull.

The black in the quilt is made up of several yards of Swiss lace, as white as can be, embellished with crystals. I bought that fabric in London from an African textiles store. The crisp newness of the white Swiss lace is another visual pun -- the black is white. It also is a marker of the absence my daughter experiences, never having met her father's family.

White

Figure X.4. Chinese embroidered jacket. © Zoë Jackson 2022. Reproduced with permission.

The one-fourth white portion of Black/White/Yellow is made of a skirt and top that used to belong to my mother's mother, Jessie. It is made in an ivory-colored silk, hand-embroidered with flowered designs. It is possible that the fabric originally came from a journey to China made by my grandmother's great-grandfather in 1920s or 1930s; he returned to the United

States with crates full of treasures. The loose jacket comes to the waist and closes at the front with frogs. An ankle-length, A-line skirt has a yoke at the waist. The skirt has been modified by hand, a zipper installed, and I recognize the competent, yet inelegant stitches I have seen in other clothes that my white grandmother once owned. She was an accomplished do-it-yourself-er, thrifty as anything, proud to have paid off her mortgage in full.

What was Jessie doing with that Chinese outfit? When or where did she wear it? It could only have been a form of dress up, a kind of fashion play. There is a visual pun built in: the white fabric for the quilt is, simultaneously, conceptually yellow. Because race is messed up that way.

Yellow

Figure X.5. Cheongsam © Zoë Jackson 2022. Reproduced with permission.

For yellow, I use a cheongsam and matching jacket made of silk that belonged to my grandmother Lilac. When I was in my early 30s, my Auntie Vi – Lilac's sister Violet – took me down into her San Francisco basement and gave me a box of clothes that had belonged to my grandmother, and my great grandmother, some old family photos, and some lengths of fabric. My grandmother Lilac had died in 1974, in an accident with a drunk driver. My grandfather was driving. I don't remember her smell.

The cheongsam and jacket were among the things I received that day, and they brought me close to my long-dead grandmother in a profoundly physical, material way that was

surprising in its power. These are custom tailored pieces from a trip my Chinese grandparents took to Taiwan in the early 1970s. As I take apart the garment, I can see faint sweat stains in the armpits.

White

My grandmother Jessie Gorham Toll was born in Ojai, California to a well-to-do ranching family. Her lineage stretches back to John Howland, who was one of two indentured servants to arrive in the so-called new world on the Mayflower. At one point on the trans-Atlantic journey he was washed into the sea during a storm, and was fished back onto deck by Miles Standish. I find it endlessly amusing that I am descended from the guy who fell off the Mayflower.[5]

Black

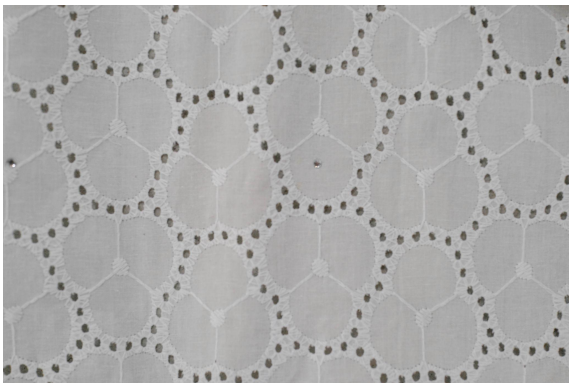

Figure X.6. Lace detail. © Zoë Jackson 2022. Reproduced with permission.

The white length of Swiss Lace, bought in London, holds space; it is a site of blankness, questions, suppositions. It is up to my daughter to dig into the history of her Black ancestors. It is not my task. What does Swiss lace have to do with Blackness? The laces, so iconically African

[5] John and his wife Elizabeth had ten children, all of whom lived to adulthood. Today they have nearly 100,000 living descendants.

today, are firmly stitched to colonialism, though that history is relatively shallow in the case of lace, and begins in the 1960s. Swiss lace may or may not be Swiss. Sometimes it is actually Austrian. Sometimes these textiles are generically called “African lace” (see Figure X.6). In technical terms they are not lace at all, but industrial embroideries. These not-truly-lace-laces (but what is truly anything?) are required wearing at most Nigerian weddings and festive events. This ubiquitous and defining textile, it turns out, only really burst onto the Nigerian scene in the 1960s (Plankensteiner 2013). Like Lilac’s cheongsam, Nigerian lace is both a marker of ethnic authenticity and a product of colonialism and global circuits of trade in things and people. The relatively shallow history doesn’t make it any less legitimately African. After all, Nigeria itself is a colonial creation.

Yellow

My Chinese grandmother Lilac was born in Alameda, California in 1919. Her mother was born in San Francisco, as was her mother before her. I searched for records of their births but could find none. The US census from 1900 records only 1,196 US-born Chinese girls and women in San Francisco, a total of 2,101 women and girls overall in a Chinese/Chinese American population of 11,449 (Chan 2005: 44-5). Why so few women and girls?

Chinese began coming to the United States in large numbers beginning in the latter half of the 19th century. It was gold rush time, and times were tough in the southern provinces of China, what was then known as Canton, now Guangdong. Nearly all those who came were men, mostly young, hoping to make a fortune and then go back to China. Very small numbers of Chinese women immigrated at this time and most were either wives of well-to-do merchants, or prostitutes. San Francisco, like other Chinatowns, was a bachelor society (even though many of the men had wives and children in China), and this state of affairs was framed as not just distasteful but downright unnatural by the increasing numbers of people who feared Chinese immigration. The “failure of Chinese men to establish families” became one of the tent-poles of

Anti-Chinese sentiment, as this supposed failure represented a refusal to assimilate and lack of interest in nation-building (Rouse 2009: 16). Cheap labor was another target, particularly of trade unionists who argued that Chinese workers suppressed wages for whites. The Page Act of 1875 had a twofold aim: it banned the immigration of any "cooly"--that is, contracted Chinese laborers – and it also barred Chinese prostitutes. This gendered policy led to a sixty-eight percent drop in Chinese female immigrants between 1876 and 1882 (Peffer 1986: 29). Chinese women seeking to enter the United States were forced to undergo interrogations that included such questions as: "Have you lived in a house of prostitution in Hong Kong, Macau, or China?" and "Are you a virtuous woman?" (Peffer 1986: 32).

Part of the history of Chinese in the United States is that for many decades, having a family that included mothers and daughters was astonishingly rare. I try to imagine what life was like for US-born Chinese girls in those early days, to be so rare, so precious, so prized, so desired, so vilified, so terrifying that entire laws had to be created to keep them out.

White

In contrast to the spotty and inconsistent presence of my Chinese family in census records, the Gorhams, Tolls, and Joys are everywhere: in each census, in newspapers, draft cards, ship passenger lists, passport applications, telephone directories, deeds, marriage registers, birth announcements, obituaries, cemeteries. There's even a tortoise at the Santa Barbara Zoo whose enclosure bears a plaque in honor of my grandmother Jessie, to recognize her years of service to that organization. The celebrated photographer Walker Evans took a childhood portrait of my white grandfather, Carroll Costello Toll. Carroll's brother, Maynard, was a prominent lawyer and founding trustee of the Los Angeles Museum of Art.

That side of the family has left a trail across the landscape as well as in bureaucratic records. Scripps College, in Pomona, California, has a building named after Eleanor Joy Toll, who

would become my grandmother Jessie's mother-in-law. Eleanor Joy Toll also has her very own entry in Wikipedia. The Toll family home in Glendale is on the national historic register. Does their existence in the archive and landscape make their history more real, their impact more meaningful?

Black

The Swiss lace is also made of cotton. The connections between cotton and Blackness are nothing if not fraught. Zoë Jackson, who took many of the photos for this piece, is descended on her father's side from enslaved people who picked cotton in the south. My daughter's ancestors may have worked alongside Zoë's, or near them. Who knows? At Zoë's senior photography installation, a branch of cotton fluffy with ripe bolls was placed beneath a table strewn with uncut negatives. I was carrying a plastic cup full of reception-grade red wine, and sprinkled a few drops to pay my respects, leaving berry-colored stains behind.

Yellow

There may be a trace of those Chinese ancestors in the census of 1900. Lilac's mother appears in the 1940 census as Ling Lee Quan. There is a household that appears in the 1900 census whose members include "Wong Shee" and her daughter Suey Ling Lee.[6] Could Suey Ling Lee be Ling Lee Quan in the 1940 census? My Chinese grandparents gave me the name Ling Ling and, only as I wrote this paragraph, did I wonder whether that name was as a tribute to Suey Ling Lee from whom I might be descended.

The census record is a tantalizing possibility that my elusive Chinese history has left a documentary trace. The first thirteen lines of the form are taken up by Bow Lee and his

[6] Wong Shee means, basically, woman from the Wong family who is married. "Shee" is the honorific for marriage. In Cantonese naming practice, women were referred to by their paternal clan even after marriage.

household. His wife, Wong Shee, born September 1861, thirty-eight years old, married twenty-five years and mother of five living children.

From the information inscribed in those thirteen lines of data, I've pieced together a narrative.

By the time Wong Shee was seventeen years old, she had been married for four years and was mother to three young sons. She and Lee Bow had married in 1875, the same year that the Page Act restricted the immigration of women from China. Lee Bow had been born in China, was twenty years older than Hong Shee, and listed as a cannery worker.[7] *His job was likely in a salmon canning factory, one of many in San Francisco at the time. The marriage quickly produced three boys and then Wong Shee seems to have had a nine-year break from childbearing. One likely explanation for the break is that, like many sojourning Chinese men, Lee Bow returned to China for a spell after the births of those first three boys. Or perhaps Wong Shee had ways to prevent pregnancy, or perhaps she had had pregnancies that did not result in live births. In any case, her two girls, Lucy Sum Lee and Suey Ling Lee, were born nine years after their youngest brother.*

In 1900, Wong Shee was a 38-year-old matriarch. She and her husband were living at home with their five children, two daughters-in-law, three grandchildren and a lodger. A total of thirteen people living at 1024 Pacific Street, a neighborhood made of the two- and three-story walkup flats that are still found throughout the city. The youngest son, eighteen, was a cabin boy.[8] *The two older boys were cannery workers like their father. They had married, one after the other, and brought their wives to live at Pacific Street. The wives had, one after the other, blessed the family with grandchildren. Though Wong Shee had been born in the United States, she did not speak English, nor could she read or write. Her two daughters-in-law were also born in the US but the generations were changing: in contrast to Wong Shee who had been a bride at fourteen, they did not marry until their early 20s, and their husbands were only a year or two older. They*

[7] A cannery is a factory where food is canned.
[8] Walkup flats are in older apartment buildings with no elevator, accessed by walking up multiple flights of stairs. A cabin boy is a boy who works as a servant on a ship.

could speak English, and could also read and write. Wong Shee's first daughter, Lucy, was eleven years old and attending the racially segregated school San Francisco provided for Chinese children. Suey Ling Lee, the eight-year-old, was not recorded by the census worker as attending school.

This Chinese American family appears only in the 1900 census; I could not find traces of them either before or after. They are unusual particularly because Wong Shee was among the first native-born Chinese, and a woman. Although Wong Shee and most of the others disappear from later census records, I know they were there in San Francisco – and that they likely moved to Oakland after the devastating 1906 earthquake. My father says that my great-grandmother remembers being on a boat in San Francisco Bay after the earthquake. I don't know whether it really matters if the Wong Shee in the census is a woman in my family line, if the life I've conjured from the census page is the actual life in my family's history. Whoever she was, I claim her and honor the extraordinarily hard work she must have done every single day.

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The manner of their arrival: They all came on ships: The Mayflower John Howland and Elizabeth Tilley (white); an enslaved person on an unnamed slave ship (black); a Chinese man and woman, no names, no records (yellow). None of them could help who they were or how they arrived wherever they found themselves, even as who they were and how they arrived made all the difference. If you arrived on a ship, you are a settler.

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Black

The popularity of African lace is largely responsible for the continuing survival of industrial lace factories in Switzerland and Austria (Plankensteiner 2013). As China zooms in to out-produce and out-distribute as part of China's 'One Belt, One Road' effort, those factories are seeing huge

challenges. Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road initiative has involved, in part, Chinese investments in African infrastructure on a massive scale, together with ambitious efforts to forge new and enduring paths for trade. One of the outcomes is that, increasingly, “African” fabric is designed and produced in China.

Black/White/Yellow

Figure 7: Sewn together after three cuts. © Zoë Jackson 2022. Reproduced with permission.

Settler geographies are baked into the ways we talk. People on the east coast of the US speak of going “out west,” while people in the west speak of traveling “back east.” African Americans speak of going “back” to Africa, and those of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese descent are still commonly told to go “back where you came from.” Whites rarely speak in this way of going back to their places that lie elsewhere, places where they more properly belong. These ideologies of out and back trace histories across native lands. We are all settlers if we are not native. In what ways is China where I came from? By what means would my child claim going back to Africa, or back to China?

Triangulating Race

Pa-pa (the Cantonese word for 'father's mother') was born in the United States; her mother was born in the United States, and her mother was born in the United States. This means that on the Chinese side, my family has been in the US longer than a great many white people. My colleague, Sean Donahue, has four grandparents who "came over" from Ireland. Nevertheless, even our Chinese students assume his 'Americanness,' while I appear as fundamentally foreign, new, less-of-this-place than he is. The archaeologist Laura Ng – an expert in Chinese migration between the US and China – told me to look in the Chinese Exclusion files in the national archive. These files, it turns out, are an archive of the ways that the US has designed Chineseness as forever alien. While the Page Act was concerned with coolie labor and Chinese prostitutes, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred Chinese laborers from immigration altogether and required those who had already entered the country to obtain recertification to return. The exclusion files record the dehumanizing process of, among other things Americans of Chinese descent having to prove their citizenship against the foundational assumption of foreignness. The files are an archive of what Iyko Day (2016) describes as the "exclusionary logics" (32-33). The logic of exclusion serves capital by racializing Asian labor as always alien, unassimilable, something to be cast out, returned to sender, go back where you came from. In tying racialization in the US to labor and capital, the texture of varying experiences becomes more comprehensible. Triangulating race in this way helps to explain why I was often asked "where are you from?" in a way that assumed I was born somewhere other than in the United States, while my daughter is frequently asked "what are you?" a question that has very different assumptions baked into it, assumptions that veer toward a lack of humanity itself.

In the project of nation-building it was important to destroy as thoroughly as possible family, culture, languages and worlds of the enslaved and the native. Such destruction was not a priority with regard to the Chinese largely because of the persistent idea that they would ultimately go back where they came from. Chinese immigrants maintained exceptionally strong ties to their homelands and even natal villages and ancestral clans. Throughout the 1800s and early part of the 1900s these ties were maintained through a steady back-and-forth of money and people, but after Mao's 1966 cultural revolution, going home was no longer an option.

Black

Blackness, for its part, stands on a different axis in the triangulation of race, one no less troublesome or fraught, but without the assumption of foreignness particular to the Chinese. Swiss lace is full of embroidered holes, carefully stitched absences rigged up as patterns of beauty and elegance. Those absences suffuse blackness in the history of the US. Some of those holes are blanks in the archives; others are silences and absences, whispers and secrets. Chinese coolies at least provisionally were recorded in ship manifests with some version of a name, unlike the enslaved who arrived as items of cargo and not as human beings. The pattern is built out of embroidered emptiness. Like Mrs. Pettway, my daughter will need to slash in and through the pattern to make her way through, to craft her own wholeness, to cover up with love.

Yellow

When my Chinese grandparents went to Taiwan in the early 1970s, it was a kind of home-going, but they were far from their ancestral villages, which lay on the Chinese mainland in the Taishanese province of Guangdong. I wonder what it was like for Lilac, who I doubt had ever left the country before that, to find herself in a Chinese nation – was anything and everything even remotely 'Chinese' like home to her? Or did she long to place her feet on the soil that her forebears had known, and mourn the impossibility of returning to where her family roots lay? Perhaps she arrived in Taiwan she felt a kind of claim to that place, a belonging unlike the conditional and circumscribed life in Chinatown, with its segregated schools and redlined geography?

The cheongsam is a quintessential Chinese garment in the United States, one that encases stereotypes as much as it also carries culture. Like the Chinese themselves, the cheongsam has migrated globally into different cultures and contexts, resonating differently wherever it finds itself. My grandfather was active in the Six Companies, the family associations that got so much work done in Chinatown.[9] They raised money, gave scholarships, built buildings, promoted business and commerce, and dabbled in mafia-esque shenanigans. In the formally posed group photos from big events, the women wear cheongsam. Out beyond Chinatown, the dress brings up images of the Orientalist and exotic movie character Suzie Wong, dragon lady, images of Asian femininity wreathed in smoke.[10] This image is one created by Hollywood, and by white directors, screenwriters and actors, to serve interests of white supremacy portraying Asia and Asians – especially women – as subservient, consumable, and, if mixed race, tragically marooned between cultures at war. (As a mixed race person, I am especially offended by the whole mixed-person-is-a-tragic-happening trope.)

Black

In an analysis of garments worn during celebrations by the Ijebu-Yoruba of Ogun State, Niger, the author concludes that "Yoruba traditional dress should be promoted in traditional festivals in order to preserve our dressing norms and prevent acculturation of western garments" (Diyalou 2010: 40). Diyalou's data show that women wear net lace, voile lace, organza lace and Swiss lace – that is, their preferred fabrics are very much like the Swiss lace I am using, though undoubtedly finer and more costly, since their cost was more than double what I paid for mine.

[9] Formally established in 1882, though beginning activity in the 1850s, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, also known as the Chinese Six Companies, was a conglomerate of the six most important Chinese organisations in California at the time. The organisation was set up to help Chinese people relocate and travel to and from the US and also offered legal and physical protection. It acted as an authorized spokesperson for the Chinese community nationwide. More information on the six companies can be found in Lee (2015).

[10] Suzie Wong is the titular character in 1960 film, *The World of Suzie Wong*, directed by Richard Quine, based on a 1957 novel by Richard Mason. The fictionalized tale of Hong Kong's red-light district contributed to the creation of the cultural stereotype of Asian women as hypersexual, yet childlike, duplicitous, and in need of rescue (Hill Collins 2004).

[11] That these dressing norms arose from and are enabled by circuits of production that are indisputably global does nothing to destabilize the authenticity of the customs Diyalou seeks to preserve; Swiss lace is certainly part of traditional Yoruba culture. My daughter is named for the kingdom of Benin, a Yoruba kingdom that had a thousand-year history and whose capital was then brutally sacked and destroyed by the British in 1897. The Oba, or king, of Benin was known to be extraordinarily rich, and the intricately carved elephant tusks and intricately modelled metal objects taken from Benin are legendary for their beauty. Benin was also rich because of its involvement in the slave trade, making for a complex relationship to slavery and its history. My daughter's name, then, tasks her with seaming together and pulling apart complexities and contradictions, past and present.

Yellow

The hybridity stitched into the cheongsam is multi-layered and woven into a several-hundred-year political history, involving several Chinese dynasties, colonialism, global migration, power, women's freedoms, and prostitution (Ng 2018). The stereotypical Hollywood cheongsam is hardly Chinese in the sense of being an age-old "traditional" piece of clothing. Rather, it emerged in the early part of the twentieth century in Shanghai and then Taiwan as the result of Japanese efforts to colonialize and modernize China by forcing it to be more western. One instrument of this Japanese imposed westernization was to change its loose, tubular shape and silhouette. Using an arsenal of English tailoring techniques – precise measurement, darts, zippers and seaming – ensured that the two-dimensional fabric could be molded closely to the body. The new cheongsam feminized the body and sexualized it, invoking both new ideas of women's freedom even as those freedoms were embodied in sexuality and licentiousness, prostitution and vice.

[11] Fabric cost ranged from 20,00-25,000 naira (about 48-49 USD at this writing); I paid about $25 for the fabric I purchased. I have found that for like items that are roughly alike in make, material, and quality, their prices are remarkably similar across geographic locations.

By the time my grandmother Lilac went to Taiwan in the 1970s, the skilled tailors who made her dress and matching jacket had likely migrated from Shanghai via Hong Kong (where they would have received English-style tailoring training) bringing with them a set of sartorial techniques and sensibilities now thoroughly immersed in a complex web of nationalist projects and increasingly global economic systems. The cheongsam of my grandmother's Oakland Chinatown was not Suzy Wong's cheongsam, nor was it a qipao, the Mandarin version of the dress that became more widespread as a fashion item after the cultural revolution in 1966 – which is to say, long after my own ancestors had left China.

White

The Chinese outfit I inherited from my grandmother Jessie is not a cheongsam in its design. The jacket and skirt likely were undergarments in China, not the right against the skin, but a medium layer atop the most intimate layer, and beneath the outer, visible garment of a relatively high-status woman. In the United States, in my grandmother's closet, they become costume of a sort. I imagine that a fashion-conscious woman such as my grandmother might have worn this outfit for an at home cocktail party, a film noir production with ladies smoking cigarettes and popping out snappy repartee. Very Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*, very Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce*.[12]

Nothing about anything Jessie wore was ever accidental, and so the 'Chineseness' of the Chinese outfit is something of a mystery to me in the sense that I wish I knew what she was thinking. But I have my suspicions. These suspicions spring from some other things I also inherited from her: a richly embroidered silk shawl with long fringes, and a couple of bright, floor length dresses with Mexican embroidery. The shawls and Mexican dresses were without doubt things she wore to Santa Barbara's annual fiesta, also known as Old Spanish Days. For the Californians who dreamed up fiesta in 1924, fiesta was meant to spur tourism to the area.

[12] *Double Indemnity* (1944), [Film] Dir. Billy Wilder, USA: Paramount Pictures; *Mildred Pierce* (1945), [Film] Dir. Michael Curtiz, USA: Warner Bros.

Fiesta's theme was initially heavily Spanish, with flamenco, toreadors, and lots of Sangria. Fiesta is temporally situated in the Rancho Period "taking place from around 1824 to 1864, when Santa Barbara was under Mexican rule and American rule … but not Spanish" (Graffy n.d.). To put it another way, as Patricia Ann Hardwick (2010) observes, "Official versions of Santa Barbara's past promoted by Santa Barbara's civic leaders and Old Spanish Days Fiesta literature tend to privilege romanticized historical interpretations that submerge and absorb California's hybrid ethnic and cultural histories into an idealized Spanish colonial narrative" (60). The Chinese outfit likely fit into some other idealized narrative, but what that narrative might have been is a mystery to me.

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Jessie, like many old Californians, pronounced the Spanish words of the state's geography in distinctive ways. Los Angeles, in Spanish, Los **'ahn-**hel-es. In standard American English, it is transformed into Los **'ann-**je-lez (or, sometimes, los **ann**-je-leez). Either way, three syllables. Old Californians pronounce it this way: Los **ayng-**glis. There's something wilful about the mispronunciation, the loss of a full syllable, the anglicization and hardening of the consonants. Old Spanish Days was dreamed up by a community of people, who like my grandmother, said Los **ayng-**glis, and wanted their history Spanish (that is white) but not Mexican and certainly not Indigenous or native. Thus, Old Spanish Days was celebrated with, among other things, sangria, and a lot of Flamenco dancing, complete with fringed, silken shawls. According to Hardwick (2010), these shawls came from the Philippines, colonized by Spain from 1565-1898, and their provenance adds an interesting layer to the colonial complexity of Old Spanish Days. My mother's cousin Sally was an excellent flamenco dancer, appearing on stage as "Sarita Diaz." My mother remembers fiesta fondly, even as she now is a bit uncomfortable about the cultural dress-up involved. She also remembers wandering through the grounds of the Santa Barbara mission,[13] across the street from her childhood home, seeing

[13] The string of 21 missions established by the Spanish beginning in 1769 play a uniquely important role in the history of California. Founded by Franciscan padres, for about 70 years the missions constituted a "...formidable and repressive system designed explicitly to control and indoctrinate their Indian apprentices (Lightfoot 2005, pp 80-81).

native graves, and being terribly, terribly uncomfortable. She had questions, but knew nobody who might answer them. My grandmother Jessie's Chinese outfit lived in that world, costume pieces in a world where these kinds of questions cannot be answered by the people of whom we would ask them.

Black

When trying to find out who the current producers of Swiss lace might be, I came across this heading in Alibaba**:** "**African French Swiss Lace Fabrics Nigerian Party Wedding Dress.**" China's overseas development finance between 2008 and 2019 is estimated to have totalled $462 billion, rivalling $469 billion in World Bank lending over the same period (Sutter, Schwarzenberg and Sutherland 2021). Producer after producer provides a snapshot of their capabilities. MH Lace, author of the African French Swiss Lace headline, boasts an ability to produce the customer's desired number of 30-45 thirty to yard bolts of fabric within ten to fifteen days. They own "50 sets of imported Schiffli embroidery machines and 400 sets of Tajima, Behringer and other multi-functional embroidery machines."[14] No more cotton. Their fabrics are 100% polyester.

Black/White/Yellow

The joke's on us: all of these fabrics lead to China and none of us has ever been there. Happy endings? We are whole, frayed here and there, pieced together, hanging in. I always felt like a fraud in Chinatown, when asked a question in Chinese by a shopkeeper, and having to answer "I

Demographic collapse was one result; few Indigenous people who were born at the missions lived to adulthood (Hackel 2005: 95).

[14] MH Lace (no date) '[Hot Item] African French Swiss Lace Fabrics Nigerian Party Wedding Dress,' *Made-in-China.com*. Available at: https://mh-chine.en.made-in-china.com/product/jdEJgFMYHxVr/China-African-French-Swiss-Lace-Fabrics-Nigerian-Party-Wedding-Dress.html (accessed 6 March 2022).

don’t speak Chinese.” Benin has been race-policed for not being Black enough and I worry that her Chineseness does not feel real or solid. Who my daughter will be is still under construction: Swiss lace pieced with two types of Chinese silk, brocade, and embroidery. Who we are is made up of more than genetic bits and pieces. She’s a Black cowboy, an escaped enslaved woman, a mixed-race dancer with marcelled hair and a blue cheongsam. She walks along railroad tracks that scar the land, dances on the gravel verge as honey bees throng among the orange blossoms. We are trespassing, but aren’t we all? She has conjured these lives from within, fed by her own wellspring of need and curiosity. Even so, she’ll stitch her own quilt, fill in the blanks, wrap herself in memories as yet unknown. It is her work, not mine, that will bring that project to completion. And here are many newly cut pieces, waiting to be fitted into a pattern that, in its turn, fits nobody but her.

It will be beautiful.

Figure 8: Five cuts. Author’s own photograph.

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