Graphic Intimations: Postwar to Contemporary Asian Diasporic Art and Writing

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2019
ABSTRACT

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follows the oblique tensions in Asian diasporic creative compositions between art and writing, performance and inscription. Identifying the graphic—written and/or drawn—as a preeminent form for Asian diasporic artists and writers in North America, this project connects scholarship in Asian American literary studies on questions of form and social formation with the material histories of Asian diasporic visual culture. From postwar graphic internment memoirs to New York City subway writing, this dissertation traces the Asian diasporic graphic’s investments in embodied creative practices that intimate the sensible and sensual in queer, interracial, and cross-cultural liaisons.

Charting the history of the graphic as a twinned positivist technology of measurement and a visceral aesthetic response, this dissertation proposes that the Asian diasporic graphic intimates social possibilities formed in, but not necessarily of, the purview of nation and the state regulation of Asian North Americans as populations. Accordingly, this work examines how these artists’ staging of the graphic encounter might enact disruptive performances of unforeseen social intimacies and political affiliations during these decades that trouble the fidelity of visual documentation.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to Mary Yaeko Kwong, an artist and a writer.
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Introduction

While sorting through the archives of Chinese American artist and collector Martin Wong in New York City, I found myself at a too-small table in Fales Special Collections at New York University—one of several receptacles for the prodigious collection, parts of which can also be found at The Museum of the City of New York, the Wong family home, art galleries, and his friend’s house in Pennsylvania. After days of peeling through letters and sketches, diagrams and boxes of ephemera, I received his oversize handscrolls. They were unwieldy: the brittle rice paper fragile, the dimensions enormous, the crowded lettering dense to opacity. When I rolled them out in a wide-legged stance, paper unfurling to the edges of long study tables and my fingers splayed to weight their willful retraction, other patrons and staff stopped their own work, gathering together to regard the beauty and strangeness of these pieces.

The scrolls are covered with Wong’s signature American Sign Language renderings—inked and penciled icons of hands spelling out a series of vignettes letter by painstaking letter. These documents are part literary, part user’s manual; they are high art, and artisan craft; they are both text based and graphically rendered. For Wong, this work distilled a lifelong obsession with ciphers and signified a gnarl of meaning: investments in queer culture’s cruising signs, his patronization of New York City graffiti culture’s tags and insider’s scripts, family formations indebted to the bilingual and bi-visual cross-cultural exchanges of the Asian diaspora, and more. Like Wong, I, too, am
keenly interested in similarly dense sites of meaning—the entangled relationship of material delicacy and ephemeral heft, things read and seen at a slant. This project seeks out graphic disturbances such as Wong’s unruly scrolls betoken.

Soon after visiting Wong’s teeming archives in New York, I found myself sorting through my recently deceased grandmother’s house in a small railroad town in British Columbia. In the basement—a crammed repository of our Chinese and Japanese Canadian families’ material passages—I found an exquisite collection of rare midcentury graphic art and ephemera, partly created and sent to the family by my grandmother’s older sister amidst photos of their internment; a great grandparent’s Gold Mountain suitcase, replete with Buddhist scripture secretly tucked into a stitched lining; and a brass steamer from the family laundry. A talented visual artist and designer, my aunt had boldly pursued a life in Toronto’s overwhelmingly white and masculinist art world immediately after the war, never receiving the critical or institutional attention of some of her peers found in the collection that she had serially posted to her family.

The modest collection she had assembled does not form a comprehensive account of midcentury Canadian graphic art or Toronto’s modernist milieu. It does, however, intimate the social possibilities for creative exchange that my aunt and other Nisei artists might have encountered in postwar Toronto and it marks a space for a potential Japanese Canadian avant-garde that may have been muted and nebulous, certainly still unconsolidated, then as now. In the graphic seepages between the explicit
and the obscure, ephemeral excess and disciplinary absence, my project is precisely interested in the undocumented possibilities these two archives pose, in the provisional, slantwise routes and circulations of minor objects winding through and between minor disciplines.

*Graphic Intimations* follows the often-oblique passages in Asian diasporic creative compositions between art and writing, performance and inscription. I connect the material histories of Asian diasporic visual culture with questions of form and social formation that animate Asian American literary studies. My route winds through the history of the graphic—in its barest signification of written and/or drawn—which I assert is a preeminent form for Asian diasporic artists and writers in North America. Some of the earliest Asian North American literature is graphic. On the walls of the Angel Island Immigration Station off the coastline of San Francisco and the now-demolished Immigration Station of Victoria, British Columbia, detained arrivants inscribed text and images into the walls, both words *and* images, tactile and sensible in the wooden substrate. These earliest graphic works from the turn of the nineteenth century limn some of the contours of this project. The circuit between Victoria and San Francisco bespeaks the transnational positioning of the objects of this study. The detained arrivants hailing from diverse sites of the Asia Pacific for variable durations in the Americas index this work’s interests in Asian North American life as diasporic. I examine these cultural histories created in but not necessarily of, the purview of nation
that trouble its reproductive logics of genealogy and origin. From the cramped and surveillanced confinements of detention and holding from which these early inscriptions emerge I follow the afterlives of the indiscrete, overlapping, and willfully obscured social enjambments akin to what Nayan Shah has termed “stranger intimacy.” Finally, from within the promiscuous and porous borders of the graphic itself, between written and drawn, I advance a route for the study of Asian North American cultural life that winds a “crooked path,” evocative of both the wayward documentation of the earliest Chinese arrivants and the graphic’s own troubled consolidations. From the recursive, patterned textures of swelling crowds in Miné Okubo’s internment memoir, Citizen 13660 (1946) to the fleshly repetitions of Martin Wong’s crowded sign language scrolls, this project argues that the Asian diasporic graphic often intimates unseen social possibilities, political affiliations, and disruptive performances that require multiple interdisciplinary investments. In three chapters I trace the Asian diasporic graphic’s investments in embodied creative practices that intimate the sensible and sensual in queer, interracial, and cross-cultural liaisons.

A comic strip sequence; the lines of a bar graph; a realistic cinematic sex act; inscribed pictures and poetry on the walls of a detention cell: this study asks us to consider what connects these seemingly discrete parts. The answer, I argue, is the idea of the graphic. The theory and application of the graphic as a twinned a regulatory technology and an aesthetic discourse dates from at least the eighteenth century and the
emergence of popular print culture and empiricist epistemologies. The sensible and the sensual conjoins the graphic as a marker of European modernity through both denotation—a positivist technology of measurement—and connotation—a visceral aesthetic response. The OED lists several senses of the graphic, from writing that “produces by words the effect of a picture; vividly descriptive; life-like,” to illustration and diagrammatic notation, typographical elements, computer visuals, and writing surfaces. All bespeak a commitment to the possibility, if not outright insistence, of fidelity as visual iconicity to reassure the always treacherous field of representation. In the absence of a comprehensive study of the idea of the graphic as an Enlightenment knowledge formation with a popular and institutional history in European thought and art, this project theoretically works from the margins of graphic discourse in the hopes that it will mark future spaces for critical inquiry. I am indebted to thinkers whose work identifies and attempts to dismantle Enlightenment knowledge formations such as Denise Ferreira da Silva, Lisa Lowe, Edward Said, Sylvia Wynters, and others whose work traces how regulatory technologies that would certainly include the graphic, have always been colonial technologies of racial, gender, and sexual consolidations. Following Sylvia Wynter’s thoughts on the “rewriting of the human” Clyde Taylor’s maxim that the “aesthetic invited itself along, first as an uninvited guest, but soon as an indispensable partner, on the far-ranging expeditions of Western knowledge” (24),
conveys the expansive possibilities that a sustained theoretical study of the graphic might offer towards decolonizing modernity.

In our digitized and data-driven present, the graphic is sensibly ubiquitous and theoretically obscure. *Graphic Intimations* does not attempt to undertake any comprehensive history of the graphic but rather marks spaces of historical and disciplinary elision where Asian diasporic creative labors haunt these gaps. In a 2006 conversation between comics studies scholars, Scott McCloud and Hilary Chute, they characterize the immense work of “condensation” and “distillation” undertaken by the artist to render an overall graphic narrative as a “secret labor in the aesthetic diaspora” (cite). While Chute and McCloud privilege the artist’s unseen narrative command through their early selection and sequencing of discrete yet narratively connected panels—what to include and what to leave out—this secret labor is also the occulted labor of the graphic itself. The graphic’s properties of optic and text, condensation and distillation, and the typographical work of the gutter spaces (the white space between panels) trigger perception through a process of sensible intimation. If we press on Chute and McCloud’s formal meditations here from the personal arc of the artist and their experiential processes to the global, the “secret labor in the aesthetic diaspora” that the gutter space signals intimates an attendant history of aesthetic labors that this project is concerned with. Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish’s “critical history” of graphic
design reminds us that the seeming ubiquity of the graphic and its generic formalization are deeply social and material:

No graphic object is discrete or isolated. All cultural expressions participate in systems of production. All designed communications are vested interests . . . The more ‘natural’ something appears, the more culturally indicative it is. Anything that claims to be universal is highly suspicious. Every graphic artifact constitutes an exchange among individuals, groups, or entities. Meaning is made, not transmitted. Communication is a dynamic system. Technology is not determinant. Style is an agent of culture. (xxix)

As Drucker and McVarish suggest, the graphic is socially embedded; meanings are accretive and fluid, subject to exchange, use, transit, and process.

I will suggest that Chute and McCloud’s formal denomination of “secret,” or invisible “labors” in the “aesthetic diaspora” unwittingly invokes the marginalized history of aesthetic labor that Graphic Intimations gestures to. In the as yet unwritten global history of the graphic, Asian and Asian diasporic labors would configure a key site of this interdisciplinary inquiry, as a material and cultural history of aesthetic practices premised on a certain invisible relation between abstraction and labor that when aestheticized can sensibly configure what Iyko Day terms romantic capitalism. The considerable influence of Asian aesthetics on what we might call graphic modernity is vast and documented in a range of scholarly undertakings, from the circulations of ukiyo-e print and early manga to fin de siècle book design, comics, and the graphic novel; in the notions of negative space, ornament, and surface; the line of the ideogrammatic Chinese written character from Fenollosa and Pound through modernist poetics and beyond. While bringing these lines of influence between Europe and Asia into relief are
an important critical labor of an archaeology of the graphic aesthetic, my project is not invested in a possessive consolidation of an originary Asianness that might overwrite the Eurocentric story of modernity. I do not make an argument that the graphic is a particularly Asian cultural production but rather that the history of considerable Asian creative labor and aesthetic influence has been irretrievable within the modern ubiquity of the graphic. Accordingly, my interests in such graphic modernity as an index of global histories of racialized labor are primarily methodological. This project asks what about the Asian diasporic graphic and its relation to Asian American art and writing is, to evoke the recent provocation of Susette Min, “unnameable” and why? Rather than attempt to consolidate the Asian diasporic graphic as a discrete site of “reconciliation and containment” that Asian American art might localize, this work takes “a pause before the threshold of visibility and legitimacy” (Min 3) to consider the weighted conditions of such charged terms as containment, visibility, and legitimacy, “the limits of a given social order” (Min 22) in the graphic’s crooked paths as a methodology of Asian diasporic research.

If Chute and McCloud’s field-defining musings on the study of comics and the graphic novel unwittingly open a larger portal to the global graphic, this project assists this inquiry by striking a conversation about the graphic between the fields of Asian American literature and art. The entwined history of Asian diasporic labor and aesthetics overlap in the Americas precisely during the height of European investments
in Asian aesthetics and expand the graphic in the emergence of new national print cultures. When we connect the fields of Asian American visual culture with literary studies, a sense of overlapping, sometimes competing, and often indirect and recursive genealogies emerges which complicates the progressive impetus of Asian American studies as an outgrowth of political movement work. *Graphic Intimations* is not a comprehensive survey of the Asian American graphic across the twentieth century or a representative sample of artists and writers from across the Asian diaspora in North America. To undertake these larger projects one could conceivably begin with the Angel Island inscriptions; early manga such as *The Four Immigrants Manga* by Henry Kiyama; illustrated texts of the modernist period by figures such as Isamu Noguchi and Winnifred Eaton; midcentury graphic art from artists such as Gyo Fujikawa, Yun Gee, and Jeanyee Wong; visual/poetics experiments and performances by artists such as Bernice Bing, Mei-Mei Bersenbrugge, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Fred Wah; Roy Kiyooka; and Karen Tei Yamashita; Asian American Movement graphic works in a range of print mediums; and contemporary graphic novels and comics by creators such as Thi Bui, Gene Luen Yang, Mariko and Jillian Tamaki, and GB Tran. This is certainly not an exhaustive list but rather a speculative recording of various flashpoints one might touch on. While *Graphic Intimations* looks to the longer global history of the graphic, its bounded stakes are more compact. I turn to the years between the immediate postwar period of 1946 to 1999 when artist Martin Wong dies of AIDS-related illness. I focus on
three groupings of works by Chinese and Japanese North American artists whose artistic practices were often shaped by familial generational experiences and training that stemmed from formal trainings in China and Japan. Because of this early history of immigration and its often-crooked paths, I premise that the artists that I study were highly attuned to the instrumental uses of the graphic as regulatory technologies and that their work often directly engages the graphic along theoretical terms. This reflects what I posit as a shared experience of earlier waves of Asian diasporic life in North America where groups were treated as populations rather than communities, and accordingly subject to textual processes of graphic documentation. Rather than follow an expansive survey, the conversations that ensue follow two linked inquiries that stem from graphic distillation: what is added and replaced when we follow the genealogical disturbances and disciplinary crossings of the graphic encounter? And what future methodologies might emerge from considering something called Asian diasporic art as a creative and political practice that is often written and drawn, textual and visual, documentary and ephemeral performance?

In the foreword to *Asian American Art* (2008), the most comprehensive work to date in this minor and marginalized field, Gordon H. Chang rather tentatively makes a case for increased attention to Asian American art and visual studies:

Can one even go so far to suggest that, given the number and productivity of Asian American artists, the special place accorded by art by many people of Asian descent, and the connections of these artists with the general American art world (unacknowledged as they have been), the visual arts are an especially rich site for the study of Asian American experiences? As a site of cultural and social expression, might visual art even be
considered for Asian Americans akin in importance to the central place that music occupies in African American experience? Might it be that Asian Americans have made special and unique contributions to the visual arts? (xiii).

In the over ten years since Chang issued this call, scholarship by Margo Machida, Susette Min, Dorinne Kondo, Karen Higa, and others that call for increased attention to the arts in Asian American cultural studies has opened a rich site for thinking about the trajectory of this still minor field. Chang’s subjunctive query also highlights the unclosed speculation that this project is interested in with regard to issues of genealogy and origins and their bearing on this aesthetic diaspora of the graphic. Chang’s formulation poses the accreted resonances of the sonic in African American cultural expression as a parallel to the visual or optic in Asian American expression, opening a sensory and medial interchange between the two. Bracketing the implications of a proposed interchangeable sonic and visual for a moment, Chang’s query also raises the question of the disciplinary positioning of Asian American studies in relation to other fields, specifically African American studies for Chang. This project follows issues of racial exclusion, settler colonialism, and the formation of interethnic and sexual minoritarian enclaves that have bearing in African American, Native American, Latinx, and critical ethnic studies. This is not a project of comparative racialization however; rather, it follows the graphic as one mode of interchange between and across the logics of racial consolidation in the twentieth century, particularly as it circles around the late 1960s and the disciplinary arrival of African American studies, ethnic studies, queer studies and their diverse entanglements. The graphic trace I follow that runs through these fields
turns on exchanges predicated by physical removals and migrations writ as graphic enclosures that reorient belonging and representation from the purview of nation and citizenship to often unforeseen ways of being together and apart. Fred Moten’s thoughts on the materiality of the graphic encounter as read through the history of improvisation in relation to black bondage and labor unbrackets Chang’s interchangeable sonic and visual by highlighting the material interdependencies of enmediaison in the “ensemble of the graphic” that rearranges these overlaps along political and aesthetic histories (52).

By opening this introduction with a twinned meditation on the archives of artist Martin Wong and the small collection of graphic ephemera retrieved from my grandmother’s basement I have staked a provocation. A gay man whose art emerged from the nexus of gay liberation as staked in San Francisco at the close of the 1960s and the height of the AIDS crisis in 1980s New York, Wong’s “queer legacy” (Edgecomb) of collaborative performance and ephemeral documentation is not dependent on “ideological narratives of normative biological continuity” (Edgecomb 36) that Mary Yaeko Kwong’s basement might suggest. The familial archive that I stumbled on in the family basement was both generational and ungenerative as it ultimately sat disregarded for half a century as minor ephemera and whose very disregard bespeaks the genealogical discontinuities of cross-ethnic ruptures and generational fracture. It is the domestic overlaps between these two archival scenes that this project is interested in exploring. David Eng’s thoughts on queer diaspora ask us to reconceptualize diaspora
as “queerness, affiliation, and ethnic dispersion” rather than “conventional terms of ethnic dispersion, filiation, and biological traceability” (“Transnational Adoption” 4).

The queer futurity that we might see in Wong’s legacy of queer curation also aligns with Gayatri Gopinath’s recent study of “the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora,” a diaspora which Gopinath marks as “both a spatial and temporal category: spatial in that it challenges heteronormative and patrilineal underpinnings of conventional articulations of diaspora and nation, and temporal in that it reorients the traditionally backward glance of conventional articulations of diaspora, often predicated on a desire for a return to lost origins” (5). Alexandra Chang’s use of diaspora “as a verb” rather than a bounded site or time and is helpful for unpacking the multiple relations between art and artists through communities. Chang’s notion that Asian American art is created by the “formation of communities of affinity through the practice of active linkage and connection including performative interaction and cultural production” underscores how communities of affinity form along multiple lines of connection, from lineations that arrive at affiliations bounded in and beyond filiation. The works that I study in this project all trouble the notion of discrete family units and straight generational progression that the Confucian-inflected discourse of the model minority immigrant family portends. Writing and drawing from within divergently arranged, often constrained and provisional domestic scenarios, the graphic intimations that inform this
project have bearing on the erotic overlays between spatial and temporal imaginaries forming the critical present.

While one could certainly embark on a graphic study of these works exclusively through materialist questions of abstract and concrete or psychoanalytic methodologies of surface and depth—and indeed, I am not uninvested in the attendant questions of materiality and abstraction or Eve Sedgwick’s work on “weak” versus “strong” theorizations, or, “paranoid” versus “recuperative” approaches as important engagements for both queer theory and Asian American studies precisely for their entwined interests—my work here follows a methodology of the intimation. What I am interested in excavating is perhaps closer to a structure of feeling that the graphic encounter encompasses. Intimation’s sense of both an indirect route to knowledge and an indication or hint emerge from its roots in the Latin intimare, to impress or make familiar, or, intimus, inmost. Rather than surface and depth or visible and invisible, I focus on something akin to mass and matter, heavy and light, the graphic as a substrate of felt impression. Heavy and light opens us to the temporal in what is ephemeral, and in this work most often betokens queer notions of time and transit, yet also paradoxically attached to deeply registered material histories of labor. The graphic’s porous and flexible capacities connect to punctuated histories of Asian diasporic labors in these cultural productions. By thinking about Asian diasporic art as visual culture, this project follows multiple modes of enmediation deployed by the graphic: in print
text, fine and commercial art, cartoons and animation, film, live performance, and
gestural practices. While I necessarily engage with long established discourses of visible
and invisible, presence and absence, surface and depth, I have followed the graphic’s
own rubrics of intimation as they are received and thoughtfully configured in my objects
of study. Overlapping with these established grammars, this study follows the graphic’s
meditations on the explicit and obscure, discrete and indiscreet, the discreet and
indiscreet.

Beginning with graphic memoirs of Japanese American incarceration, the first
chapter of this dissertation sketches the coterminous forces of visual state measurements
of loyalty in the camps as the condition of normative liberal citizenship and an erotic
register of the explicit and obscure that revises the affective geographies of the settler
colonial nation. First published in 1946, Miné Okubo’s memoir *Citizen 13660* is one of the
first graphic memoirs in the Americas. This research considers the relative absence of
Okubo’s memoir from the current wave of graphic novels and memoirs amidst its
ongoing utility as a romantic settler affect in transnational Canadian graphic works.

The second and third chapters explore the experimental textual art and visual
poetics of Chinese American artist Martin Wong. I begin with Wong’s early creative
collaborations with San Francisco drag collectives—the Cockettes and Angels of Light—I
sketch his theorization of an actively embodied history of queer Chinese space and
temporality and its relation to liberatory “free” economies of diverse San Francisco
countercultures. The final chapter concludes with the ephemeral economies of Wong’s short-lived Museum of American Graffiti within the entwined landscapes of what graffiti writer Lee Quiñones terms the “radical deforestation” of urban renewal throughout communities of color amidst the AIDS crisis of 1980s New York City. As an act of what Gopinath tags “queer curation,” Wong’s assemblage of the writing archive gathers African diasporic forms through multiple cultural signifiers and challenges notions of discrete and discreet genealogies of the hip hop movement. Tending to the interlocking economies of the Museum and archive, I propose that Wong’s curation looks back to the free economies of gay liberation, closing an unlikely cipher of diasporic repurposing along multiple sites and times.
1. Sight and Sentence: Graphic Form, State Metrics, and Japanese North American Wartime Incarceration

Life in a Relocation Center for Nissei and Issei is described and pictured by the author, who was Number 13660. Living in Berkeley, Calif., with a brother, she describes graphically the life of the internees, and while there is not bitterness evident, there are suggestions of anguish and mental sufferings. That there were disloyal men and women in the group is admitted, but on the whole there seems to have been devotion to the United States.

—Roy Hillbrook, Review of Citizen 13660, 1946

In a short 1946 review of Miné Okubo’s rendering of Japanese American incarceration in her wartime visual memoir Citizen 13660 (1946), Roy Hillbrook evokes a certain fantasy of the graphic: that the graphic as description and image can be both explicit and suggestive. A grammar of violence and pleasure threads through Hillbrook’s clipped account of (unnamed) Okubo as the author denuded and reconstituted as “Number 13660.” Her “graphic” description of a non-evident bitterness marks the “suggestion” of “anguish and mental sufferings.” The voyeuristic undertones of such graphic suggestiveness climax in Hillbrook’s insinuation of the work’s potential juridical utility, as evidence of one’s “disloyal[ty]” or “devotion” to the United States. Hillbrook’s familiar notation of loyalty with regards to the justification for the wartime removal, incarceration, and segregation of ethnic Japanese along the Pacific coast is significant not only because it remains the key optic through which this episode was and
often continues to be assessed. Well before Okubo began assembling the text, the state attempt to determine Japanese loyalty was a fait accompli, already embedded within the management of incarcerated ethnic Japanese along a spectrum of citizenships in the United States and Canada. The Office of Naval Intelligence (OWI) and later the War Relocation Authority (WRA) responsible for administering the American camps had already officially determined who was disloyal and who was devoted with the infamous “loyalty questionnaire” administered in 1943. A similar questionnaire was circulated in Canada. The questionnaire created to order, classify—indeed both quantify and qualify—some static and essential property of loyalty with regards to Japanese North Americans of varying citizenship statuses foregrounds how the visual and textual properties of the graphic in Okubo’s work were assumed to complement the questionnaire’s powers of categorization and consolidation. Historian Greg Robinson succinctly summarizes the exceptional properties of the questionnaire as a broader state analytic: “The unquantifiable and amorphously defined concept of ‘loyalty’ became a stand-in for security.” (Tragedy 185).

A large body of historical research on Japanese North American removal and incarceration has accumulated in the over seventy years that have elapsed since Franklin D. Roosevelt’s issuance of presidential Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942. This

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1 Hillbrook’s review is not exceptional but closely follows the form and content of other contemporary responders to the work. For a detailed account of contemporary reviews of Citizen 13660 see Heather Fryer, “Miné Okubo’s War,” 92-5.
order authorized the creation of military zones on the west coast that led to the subsequent detention, removal, and incarceration of over 110,000 Japanese alien residents and Japanese American citizens.\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Citizen 13660} provides a written and visual account of Okubo’s experience of Tanforan, one of seventeen coastal assembly centers in which new inmates were frequently housed in the livestock pens of fairgrounds and racetracks, and Topaz, one of ten “permanent” relocation centers of the inland west. In the four years that ethnic Japanese were held in these military-controlled camps they lived in crowded twenty by twenty-five feet wooden barracks in extreme ecologies with only rudimentary access to the barest of essentials. The improvements in housing, food production, and lasting regional infrastructures such as dams and irrigation canals wrought by inmates and lauded by administrators as evidence of civic industry and responsibility—even functional beauty—were often matters of bare survival for these communities. Farther north, after ethnic Japanese men had been “voluntarily” relocated to road labor camps in the Rockies in 1942, the Canadian government removed and

\textsuperscript{2} Debates about what constitutes a correct terminology for the state mandated experience of Japanese Americans and Canadians during World War II have marked public discourse and scholarship since the mid-twentieth century. In “Words Do Matter,” Roger Daniels traces the routine deployment of euphemistic and often legally incorrect language of “relocation,” “internment,” and “evacuation” employed by various figures and bodies of the U.S. state and public during and after the war. He argues that “removal,” “incarceration,” and “concentration camp” more accurately describe the varying degrees of state force brought to bear on ethnic Japanese residents, particularly the Nisei, or Japanese American citizens by birth. I follow Daniels, applying these terms to both Japanese American and Canadian communities while incorporating Greg Robinson’s suggestion that “internment” is the more precise term for discussing the broader experience of some Japanese Canadians due to the complicated legal definitions of aliens and citizens in Canada at this time. See Daniels, “Words Do Matter” and Robinson, \textit{A Tragedy of Democracy}, vii-viii.
interned the remaining ethnic Japanese of the Pacific Northwest to sugar beet plantations east of the Rockies and later to primarily mining ghost towns in the harsh mountainous British Columbia interior. Unlike the United States where the camps were federally maintained and funded as paradoxical “socialist” enclaves—although as some scholars effectively argue, these enclaves are also scripted as “potentially permanent sites of voluntary colonization” (Lye 156)—within the capitalist settler colonial state, the possessions of ethnic Japanese in Canada (itself a recently colonial dominion) were seized and sold at auction to provide the material support for the business of internment. The situation of ethnic Japanese residents and citizens of Latin American countries, particularly Mexico, Panama, and Peru, has been less studied and their effectively stateless condition during and after the war deserves an examination of far greater depth than I can provide within the scope of my inquiry.³ In short, the Canadian and American wartime experience was similar in terms of the roles that systematic nativism in the west, the de facto detainment and removal of communities, and the terms of loyalty as the disciplinary basis for dispersion and resettlement after the war were experiences shared in common in North America.⁴

³ See C. Harvey Gardiner for the paradigmatic study of the incarceration of Peruvian Japanese. See Greg Robinson, A Tragedy of Democracy, for an account of the hemispheric incarceration of ethnic Japanese during this period. For Japanese Canadian histories see Ken Adachi, Roger Daniels Concentration Camps, Masako Iino et al.

⁴ Canadian policy was overall less federally organized, and policy was more immediately subject to the intense racism directed towards Japanese Canadians. This is most striking in the creation of what was meant to be a permanent exclusion zone in Canada that prohibited residence west of the Rockies for Japanese
In this chapter I follow Robinson’s “amorphous” concept of loyalty in its deployment as a graphic analytic entrained by this event. I consider three graphic works that ostensibly document this mass incarceration and I argue that such works index the application of graphic technologies that were wielded as a racial technology by state administrators to consolidate and define the amorphous boundaries of (dis)loyalty.

Japanese North American incarceration has generated a considerable body of literary and visual artifacts that complement legislative and juridical records of this experience. However, I suggest that the graphic camp memoir overlaps with increasingly graphic modes of representation circulating at the midcentury in popular academic print culture that enhanced state administrators’ attempts to manage—indeed create—this signal population during the war. I detail how the promiscuous fusion of text and illustration—sight and sentence—structuring these works produced within the camps might compose a graphic posture, a pointed index of the state’s demand to objectively and explicitly document this collective experience. As I examine how these accounts of camp experience were deeply imbricated within a racial analytic of loyalty at the midcentury, I suggest that the promiscuous graphic also intimates the artists’ tacit refusal of what was also a notably gendered and sexually charged demand through their very use of such an unfaithful form.

Canadians after the war and the illegal “voluntary deportation” of nearly 4,000 of a planned 10,000 ethnic Japanese—many of whom were born in Canada—“back” to Japan until 1947.
The three popular works that I study intimate something of how the notion of evidentiary loyalty in this period was both a representation and a performance of juridical and aesthetic forms central to charged debates about changing modes of visual objectivity. I examine Miné Okubo’s *Citizen 13660* (1946); Jack Matsuoka’s *Camp II, Block 211: Daily Life in an Internment Camp* (1974); and Michael Kluckner’s *Toshiko* (2015). As one of the earliest graphic memoirs in the Americas, a form that has seen an explosive rise in popularity over the past two decades, *Citizen 13660* has been heralded as a foundational work in the literature of Japanese American incarceration yet neglected in the broader history of the popular graphic form itself. A relatively unknown work, Matusoka’s memoir was composed during his incarceration at Poston, AZ yet was not assembled and published until 1974 when the Redress Movement was gaining momentum. I examine Canadian heritage artist Michael Kluckner’s *Toshiko* as a more recent example of the pedagogical utility of the camp graphic. The recent proliferation of the graphic novel has included surprisingly few accounts of Japanese North American incarceration. With the exception of George Takei’s forthcoming graphic memoir, *They Called Us Enemy*, recent publications such as Kevin C. Pyle’s *Take What You Can Carry* (2012), and Matt Faulkner’s *Gaijin: American Prisoner of War* (2014), are almost uniformly fictional accounts by non-Japanese North American authors. Such works are primarily organized around tropes of interracial friendship and romance that enhance the pedagogical appeal of this event for young learners, as curricular texts that craft liberal
citizenship in the settler colonial nation. I argue that it is precisely in the break between Kluckner’s cross-racial “Romeo and Juliet” version of Japanese Canadian internment and the circumscribed intimacies of Matsuoka and Okubo’s earlier memoirs that the camp graphic consistently reworks the valences of the Japanese North American family and its unrepresentable—explicit and suggestive—intimacies from within an unabashedly voyeuristic state optic.

For the purposes of my study, that the process of ethnic Japanese detainment, removal, and incarceration was a broader hemispheric and transnational movement opens the question of how and why the optics of this event are mediated almost entirely through a specifically Japanese American experience. I suggest that the optics of the incarcerated Japanese American family were in no small measure imparted by the advanced bureaucratic management applied in the American camps. These tactics engendered increasingly graphic techniques of documentation. In the graphic compositions that I examine here, the embedded demand for particular iterations of ethnic Japanese loyalty mirrors a mode of graphic objectivity that had assumed legitimacy in progressive academic and popular print culture since at least the 1920s. This progressive push to graphic objectivity complimented the work by a suite of state and institutional players producing graphic data and documentation in the camps. This includes the US Navy and Army, the Department of Justice (DOJ), Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), the Office of Indian Affairs (DIA) and especially the
attendant large-scale research studies such as the Bureau of Sociological Research and the Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Study. Under the purview of these bodies, the study of the incarcerated family became a signal site for confirming the utility of graphic technologies as modes of data representation throughout the social sciences. These graphic forms were also increasingly employed as an analytic of American democratic production in popular print culture, from popular social science journals such as Survey Graphic to illustrated textbooks. Benedict Anderson’s thoughts on the development of a mass vernacular print culture to construct an “imagined” community of national spatial belonging underscores how incarcerated Japanese Americans were also themselves active participants in this emergent popular graphic mode as producers of commercial visual and print culture that complemented institutional data visualization techniques at the midcentury. Like many Nisei (second-generation ethnic Japanese), Okubo and Matsuoka both worked as commercial artists after the war. Their wartime compositions reflect the keen visual literacies of Japanese American artists who helped to develop the overarching visual vocabulary of this period in a range of mediums. A generation of mostly unrecognized Japanese American animators, graphic artists, and illustrators emerged from the camps. These artists left traces and impressions of important visual and textual styles in a range of publications and without forming a coherent or organized grouping. Gyo Fujikawa, Ruth Asawa, Tom Inada, Chris Ishii, Atsushi Iwamatsu, Michiko Kataoka, Masao Kawaguchi, Bob
Kuwahara, Jack Matsuoka, Jimmy Murakami, Benny Nobiri, Tom Okamoto, Iwao Takamoto, and James Tanaka are some of the names of this predominantly but certainly not exclusively male group that quietly worked in the shadows of midcentury visual culture. My study of the camp graphic excavates only a small part of this remarkable American cohort and anticipates future studies of how these artists pushed visual and textual form throughout the twentieth century in as yet mostly unremarked upon ways.

A central provocation in my study of the camp graphic is to limn how modes of graphic objectivity developing here correlate with shifting social arrangements provoked by domestic revisions central to the camps. The camp graphic’s relation to photography is key in my account as photography forms the bulk of the visual archive of Japanese North American incarceration. This might seem surprising given that cameras were prohibited and confiscated from inmates in the United States upon arrival at the holding centers and in Canada, restricted to the documentation of “officially sanctioned activities” (McAllister, “Photographs” 133) by professionally registered Japanese Canadian photographers.5 While I do not examine specific photographic works in this chapter, I do argue that the legacy of American documentary photography of the 1930s forms a crucial visual logic that threads through the graphic works of Okubo and Matsuoka in particular. Okubo herself stated on many occasions that her drawings were

5 Recent studies of photography and Japanese North American internment continue to mount. See Creef, Gordon and Okihiro, Higa, Sturken. See McCallister, Marlatt and Minden for Canadian photography.
“recordings,” realistic hand drawn substitutions for the forbidden camera. The aesthetic and the political merge here as an established American social policy of progressive documentary engendered the necessary quotidian demonstration of ethnic Japanese visual loyalty. This affective demonstration is parallel to the mimetic fidelity of documentary reproduction in the US camps. That the visual loyalty proffered by Okubo is not iconic or mimetic reflects how the freighted intimations of the explicit and the suggestive circulate in the broader cultural imaginary through the US democratic state’s imperative towards visual reproduction during the war. Marita Sturken asserts that while the Asia Pacific War “produced several image-icons” that celebrated American international heroism, incarceration is marked by an absence of any singular “image-icon,” despite the body of “counter images” (694) generated by photographers such as Toyo Miyatake—who improvised his own camera with camp materials—Ansell Adams, and FSA documentary photographer Dorothea Lange. I would argue with this claim in its premise that there was no singular icon to emerge from internment. I hazard that the graphic production of ethnic Japanese loyalty/disloyalty is reproduced as an iconic model minority in the postwar era by means of the positivist system of visual representation infusing this event. However, I find Sturken’s conclusion highly insightful; she argues that the “present absence” of any such (missing) icon stems from camp optics, which were “too disruptive and too domestic . . . [an] image of hyperdomesticity [that] served to feminize the camps and emasculate the Japanese men
within them” (694-5). It is precisely the feminized hyperdomesticity of the camp as a surveillable population and their untranslatable intimacies that Okubo’s work in particular intimates and reviewers such as Hillbrook find titillating.

Recent scholarship that examines the enforced production of specifically American democracy in terms of juridical bare life—the “too disruptive” and “too domestic”—considers the camps as spaces of exception. That state sovereignty through executive order must render Japanese American loyalty and disloyalty quantifiable and qualifiable—graphically explicit and suggestive—outlines something of the biopower of the graphic production within an incarcerated population. The paradoxes of Citizen 13660 limn these connections as Christine Hong succinctly notes, “Okuo’s images of life behind barbed wire were perversely mobilized, in the transwar years, as an affirmation of the democratic potential of the American concentration camp” (“Introduction” x). Research that connects American settler colonialism with Japanese American incarceration resets these seemingly paradoxical tensions by pointing to the fraught visual material economy resonant to the American west in which inmates alternately were represented and represented themselves as pioneers and Indians. Such graphics are evocative examples of what Jodi Byrd articulates as the “transit of empire” or “the

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* See Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, Fred I. Lee, Ana M. Manzanas and Jesús Benito for readings of internment as a state of exception.
transit of Indianness to inscript empire internally and externally” (188). The slippage and oscillation between tensions of indigene and alien, internal and external, domestic and public, normative and perverse, explicit and suggestive, quotidian and exceptional that we find in the graphic account unfolds how Japanese Americans became a signal population to “redomesticate the alienized camp inmate” by “the striking renaturalization of the Nisei as a bona fide American citizen” (Hong, “Introduction” xiii-xv). Many graphic lines of such a redomestication are traced in the following pages as the interplay between text and image in these works pressure the interior and exterior logic of loyalty. Pushing Hong’s observations, I argue that such a process of renaturalization as redomestication was in fact a state mobilization against the tacit perversity of Japanese American hyperdomesticity and its graphic intimations. As I turn to Kluckner’s Toshiko in the final section of this chapter, I will outline redomestication’s transnational force as the Canadian context provides an explicit purview of these dynamics and their persistent presence.

The graphic account, I suggest, is a mode of recovery or retrieval that inmates adapted to mark the state application of a graphic analytic of affective and racial

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7 See Jodi A. Byrd, Iyko Day, Linda Gordon and Gary Y. Okihiro, Brian Masaru Hayashi, Ruth Y. Okimoto, and Zhou Xiaojing for readings of internment and democratization in relation to the history of settler colonialism—and underscored in Byrd and Hayashi, an attendant Pacific imperialism. See Christine Hong “Illustrating the Postwar Peace” for an illuminating account of how internment produces administrative knowledge towards American Asia Pacific domination, albeit with less emphasis on the history of domestic settler colonialism.
legibility, while notating their own experience of this process. These works do not document loyalty or disloyalty. What these works do document are the limits of graphic objectivity. They register an emergent and experimental liberal optics seemingly obsessed with quantifying ethnic Japanese loyalty as a means to qualify collective racial characterizations. In the stark black lines of the earlier compositions, the graphic outlines the pressures between the imperative of performing an impossible-to-qualify loyalty to a democratic state built upon one’s very exclusion or a converse loyalty to an imperial Japanese state committing widespread atrocities in Asia. The seemingly lighthearted comic lines of these works belie the extreme pressures brought to bear on the lives of ethnic Japanese interned at the midcentury. I trace how artists such as Okubo and Matsuoka elide the demand for the graphic encounter to faithfully document and represent its own iconic formation even as they gesture towards other arrangements of social and political life formed under seemingly comic domestic intimacies. If the carceral space is often the necessary site of improvisation, the Japanese American camp graphic is one form whose effects reach beyond the camps and their present moment. The camp graphic signals a form of provision—a sending, a provisional proof of life if you will—sent forward for later. Such provisions are paradoxically opaque foresights from (then) present conditions that can’t be legibly sighted by the state but rather serve as sketched placeholders of collective memory and its representational limits.
1.1 “one status, one condition”: Miné Okubo, Jack Matsuoka, and the Camp Graphic

Miné Okubo was born in Riverside, CA in 1912 to Issei parents Tametsugu and Miyo (Kato) Okubo. A graduate of the Tokyo Art Institute who came to the United States to work as a calligrapher in the Japanese Arts and Crafts Show of the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, Miyo Okubo encouraged her seven children to pursue careers in art. Greg Robinson recounts Okubo’s memory that while her mother was always supportive, she “often lost patience with her early efforts at art because Miné could never copy anything precisely” (Robinson “Mine Okubo”). Miné emphasized her mother’s profound importance as an example of a woman artist derailed by family responsibilities to Fay Chiang:

My mother was a renowned calligrapher. She came to America to represent Japan in the St. Louis Exposition, but look what happened to her taking care of all those kids. When I was traveling through Europe after graduating from Berkeley, I sent her a postcard every day telling her about my adventures. I came back when she was sick and she died shortly after. I found those postcards after she died. She had saved everyone. (3)

She extended the lessons of her mother’s domestic labors to her own views on marriage, explaining to Chiang why she remained unpartnered for life: “No, I wasn’t going to get married to anyone. Cook his dinner, do laundry all the time” (3). Okubo’s death in 2001 marked the close of a remarkable creative life that spanned nearly the entirety of the twentieth century. Trained in art at the University of California, Berkeley and the winner of the Bertha Taussig Traveling Scholarship that sent her to Europe to study in 1938-9,
Okubo’s artistic development reflects both formal western training as well as her mother’s training in classical Japanese forms. As a Nisei woman who has received considerable critical and public attention since the postwar period, Okubo’s multifaceted and well-documented oeuvre provides a rare insight into the broader experience of Asian American women artists, a crucially understudied group. That Okubo hailed from a family that valued and practiced art is evident in her mother’s noted support and her older brother Benji Okubo’s career as a significant painter in his own right. With the support of her family Okubo achieved relative success as an unmarried working artist even as her life unfolded in an ongoing experience of cramped spaces. Shirley Sun writes in 1972 that after leaving “the desert of Topaz Relocation Center for the jungle of New York,” Okubo “lived and painted in this tiny studio—at one time lying on her back for a year painting a mural for an ocean liner” (12). Surrounded by hundreds of canvases in her New York apartment and surviving on slim commissions in tight spaces, Okubo’s expansive vision is contextualized by conditions of physical and material constraint.

In 1942 following Executive Order 9066, Miné and her brother Toku packed a meager supply of allowed necessities from their shared house in the Bay area and reported to the Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno, CA. The Okubo family was

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8 See Chang et al, “Okubo, Benji” (405-7) for a closer look at Benji Okubo’s work as a painter, illustrator and landscape architect. Okubo is noted for his group exhibitions with Los Angeles artists including Hideo Date, Gilbert Leong, and Tyrus Wong. Incarcerated at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center, Okubo taught art classes with Hideo Date, animator Robert Kuwahara, and Shingo Nishiura, forming the Art Students League of Heart Mountain.
scattered across the west; Miné herself would never return to live in California. Miné and Toku were later held at the Topaz Relocation Center in Utah, from which Miné departed in 1944 after accepting employment as an artist for Fortune magazine, who had arranged for her release. Okubo’s wartime illustrations fall into several categories: graphic illustrations and typographical work on the Topaz journal Trek; her immediate postwar drawings for Fortune magazine; and the visual text published as Citizen 13660 by Columbia University Press in 1946. Citizen 13660 was assembled from her vast collection of some 2,000 ink, gouache, and charcoal drawings of the Tanforan and Topaz experience. Although primarily studied for her wartime graphics, the spectrum of Okubo’s work encompasses a sizeable range of fine and commercial art including paintings—often of women, children, and cats; murals; graphic art; book illustrations; and drawings that she produced after the war in her tiny New York city apartment for some sixty years. Okubo’s wartime art falls within the continuum of her broader oeuvre in its sustained focus on the private domestic lives of women and children, domestic lives that in Citizen 13660 are exposed and painfully public within the frame of incarceration, yet also exceptional by virtue of their later social and political effectiveness. This evidentiary utility of Citizen 13660 was particularly important for the redress movement in the 1970s and 1980s which as Hong notes, introduces a “retroactive interpretive lens” (“Illustrating” 106) that requires careful historical work to disentangle the temporal threads of a visual loyalty economy and their continued reverberations.
Ongoing debates circling the issue of *Citizen 13660*'s documentary utility underscore how Okubo’s compositions limn the extreme complexity of working within the interlocking systems of vision and constraint that characterize the politics of Japanese American critical and artistic production at this juncture. Critical response towards *Citizen 13660* has most often read the work in terms of recuperating a necessarily (for the critic) submerged resistance to its own historical conditions of accommodation with the US nation state. Christine Hong and Greg Robinson, two scholars who have undertaken the most comprehensive archival work on Okubo, have both demonstrated how accommodation and resistance are extraordinarily complex terms with regards to Japanese American incarceration as a facet of democratic production in its domestic and imperial capacities. Many readers of Okubo flatten the historical nuances of the work by avoiding the archival evidence that Okubo’s illustrations were indeed sharply critical of this state mandated experience and paradoxically received by the same state mandators with unbridled enthusiasm. In an astute review of a recent critical anthology centered on Okubo’s life and work, Margot Machida’s assessment of much Okubo scholarship foregrounds how notions of objectivity remain unmarked and accordingly complicated in this work:

A common supposition conjoining most of the critical essays is that the imagery and text of *Citizen 13660* should not be read as an ‘objective’ visual record of the incarceration, but rather as a coded critique replete with subversive undertones and signs of resistance, whose form embodies the tense ambiguity between outward compliance and resistance that an artist in Okubo’s position must necessarily have negotiated to produce such work under the censorious supervision of the War Relocation Authority. (75)
Or, to extend Machida’s insight, research on Citizen 13660 has tended to perform “paranoid readings” of Okubo’s vaunted objectivity. That the work was lauded during the mobilization of the redress movement precisely for its juridical value as “documentary proof of government injustice and a self-evident argument for reparations” (Hong, “Illustrating” 106), yet the mainstream of Okubo scholarship reads the work as a not-graphic-enough documentary of injustice, points to the conundrum of the graphic form as composed by Okubo. I follow Machida’s call for more work that provides “a wider contextualization . . . with the art and art world of her time” (76) to examine these dynamics more closely.

Citizen 13660’s narrative visual strategies elaborate how the work’s reception has become embroiled in competing definitions of objectivity and its ethical or political efficacy that belie its contemporary reputation for documentary realism. In a 1943 article for the San Francisco Chronicle penned from Topaz, Okubo writes about the removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans as a uniform and standardized experience that might be effectively represented by a graphic realism. Okubo discusses her vast collection of drawings of the Tanforan and Topaz sites as interchangeable for any of the seventeen assembly centers and five relocation centers: “In all of them the situation has been more or less the same, so I feel that in picturing Tanforan Assembly Center and the Central Utah Relocation Center (Topaz), I am expressing the whole” (Robinson and Creef, 40). Okubo’s storied adaptation of what has been often described as a visual
sociology is expressed in the ratio of part to whole; her graphic memoir consisting of a small selection of her drawings of this “whole” experience will be published as *Citizen 13660*, a synecdoche of the common “situation” of ethnic Japanese. In the 1983 preface to a new edition of *Citizen 13660* Okubo reflects further on her sociological imperative to visually reproduce the conditions of her now iconic camp experience in a written form:

> In the camps, first at Tanforan and then at Topaz in Utah, I had the opportunity to study the human race from the cradle to the grave, and to see what happens to people when reduced to one status and condition. Cameras and photographs were not permitted in the camps so I recorded everything in sketches, drawings, and paintings. (xxvi)

Her suggestion in 1983 that the “sketches, drawings, and paintings” were a substitute for “cameras and photographs” closely echoes the language of her stated desire “to record” an objective account in the oral testimony she delivered to the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians in 1981:

> So the factual account of the Japanese evacuation and internment is in *Citizen 13660* . . . It was the first inside-the-camp documentary story of the Japanese evacuation and internment coming out when the subject was not too well known in the East . . . I kept the drawings objective, and the brief text was not only to interest the reader but to record this tragic incident of the war. (Robinson and Creef, 47)

In the seventy years since the publication of *Citizen 13660*, Okubo’s graphic account of the camp experience has been consistently accepted in terms of its visual and literary realism. Readers, critics, scholars, and Okubo herself have framed their responses to the work within the assumption of her visual documentary technique, itself a substitution for the mechanical “recording” of the prohibited camera. It is ironic that Okubo should be characterized for her adult skills of mechanical reproduction, given her own
previously noted remembrance that “her mother often lost patience with her early efforts at art because Miné could never copy anything precisely.” Readers have consistently noted the “sociological overtones” within these oft-cited passages from Okubo towards proposing a type of political agency in her undertaking of an objective yet impassioned “survey” or “observation” of the situation. I believe however that Okubo’s notions of parts to whole and “one status and condition” index a more complicated relationship between Okubo, Citizen 13660, and the visual methodologies of the social sciences during internment. While Okubo consistently characterizes her work in terms of objectivity and realism, she notes a gap in representation comprised of experience as she continues to explain to the Commission: “there were no plans or preparations for this forced evacuation. Everybody of Japanese ancestry was evacuated: the young, the old, the children, babies, pregnant mothers, sick—110,000 were evacuated in three months. One cannot know what it was like unless you lived it” [emphasis added] (47). It is this epistemological gap between recording and knowing, observance and representation, standardization and chaos, the explicit and suggestive that underpins this work. What the solitary “one” cannot know, the many do.

A composition such as Citizen 13660 requires a very careful delineation between such terms. This work is neither objective nor realistic. Of the roughly two hundred illustrations detailing her incarceration at Tanforan and later Topaz, the
Figure 1: The artist as surveyor in Citizen 13660.

Tanforan illustrations form about two-thirds of the frames and are frequently sketched from a close-up to medium perspective amidst swelling masses of people “reduced to one status and condition” [Fig. 3] In the Topaz drawings, time and space seem less compressed and we frequently find illustrations that include landscapes and seasonal passages of time. Given the graphic medium of pen and ink, landscapes here rely on linear rather than atmospheric or aerial perspective, without nuance of color or shading to provide depth or distance. This is significant given that this linear perspective formation of distance announces the built or drawn quality of the perspectival landscape and the imprecisions of our own sight rather than an objective rendering. The overall stylistic effect of Okubo’s drawings contrasts rounded human figures—an enduring and
endearing characteristic of her color paintings—and the foreshortened linear and diagonal lines of the camp layout and architecture. The line drawings retain a consistent and striking uniformity within the squared lines of fences, housing barracks, and roads that render the Tanforan and Topaz sites as interchangeable and uniform military-designed sites in which humans offer a limited counterpoint of stylized yet standardized variation [Fig. 1 and Fig. 4]. Variation is fashioned in the patterned clothes, the individualized facial details of inmates, the careful detail the artist supplies to the range of activities people are performing (Fig. 2). Yet these variations are necessarily limited, repetitive, and standardized by their very conditions of recorded experience. Clothes vary by a select range of patterned texture, faces melt into indeterminate crowds, activities are constrained and recursive.

The text that accompanies these unframed panels of illustration is similarly standardized. It remains unclear when and how Okubo scripted Citizen 13660 but the unrelenting past tense of the narrative indicates that image and text were constructed within a significant temporal break despite their seemingly entwined typographic immediacy within the world of the book. Sentences are past tense, short, and declarative. Most often sentences describe or explicate the paired illustration, forming a tightly bound compact of mimetic self-evidence—coupled graphic lines of
sight and sentence. The initial editions of the work read as an illustrated book with no marked organization separating text and image (Fig. 3). In the 2014 edition however, a single black line separates text from illustration (Fig. 4). The 2014 edition also features a new cover, a magnified detail of Okubo glaring at a guard. University of Washington Press senior designer Thomas Eykemans reflects on the “radical redesign” of the cover art from the abstract art deco frieze that had initially bound the book (Fig. 5):

The original 1946 jacket, lettered and illustrated by Okubo herself, was both classic and practical. However, it gave absolutely no clue as to the content of the book. The 1983 paperback did little to remedy this, simply appropriating the beautiful, but misleading, case stamp from the original cloth edition.

This restyling of the book’s form is significant as these comments mark how the work has become increasingly curated by conventions of the graphic novel and cartoon in the
Figure 3: Scene from Tanforan Relocation Center in the 1946 edition of *Citizen 13660*.

On the barracks in the center field and on the stalls, ingenious family name plates and interesting signs were displayed with great pride. All signs in Japanese were ordered removed, but many fancy names, such as Inner Sanctum, Stall Inn, and Sea Biscuit, lent a touch of humor to the situation. To discourage visitors, I nailed a quarantine sign on my door.

Figure 4: A black line separates text and image in the 2014 edition of *Citizen 13660*.

All residential blocks looked alike; people were lost all the time.
addition of black lines separating text and image to create “gutter space”—the white areas separating frames in comics. The turn from the stylized and entwined figures of the original case stamp, which testifies to Okubo’s skill as a graphic artist and perhaps suggests the experience of entangled camp life, to a demand that the book form and content mimetically reproduce the image of Okubo herself reflects the uptick in interest towards delimited graphic forms. As this work is increasingly recuperated within the genre’s genealogy with little regard for its embedded graphic history, the insistence that the work’s cover form reveal content demonstrates a persistent prioritization of a discrete individual narrative over what Okubo herself stated as a collective, even untranslatable experience that infuses the case stamp.

Okubo’s work presents constraint and recursion as conditions rather than properties of her forms of graphic life. Viewing her text alongside Jack Matsuoka’s
graphic memoir outlines how other artists of the same “condition” also played with graphic conventions to markedly different effect. Like Okubo, Matsuoka worked as an illustrator for popular and commercial print periodicals in the postwar period. Their shared work as commercial illustrators index how popular visual culture offered a counterpoint to the WRA experiments exacted upon the camps with the emergence of a generation of mostly Nisei artists and technicians who were already highly astute visual readers and creators. Matsuoka’s collection of cartoon sketches of his coming of age in the Poston, AZ relocation center was published as Camp II, Block 211 (Fig. 6) in 1974, the year that Matsuoka became an editorial cartoonist for The Pacifica Tribune. A Nisei born in Watsonville, CA in 1925, Matsuoka lived and worked on both sides of the Pacific until his death in 2013. In contrast to Okubo, who hailed from a family that was immersed in formal Japanese art training yet never herself studied in Japan, Matsuoka was self-taught as an artist before honing his practice in Japan’s commercial market. Both represent the constellation of diasporic Asian American artists and the variable transpacific routes Japanese American artists and art circulate in the twentieth century. Matsuoka and his mother, a midwife, were detained at the Salinas rodeo grounds before their incarceration at Poston, located on the Colorado River Reservation and the notable site of John Collier and Alexander Leighton’s applied anthropology studies, which I will discuss in further detail in the next section. Following his release from Poston, where he illustrated for the camp paper The Poston Chronicle, Matsuoka studied for a semester at
the Cleveland School of Fine Arts in Ohio before being drafted. In 2011 Matsuoka humorously recounted how he was ordered to become a Japanese language interpreter for the US military in Japan, despite his protests that his spoken and written Japanese were poor. “I can read North, South, and West and all that, because I played mahjong,” he noted, and his basic spoken Japanese was purportedly only facilitated by the “big argument” he had with his mother “everyday growing up” (“Transcript”). Matsuoka served as an interpreter for the Military Intelligence Unit in occupied Japan until he was discharged. He stayed and pursued studies in Tokyo, married, and eventually was employed as a sports cartoonist for publications including the Japan Times and Nippon Times. In addition to the cartoons that he continued to publish in Japan, and later in the Unites States when he returned in the early 1960s for the bilingual Sacramento paper, Hokubei Mainichi, Matsuoka donated a notable personal archive of rare home film from the postwar period from his residency in Japan, now digitized and housed at Stanford.

Matsuoka’s commercial career as a newspaper cartoonist is reflected in the style and tone of his memoir. Stylistically evocative of midcentury newspaper comic strips such as Beetle Bailey (1950) or Peanuts (1950), Matsuoka’s drawings are visibly “American,” even as the book’s subject, “memories of a [forced] life style,” suggests an inversion of American youth experience emerging at this moment. This notion of an inverted mainstream youth experience will become increasingly consolidated in the genre, particularly in later graphic novels by non-Japanese Americans. For example,
Kevin C. Pyle’s *Take What You Can Carry* (2012) contrasts two protagonists, a Japanese American and a white American boy, whose wartime experiences are visually and narratively constructed as two divergent, yet connected, youth formations. While Okubo’s memoir features the stylized work of a mature artist with a formal training, the drawings of *Camp II, Block 211* conveys a youthful artistic practice and the emotional perspective of a tumultuous adolescence. Thirteen years Okubo’s junior and immersed in a burgeoning American mass youth culture, Matusoka’s work adheres more firmly to comics conventions than Okubo’s more formally crafted style of graphic illustration. *Camp II* is a work that hinges on a complex temporal and spatial enfolding of the page frame and the book. Like *Citizen 13660* the book spatially separates the textual from the visual; the spare text on left-side pages face the right-side pages of large, unframed cartoon-style drawings. Bound in a distinctive rectangular shape, the animated frames
follow an expansive horizontal stretch that mirrors the wide desert expanses of Poston, highlighting vast white spaces that bleed into the dwarfed, spare text (Fig. 7). Unlike *Citizen 13660*, *Camp II* often enfolds text and image together in the mode of conventional comics in the extensive use of word balloons throughout. The narrative text on the left-side pages complicates the overall composition of the work, introducing a nostalgic retrospective that places the temporal narrative at an even farther remove than Okubo’s text in *Citizen 13660*. The frames were allegedly left “in a trunk for decades until his mother, Chizu, found them and suggested that they be shared with the public.” (“Nisei Cartoonist”). Pairing Matsuoka’s adolescent sketches with text written from an authorial retrospective some 30 years later and after he had lived in postwar Japan and America, the dissonant temporality of the account is enhanced by the visual content of camp life. One day is stretched along multiple elapsing years. What would have been quotidian recurring tasks or “routines” expand into multiple pages of nested and singular detail.

The oscillations between adolescent experience and middle-aged recollection that order *Camp II* underscore how its genesis in the camps of Matsuoka’s adolescence configure with the shifting political discourse of Japanese North American communities
during the 1970’s when it was published. The redress movement that gathered force from the 1970’s to the 1980’s encouraged new readings and vocabularies of the Japanese American wartime experience and its representation that remain nascent in Okubo’s earlier text. The multiple forwards of Camp II highlight some of the twinned legislative and activist concerns that demarcate internment’s public memorialization by the 1970s. State authority greets the reader immediately after the copyright page as official typography introduces Senator Daniel K. Inouye’s reflections on the importance of the work under the inscription, “United States Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510” (vii). Inouye emphasizes that the majority of the “unfortunate residents” of the camps were mostly “loyal American citizens,” foregrounding Matsuoka’s “keen understanding of human nature” and his singular talent at capturing “observations” of “what little humor” was to be witnessed in the camps, where life was “anything but amusing or humorous” but rather “confining and cruel.” A short foreword by David E. Yushio, then National Executive Director of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) echoes Inouye’s affective emphasis on the graphic capture of humor as he praises Matsuoka’s “insider’s view” of the “tragic humor resulting from this stifling confinement” (ix). The forewords move from state to activist endorsement with an introduction by Edison Uno, a radical community organizer and civil rights activist who sparked the Redress Movement before his death in 1976. Uno’s endorsement echoes Inouye and Yushio’s emphasis on the grim humor of the camps, writing that “behind the comic laughter of each cartoon is
a genuine story of Americans living under adverse conditions, without guilt, attempting to survive by living each day as best they knew how.” A key organizer and theorist in the push for Ethnic Studies at California State University, San Francisco, Uno also praises *Camp II* for its pedagogical promise, as an urgently necessary “educational tool in the primary grades” (xii). Uno extends and connects the humor generated within the particular experience of ethnic Japanese to a critical overlap between other marginalized groups: “I do not believe we who experienced the camps of 1942 to 1946 have a monopoly on the humor reflected in these cartoons” (xiii). Together, this assemblage of forwards that open the work signal the array of political uses and positions that could claim the camp graphic in the early years of the Redress Movement.

Like *Citizen 13660*, *Camp II’s* graphic fusion of present and future-past meditations seems to create a temporal remove from the trauma of camp experience from which a seemingly objective stance can emerge through humor. The uneasy co-life of humor and implied, rather than graphic, violence links Matsuoka and Okubo’s comic forms in their shared depictions of quotidian domestic life, specifically the feminized hyperdomesticity that Sturken identifies. The graphic split between the frames of Matsuoka’s adolescent funnies and the middle-aged narration of his remembered experiences outline some of the shifting economies and regimentations of physical and social intimacies. These depictions range from the grim humor of shared public toilets and showers, frank illustrations of sexual practices and courtship scenarios, to
communal health concerns with lactose intolerance and the evocative potential of multiple generations sharing family histories during long nights at the fires. *Camp II* is both explicit about bodily functions and the resultant humor these conditions tender, even as it only suggests the radical upheavals in process. Although *Camp II* doesn’t seem to adhere to the imperatives of standardization and documentation that orders Okubo’s work, an unrelenting heteronormativity is consolidated in the form and content of Matsuoka’s cartoon or comic strip, scripted as generic loyalty that can be upheld as national example. Matsuoka’s figures are more individualized and discrete; a visual sense of normalcy is consolidated by the stylized figures so reminiscent of newspaper funnies and the domestic comedies offered in static, discrete panels like tableaux. While an undercurrent of emergent sexuality threads through the work in the numerous sketches depicting the absurd conditions under which courtship, sex, and the workings of desire in the camps are routed, this enhances the comedic effect. For example, one panel in a section called “Chow-time politics” details one way of getting extra food called the “good-looking sister ploy”: “Going to meals accompanied by your good-looking sister—if you were lucky enough to have one—usually meant that the servers gave you more food in a friendlier way” (40). Matsuoka’s jokes here as conventional “funnies” obscure the recorded and remembered physical and sexual violences of the Poston camp that Matsuoka would have undoubtedly known about, if not witnessed such as the imposed labor conditions of inmates, ongoing incidents of domestic violence,
the shooting of James Hatsuki Wakasa by prison guards, and the widespread resistance at Topaz to the questionnaire. Although not technically a comic, Matsuoka’s text passes the first Comics Code of 1948 with its prohibitions of graphic violence and no “unduly exposed” female bodies (Nyberg 165). Okubo’s text notably would not have passed, in the illustrated depictions of naked women in baths and toilets and her direct portrayal of camp officials as “stupid or ineffective.” Ultimately, Matsuoka’s adolescent rendition of normative camp intimacies under perverse conditions, conveys what Tina Takemoto glosses as “the desire to preserve a certain version of historical memory that would maintain the gravity of incarceration as well as the normalcy and morality of innocent Japanese Americans unjustly imprisoned by the federal government (247-8).

Together, Okubo and Matsuoka’s work emphasizes compressed and close bodies in what we might call “skinship” yet refrains from graphically depicting the whole experience of internment. Invoked by critic and curator Betty Kano for the 2004 exhibit, (S)kinship: African American and Asian American Connections, Kano repurposes skinship as a Japanese term from the 1940s that initially described the closeness of mother and child but is expanded to denote “the close relationship between friends or coworkers when they share their nakedness as in any onsen or sento (public baths) stripping away the social constructs that would otherwise differentiate them hierarchically as boss and employee or senior and junior” (20). While both use the graphic form to intimate the complex intra-ethnic intimacies—the skinships—of the camps that pressure rigid
delineations of class, age, kinship, sexualities, gender roles, and even race, Matsuoka’s
text is notably the more determined to render the experience in normative tropes that
restore legibly heteronormative kinships and social formations. Recent investigations of
camp intimacies, particularly queer intimacies or living arrangements that disrupted
patriarchal gender and generational roles demonstrate the continued collective silence
and unrepresentability of a range of life arrangements that surely were part of camp
experience (Eng, Howard, Robinson “The Great Unknown,” Takemoto) Okubo’s text,
the more formally experimental of the two, comes closer to opening a space, an
intimation, for what must not be graphically rendered, yet is precisely in fact precisely
rendered through the graphic itself and its promiscuous compression of unregulated
and regulating experience.

1.2 Liberal Visuality: Survey Graphic, Isotype, and the Infidelity
of the Artist

The standardized expectations and perspectives that frame the reception of
Citizen 13660 and Camp II, Block 211’s as graphic works suggest that we might read and
view this work in a straightforward manner and that any complications of the text issue
from the constraints of the camps themselves. be they material in the prohibition of
cameras or sophisticated drawing materials, or political in the very real censorship and
physical constraint brought to bear on daily life. However, I suggest that Okubo’s
graphic method in particular delineates what can and can’t be seen in the camps. The
embedded demand for realism and a visual loyalty that intimately concerns in many
ways prefigures the more generalized paranoia of midcentury American political and social life when symptomatic readings became a national pastime. A judicial obsession with political disloyalty as emerging from something hidden in the always sexualized sphere of private domestic life manifests in the public spectacle of ethnic Japanese mass incarceration writ as both domestic and militarized space. The terms of ethnic Japanese removal and resettlement form an earlier state prototype for what will become the “loyalty-security” program of the Cold War period in which some four million investigations were undertaken in the public spectacle of “loyalty board” hearings and domestic surveillance programs. That Japanese Americans had been the focus of ongoing surveillance many years before the war is well documented. Brian Hayashi outlines how anxieties about loyalty had driven J. Edgar Hoover’s systematic screening of ethnic and racial minorities, including the Japanese community, as they automated the process as early as the 1930s: “The bureau had a fingerprint collection of ten million and used an IBM tabulating machine to do the work” (32). If the FBI was the most unrelentingly suspicious towards Japanese American communities, the US Navy also firmly equated race with disloyalty, in contrast to the WRA which had an ostensibly more nuanced understanding of race and culture given its preponderance of social scientists directed to study the incarcerated communities. As Okubo’s work points out in her detailing of quotidian yet vague surveillance, the administration of the internment experience itself was both systematic and fragmentary. A host of military and civil
branches, agencies, committees, and working groups were responsible for its execution and displayed a considerable range of attitudes towards the idea of loyalty and race—a coupling fraught with sexual intimations.

These competing tensions between loyalty, race, and an increasingly voyeuristic optics intersect with the administration and assessment of the so-called loyalty questionnaire in 1943. Okubo’s standardized text might be read as a syllabary of the competing grammars of state administration. The loyalty questionnaire was initially administered in 1943 by the Office of Naval Intelligence (OWI) to all adult Nisei men and then later adapted as a questionnaire by the WRA for female Nisei and adult Issei inmates as a condition of resettlement. Like *Citizen 13660*, the loyalty questionnaire is a typographically simple document in black and white; complexities are flattened in the formation of specific questions designed to compress an individual’s range of experience into the objective perception of loyal or disloyal. It took form as a four-page document asking a series of questions that ranged from the magazines and newspapers to which one subscribed, to a detailed accounting of familial kinship relationships on both sides of the Pacific and membership in clubs or organizations. Inmates were understandably provoked by the questionnaire’s framing apparatus titled as “Application for Leave Clearance,” that insinuated they were voluntarily requesting to fill out the form and questions 27 and 28 generated intense anxiety amongst inmates. Question 27 asks: “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, whenever
ordered?” Question 28 asks: “Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?” These yes/no questions proved impossible for many to answer without adding extensive marginalia to contextualize their responses, which when received led to immediate suspicion. In the unstated, suggestive yet explicit demand of the questionnaire for inmates to assume a loyal legibility within the designated line or typographic field we might understand the gaps, spaces, and elisions of Okubo’s short declaratives and stark graphic lines as the work weaves the demand for the flatness of literality with the messy intimacies of constrained human lives scripted under multiple pressures.

Eric Muller’s study of the vast bureaucratic entanglements that produced and defined loyalty at this period materializes the apparatus of assembling parts to wholes. Muller follows the twisted archival trail of the “completed questionnaires into the bowels of the wartime bureaucracy” (1). Rather than examine the highest levels of political and military command, which solidifies a tendency to reinscribe sovereign power, Muller undertakes a methodology similar to Foucauldian archaeology. Muller looks at the everyday forces that “moved deep within the government rather than atop it,” in the bureaucratic performance of “quotidian decisions and conflict that pushed the government through months and years of systematized oppression” (3). After
circulating the loyalty questionnaire, the problem of how to assess the responses fell on state workers in the Japanese American Joint Board (JAJB), an intended collaborative body of state bureaucrats and military personnel whose ongoing crisis hinged on the fact that each of its parts and thus the overall whole, was never able to articulate “a coherent definition of loyalty even for itself”(4). The JAJB loyalty assessments provide a model of the messy biopolitical underpinnings of visualizing the amplifications of race and loyalty. After an initial attempt at using a point system that assigned and subtracted points for answers that signaled more or less Americanness or Japaneseness, a new color-coded system was introduced. A three color system was adopted that poised a white (loyal) and black (disloyal, possibly criminal) category at the ends of the spectrum with a brown—not grey—field in the middle, engineering an undeniable racial scale to determine loyalty, one that hinged on essential categorizations of black and white with a messy disarticulated center (50). Not surprisingly most cases fell into the nuances of the brown category, necessitating recall to the massive trove of surveillance data that had been previously gathered by the FBI on the community. The spectacle of the loyalty questionnaire and the imperative to categorize and shorthand lived complexity provides a terrifying counterpoint to the seemingly dispassionate lines of Okubo’s wartime compositions. Just as the supposed realism of the graphic lines of linear perspective in Okubo’s forms foreclose atmospheric gradations of scale or depth, the questionnaire
itself provides a textual prototype of both the insistence of transparent visible fidelity and its impossibility in the messy backlog of parts.

If we remain intent on parsing Nisei “resistance” to such a convoluted structure, I suggest that Okubo’s special genius lies in the ways her work formally indexes and subverts the constraints brought to bear in the execution of such racialized grammars as the graphic and the questionnaire. The sociological position that readers have noted in *Citizen 13660* might be more clearly understood as sociological posture or performance.
The camps, as several historians have detailed, were sites of intense sociological observation—laboratories situated at the limits of democracy and its enforced production. Brian Hayashi outlines how trained Parkian sociologists and WRA administrators immersed in liberal social reform policy since the 1930s attempted to delineate a Japanese “psychology” while teaching democracy. John Collier, Commissioner for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which administered the Poston and Gila River camps opened a Bureau of Sociological Research at Poston headed by Alexander Leighton, a psychiatrist who had previously worked with Native American communities. Dorothy Swaine Thomas who had participated in Gunnar Myrdal’s Carnegie Corporation study of African American communities headed another unit organized by the University of California. The volume and types of research generated

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* See Byrd and Okimoto for a more sustained study of Collier, the Poston center and interwoven politics of colonization and internment within the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the WRA.
from the studies of incarcerated ethnic Japanese in the camps reveals something of the
disparate desires and policies mapped onto this captive population. Because the WRA
was staffed with civilian social workers it was viewed with some suspicion by the
military, which overall tended to uphold a more rigid coupling of race and loyalty. The
WRA’s more nuanced perspective is reflected in their internal assessments of loyalty in
leave clearance interviews at the Gila River Center. The assessments reveal how these
academic units become overall less interested in quantifying loyalty than expanding and
refining a process of qualification itself. Muller describes the “stunning document” used
by the WRA in the Gila River interview assessments, composed of long checklists of
affective adjectives that provided a “dizzying menu of internee attitudes” in the
subject’s interview performance (81-2). This more nuanced, “liberal” screening steps
away from the black and white quantification of loyalty seen in the JAJB assessments
towards a qualification of affect itself. Muller describes the WRA’s graphic assessment
system as “fourteen shades of gray” that notably did not release inmates based on the
spurious assessment of loyalty but rather had the effect of categorically allowing for the
indefinite incarceration and segregation of citizens at Tule Lake based on whether their
affective performances seemed dangerous to the WRA for reason that they would be
“disadvantageous for public relations” (82). That the more liberal assessment seemingly
moves away from hard racial categorizations to more nuanced and de facto dangerous
assessments of individual affect in the brown or “fourteen shades of gray” spectrum
underlines the mounting surveillance and documentation of affective spectacle and performance in the camps, providing an unsettling insight into what I will suggest is the graphic posture of Okubo in her memoir.

The coupling of a liberal reform impetus with a sociological study towards the production of democracy is underwritten by the considerable presence of anthropologists in the camps as well. Alexander Leighton, the head of Collier’s Bureau of Sociological Research answered to the Society of Applied Anthropology. Both Leighton and Edward Spicer, also a trained psychiatrist that later became a professor of Cultural Anthropology and studied Native American communities in the Southwest, utilized their fieldwork at Poston to further the methodology of applied anthropology after subsequently developing sustained interest in Japanese culture and interethnic management. Two of Spicer’s essays on Japanese Americans in Poston were included in his landmark methodology textbook, *Human Problems in Technological Change* that attempted to demonstrate how methods “developed in applied anthropology work with non-American Indians—a first for the field—and can assist in getting laborers to pick cotton or resettle in a new albeit undesirable location!” (Hayashi 214). Two of Jack Matusoka’s animated sketches of Poston visually intimate how people recognized their imbrication within the intertwined legacies of Native and African American histories that underwrite the instrumentalist methodologies applied to them as a population. Matsuoka details an episode from the perspective of the young adults targeted by the
WRA social workers who are rightfully perceived as part of the indeterminate muddle of administration he calls “the authorities” (Fig. 8): “Doing their part. Once the authorities asked camp high-school students to volunteer to pick cotton in the blazing sun as their contribution to the war effort” (112). The subsequent panel (Fig. 9) depicts the presence of the indigenous residents of the Colorado River Indian Reservation on which the Poston Center was erected against the Tribal Council’s strenuous objections. In this spare frame and text Matsuoka narrates what was perceived as the phenotypical likeness shared by the inmates and their protesting hosts, fusing contemporary presence and historical precedent: “Greetings from the original Americans. American Indians—with Japanese-looking faces—waved to the students’ truck as it returned to camp from the cotton fields (114). The slippage between histories of African and Japanese American un-freedoms Native and Japanese American denizens of Poston. The ability of Matsuoka and Okubo’s texts to convey rich shadings of meaning despite the constraints of their lived and artistic forms offers a significant counterpoint to the ever-encompassing management of the camps.

The fusion of anthropology and sociology that underwrites the administration of the camps winds through Okubo’s graphic in more formal ways that hinge on a similar visual irony. In all of the sketches chosen for the work Okubo draws herself into every
Figure 8: Picking cotton in *Camp II, Block 211*.

Figure 9: Greeting residents of Colorado River Indian Reservation.
Figure 10: Details of the artist making art in *Citizen 13660.*

frame as a participant and an observer. Okubo strikes a range of postures and poses in the frames, the repetition of her drawn self and accompanying signature highlighting a third person external projection of self-inscription into nearly every frame of *Citizen 13660.* While this repetition of the artist and her posture as an observer has been lauded by critics as visual evidence of Okubo’s sociological agency, a particular posture in the work seems to correspond to an older ethnographic visuality: the performance of the Asian artist making art (Fig. 10). The spectacular performance of Asian artists as both creators of art and objects of art themselves has a long history in the Americas. James Moy’s 1993 study of Chinese American performance underlines how this history most often enscripts Chinese Americans. Popular spectacular culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that featured decidedly orientalist conflations of space and
time set a precedent for the Japanese artist as art that Okubo’s own mother may have experienced as a calligrapher at the 1904 St Louis exposition which featured performances of art making. A significant number of Okubo’s drawings feature her making art. Sometimes, as in the top two frames of Fig. 10, in the midst of camp authorities and frequently in spaces that would be domestic and private but given the conditions of camp are rendered irrevocably public for the gaze of the reader. The interface between space and ethnicity come into relief when we consider contemporary depictions of Chinese American artists in Chinatowns offering art-making performances. Popular photographic portraits at this time of Dong Kingman and Jade Snow Wong painting and making pottery offer a photographic counterpoint as performances of cultural virtuosity. At Topaz camp we see both demarcation and analogy between Chinese and Japanese parameters of racialized anthropological portraiture. Between Chinatown and Topaz bodies serve as synecdoches for racialized sites as the graphic serves as a synecdoche for photography itself and its properties of capture. However, in Citizen 13660’s self-sketching of the artist making art we might glimpse a willful *mise en abyme* that repeats the recursive fidelity of image to creator, limning the sociological grammars of the camp, which as Okubo has suggested can be represented but not known “unless one had lived it.” To think about Okubo’s work as outlining, without reproducing, a certain instrumental logic establishes a political and aesthetic intention towards grappling with the presiding visual cultures of the moment.
If Okubo and Matsuoka’s drawings go far to visually delimit what we can and can’t know about the camps and their administration, Okubo’s work in graphic print culture during and after the war signals her artistic imbrication within the prevailing styles and movements of the day. The history of *Survey Graphic* magazine provides a graphic counterpoint towards the circulation of popular print that parallels the work undertaken by social scientists in the camps. *Survey Graphic* was published as a supplement to an earlier publication, the *Survey*, that had formed in 1912 from a cooperative publishing society dedicated to advancing national philanthropic discourse. The first issue of *Survey Graphic* was published in 1921 as a popular quarterly magazine targeted at liberal professionals and laypersons interested in progressive social reform. The editor Paul Kellogg, a proponent of New Deal policy was notably interested in Dewey-influenced ideas towards pragmatic education and the consequent development of visual literacy and an emergent progressive multiculturalism. From the 1920s through the 1930s *Survey Graphic* featured extensive coverage of national debates on race, launching a “Race the Issues” series in 1921 that promised to devote a month every year to a different ethnic or racial group. This culminated in the landmark double issue, “Harlem: Mecca of the Negro” in 1925, guest edited by Alain Locke. The Locke issue provoked considerable outrage for its inclusion of two series of ethnographic-style portraits of African American subjects by photographer Winold Reiss titled, “Harlem Types” and “Negro Women.” These series repeated the visual logic of an earlier series by Reiss, “Orientals in
America,” that attempted to show variation within type—both diversifying and reinscribing racialized typologies (Johnson 52). *Survey Graphic* undertook extensive coverage of ethnic Japanese incarceration and notably featured an “imagetext” collaboration between Dorothea Lange and Paul S. Taylor that paired Lange’s FSA-style documentary photographs with Taylor’s restrained essay. Taylor denounced the imprisonment while trying to balance security concerns, noting that the experiment of the WRA “will go far toward fashioning the whole pattern of our policy on racial and minority groups now and in the post-war world” (397). A drawing by Okubo initially published in *Trek* was included in the December 1944 issue, “Christmas in a Relocation Center,” reflecting Kellogg’s interest in promoting both fine and graphic art. In 1935 Kellogg wrote in an annual forecast for the journal about the special importance of art towards a progressive project: “In visualizing the stuff of human affairs, *Survey Graphic* has long made use not only of graphs, charts, maps, but of etchings, paintings, frescos, sculpture” (“People”). The field of visuality as defined by Kellogg delineates between art as “etchings, paintings, frescos, sculpture” and data visualization as “graphs, charts, maps.” The traversals between these fields provide a significant point of overlap for the fusion of the explicit and suggestive in the graphic form at this period.

*Survey Graphic* was a key promoter of the visual education properties of isotype, a graphic system of representation pioneered by Otto Neurath, a philosopher of the Vienna school of logical positivism. Neurath had intentionally developed isotype, or the
“Vienna method,” as a standardized visual language that could objectively interpret social issues without boundaries of language. Neurath developed his ideas in the interwar period in Europe, establishing the Social Museum of Vienna to showcase the form as well as other experimental visual methods, including animated films. His first charts using isotype in America were published in *Survey Graphic* in 1932. Educational and government publications using isotype, which was based on the unit of the pictogram, soon followed. Neurath’s most significant follower in the United States was Rudolf Modley, a former director of the Social Museum and curator of the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. Modley established Pictorial Statistics Inc., creating a considerable volume of isotype-based educational and policy materials that he called pictorial statistics. Despite differences of name, isotype and pictorial statistics both function according to the logic of positivist principles of representation. Pictographs and isotype are designed to convey complex information in the simplest and most visually immediate form possible. Neurath’s signal innovation was to eliminate scale from the representation of data and replace with quantity. Rather than representing quality with larger or smaller icons, he measured with quantity using the depiction of more or less numbers of icons. In a 1938 article explaining pictorial statistics, Modley outlines the “pictograph” as a unit of visual measure based on an (incorrect) understanding of other languages’ linguistic forms. Seeking to remedy the “repetitions and monotony” of modern conventional graphs to express data, Modley explains that the isotype
movement has “turned to the ancient picture languages to get its first principle: to use self-explanatory pictorial symbols as units in making charts. As in early American, Chinese, or Egyptian drawings, a picture of a cow again stands for a cow and a drawing of a man for a man” (660). In this marriage of an excavated “ancient” language of pure iconicity and modern data visualization we find the troubled conflation of an extravagant proliferation of static iconic surfaces and the flattening of depth and multiplicity. His co-authored 1937 textbook with Louis Hacker and George Taylor, The United States: A Graphic History, provides a fascinating example of isotype’s contradictions. A triptych of the transatlantic slave trade is titled “Colonial Trade Routes” (Fig. 11). This graphic conveys the stunning scale and violences of such a project’s reduction and excision of the accumulated connections and entanglements, overlaps and amplifications of human and non-human life rendered interchangeable. Excavating the fractures between life and its static and instrumental representation such as isotype and the anthropological fallacies that Modley’s notion of “pictograph” cheerfully circulate towards the project of social education illustrates some of the theoretical and methodological crossover between the WRA, a progressive visual print culture and the camp graphic.
Figure 11: “Colonial Trade Routes” in The United States: A Graphic History (1937).
Okubo herself dabbled in isotype and informational graphics with *The Mediterranean* (Fig. 12), the mural she executed “lying on her back for one year painting a mural for an ocean liner” according to Shirley Sun (12). Okubo’s “informative mural” testifies to the diverse ways that graphics and data were being self-consciously combined during this period in a range of government, educational, and commercial publications. *The Mediterranean* denotes the logic of the graphic itself as inscription, of both picture and word even as it connotes other embedded yet perhaps opaque resonances. While Okubo, as a commercial illustrator and contributor to forerunners of isotype such as *Survey Graphic* was doubtless aware of Neurath and Modley’s visual experiments in quantitative visual consolidation, Okubo herself spoke of her technique at this period as a process of simplification garnered from illustration: “It was from illustrating anatomy for a medical book that I learned the most. It taught me to investigate into all the facts, like a scientist. I simplified and simplified in the drawings until all interpretations and mannerisms are out and only the clear facts remained” (Sun 41). Accordingly, in the seeming “simplification” operative in *The Mediterranean* mural we find traces of isotype.10 While Okubo may have simplified the anatomy illustrations

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10 This is one of the few extant documentary sources of *The Mediterranean* mural. Okubo painted the mural in 1948 for the deluxe passenger cargo ship the *Exochorda*, one of four retrofitted World War II naval ships by American Export. The *Exochorda* was initially the SS *Dauphin*, a naval vessel that saw active naval service during the Pacific war and was present at Tokyo Bay in 1945 for the day of surrender. After returning to the east coast, the ship was decommissioned in 1946, retrofitted, and sailed a Mediterranean route as a cruise liner from 1948-1959. It was then rechristened the SS *Stevens* and served as a floating dorm for students of the Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey until it was scrapped in 1979 when the mural was
to their barest facts, *The Mediterranean* itself cannot be so simplified, despite its stylistic tribute to isotype. In the mural Okubo offers hand drawn icons yet the arrangement is haphazard, curved lines of suggestive movements, trajectories, and routes that are unexplained and for which we are given no key. In contrast to the self-evident authority of much isotype and its violent reiteration of how people can be reduced to objects without any account of the processes that make such a reduction and objectification possible, Okubo’s *Mediterranean* asks us to consider other ways of seeing that might include the submerging of reduction itself, the tracing of other routes. In contrast to the squared lines of Okubo’s recursive and repetitive internment camp and the flattened presumably lost. The *Exochorda’s* sumptuous remodel was led by industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss and included now-lost works by Okubo, Isamu Noguchi, and others. See “Modern Art Goes to Sea.”
human lives of “Colonial Trade Routes,” *The Mediterranean* intimates other possibilities of moving and not moving in the world.

**1.3 Graphica Pacifica: Contemporary Transnational Camp Graphics**

I want to conclude by briefly examining a recent graphic novel on Japanese Canadian internment that sketches some of the possible outcomes of these provisional forms engendered by the experience of mass incarceration. While Joy Kigawa’s exquisite account of Japanese Canadian internment in her 1981 novel *Obasan* continues to exert transnational appeal in both American and Canadian college and high school syllabi as well as Asian American studies curriculum, no graphic work in Canada emerged as a contemporary complement *Citizen 13660*, even retrospectively, such as Matsuoka’s collection. Only very recently, with the publication of Canadian artist, author, and historian Michael Kluckner’s graphic novel *Toshiko* (2015) has a graphic account of Japanese Canadian internment entered the field. Published the same year as the British Columbia Liberal government’s rollout of the “New Curriculum” in 2015, *Toshiko* was aggressively marketed as a teaching aid for elementary to high school teachers following the revised provincial curriculum. In Kluckner’s work, the nascent pedagogical imperative attached to Okubo and Matsuoka’s earlier Japanese wartime experience in graphic form has consolidated to the central organizing principle of the work’s intended audience, reception, and function. This pedagogical imperative is outlined in the two-page teaching guide that Kluckner includes with the work (“Toshiko: A Guide”).
Toshiko is Kluckner’s first foray into the graphic form and forms a diptych with his subsequent publication, *2050: A Post-Apocalyptic Murder Mystery* (2017). In *2050*, Kluckner follows the journey of protagonist Sara Fidelia through a future post-apocalyptic Vancouver and I suggest that the graphic resonances between Japanese Canadian Toshiko and racially ambiguous Sara Fidelia bookend Kluckner’s particular liberal vision of regional citizenship. Examining the formal graphic strategies of *Toshiko* and Kluckner’s overall oeuvre, I argue that *Toshiko* has much to suggest about the lingering legacies of Okubo’s earlier work and the affective and aesthetic stakes of graphic representation and pedagogy of Japanese North American incarceration as a contemporary site of heritage in the settler colonial nation.

An accomplished and immensely popular artist, author, and regional historian, Kluckner’s renderings of Vancouver and rural British Columbia have left an indelible impression on residents that I would argue has been instrumental in forging an aesthetic relation to the region through the politics of memory and settler colonial heritage. Beginning with intensely local neighborhood histories, or, “Vancouveriana,” Kluckner’s first major works, *Vancouver the Way It Was* (1984), followed by *Victoria the Way It Was* (1986) featured Kluckner’s exhaustive, grassroots historical sourcing from archives, newspapers, old postcards and photographs of early Vancouver and Victoria fused with his nostalgic watercolors of a changing urban landscape. The immensely popular *Vanishing Vancouver* (1990) established Kluckner’s vision of Vancouver as a city “tearing
itself to pieces” (Vancouver Remembered 14) in the wake of Expo 86 and the eruption of urbanization, gentrification, and a still-escalating housing crisis. In Vanishing Vancouver, Vancouver Remembered (2006), and Michael Kluckner’s Vancouver (1996), Kluckner integrates watercolor, photographs, text, newspaper cartoons, ephemera such as postcards and old ads, enmediating Vancouver as a nostalgic graphic fusion. Kluckner has produced thousands of recognizable watercolor renderings of colonial-era Edwardian and Victorian commercial and residential buildings that were being demolished in the years preceding and following Expo 86, forming a decidedly elegiac compendium of a vanishing and lost city. Kluckner tipped towards jeremiad in 1991’s Paving Paradise: Is British Columbia Losing its Heritage?, railing against the lack of heritage protection for residential and commercial properties, motivated by development speculation and the strain of the automobile and transportation infrastructure on precious farmland.

Kluckner’s concerns with housing, transportation, and environmental sustainability in the fragile ecologies of this coastal delta region are founded. However, Kluckner’s reasoning of the causes and remedies for these issues highlight how settler colonial investments in property are rendered in terms of aesthetic values and feelings that invoke the notion of heritage. Kluckner’s oscillations between jeremiad and elegy take graphic form in his work’s fluctuations between the written and drawn. In Paving Paradise, Kluckner writes of BC as fragile paradise, threatened by redevelopment
“spurred on by the new migrants who are arriving in British Columbia at almost unprecedented rates”:

British Columbia is being loved to death. The good aspects of its heritage are being thrown away and most of the new development is treading very heavily on the land. Unless its urban and rural environments are recognized as fragile, like the wilderness areas we are exhorted to protect, they will be ruined and the quality of life and character that attracted people to the province in the first place will cease to exist. (2)

Kluckner contrasts the “Shangri-La” of Vancouver with Singapore, a “city without a soul . . . where the sameness of the sparkling modern buildings and shopping districts is about as interesting as a box of Band-Aids” (2). Situating Vancouver in what Jodi Byrd might characterize as transpacific transit of empire—adroitly neo-orientalized through the invocation of Shangri-La—Kluckner links wilderness preservation with urban preservation through the notion of heritage as active “stewardship” of both “natural environment” and “the past,” extolling how Vancouver’s potential retention of “an awareness of heritage gives a person a sense of roots—of place and citizenship” (3). Invoking the language of stewardship to conjoin history with regional ecology as a marker of “roots” and “citizenship,” Kluckner’s long jeremiad effectively elides and displaces indigeneity as something already extinct yet fungible against the rhetorical relief of the Asian Pacific as invasive and without a necessary aesthetic “soul” that might engender immigrants as properly rooted citizens. Kluckner’s investments in heritage are both rhetorical and concrete; he has been a central figure for creating a popular visual register of what constitutes heritage in British Columbia but also nationally in his long tenure as a member of the Board of Governors of the Heritage Canada Foundation and
the Vancouver Heritage Foundation. Initiated by the federal government but organized as a national nonprofit, the Heritage Canada Foundation (now National Trust for Canada) is a central entity towards promoting the values, aesthetics, and legislation that determines the discourse of heritage in the state.

Since the 1980s Kluckner’s iconic illustrations of a “vanishing Vancouver” have instantiated a visual elegy for a city that is undeniably in the third decade of a housing crisis due in part to its international appeal. Kluckner’s notable long battle against the “Vancouver Special,” or in his own words, the “monster house” (Fig. 13) reflects the twinned affective and aesthetic valences through which Asian immigrants, specifically Chinese immigrants who have migrated to Vancouver in substantial numbers since the early 1980s. The long public outrage sparked by the monster house is predicated on twinned biological and social discourses of unchecked reproduction as these cheaply constructed buildings are constantly constructed, bulldozed, and reconstructed. This

Figure 13: Michael Kluckner poses by a monster house in 1992.
relay feeds the city’s accelerating cycle of global capital and a corresponding trepidation for what alien familial arrangements the structures might house permeates media in the province. The monster house materializes the abstractions of global capitalism writ as invasive Chineseness into architectural and aesthetic form. Iyko Day’s study of the abstraction of Asian labor in the North American settler colonial nation highlights the unique threat of the too-efficient and soulless “monster house” in discursive registers that emerged in the nineteenth century:

[T]he connection between the Chinese and the abstract domination of capitalism evolved through their identification with a mode of efficiency that was aligned with a perverse temporality of domestic and social reproduction. In other words, the Chinese personified the quantitative sphere of abstract labor, which threatened the concrete, qualitative sphere of white labor’s social reproduction. (16)

What we might call a settler colonial structure of feeling consolidates through Kluckner’s visual narration of a purportedly threatened and vanishing white indigeneity writ in the destruction of organic romantic colonial architecture. Such an affective response is predicated on simplifying complex problems of global capital and local neoliberal governances with aestheticized nostalgia of what Day tags as “romantic capitalism” in Kluckner’s evocative watercolor renderings of old Vancouver (Fig. 14).

Kluckner’s recent turn to the graphic novel marks a new medium for the artist that conserves his long-standing investments in heritage. Toshiko and 2050 highlight how tensions between organic and soulless, concrete and abstract render anxieties over Asian domestic organization through differential Japanese and Chinese personifications. In contrast to Okubo or Matsuoka’s earlier first-person memoirs, Toshiko centers the
recollections of Cowboy, a white adolescent boy who visually and textually narrates the wartime story while unmistakably evoking the American frontier. The work details the “Romeo and Juliet” romance between Cowboy and Toshiko, an adolescent Nisei girl whose family is taken in by a local white family in rural Tappen, British Columbia. Toshiko’s family has avoided the established camps of the eastern interior where most Japanese Canadians were relocated by striking an arrangement with a local white farmer who exchanges legal oversight and crude housing for the family’s farm labor. While Okubo’s text (and own defiantly single life) refuses the expected closure of marriage and a return to normative family arrangements, Kluckner follows Matsuoka in narrating Japanese North American incarceration as a staging for unlikely youth romance amidst a burgeoning youth culture at large. However, while Matsuoka’s comic refrains of furtive
adolescent and adult sexuality were embedded in the larger collective experience of physical constraint and temporal recursion, Kluckner’s work effectively excises the personal or collective experience of Toshiko and her ethnic community by scripting a rare and very particular mode of wartime domestic accommodation for the far more common collective experience of the internment camp. With Toshiko and her small family narratively isolated in an overwhelmingly white and presumably hostile

Figure 14: Detail of Vancouver architecture in *Vanishing Vancouver*.
community, an isolated Toshiko and her brother are designated as the bearers of particularized racial expectation.

Kluckner’s romantic imbrication of heritage and Japaneseness constitutes an important formal element of racial affect in *Toshiko*. The work’s form is representative of the contemporary graphic novel, including gutter spaces, word bubbles, and complex transitions of visual perspective between frames. The work is rendered in pencil and charcoal sketches that detail buildings and landmarks more than people. Kluckner’s distinctive fusion of line illustration and watercolor is adapted to the greyscale charcoals in the graphic form. In portraits of rural Tappen, Kluckner fuses the romantic atmospheric perspective that Okubo’s work eschews with the detailed line drawings of wartime urban Vancouver, invoking a particularly west coast tradition of arts and crafts aesthetic with the elegiac erasure of Japanese Canadian cultural form even as he visually sutures the larger province into a settler-colonial terrain of metropole and periphery (Fig. 15). The recuperation of Japanese Canadians into a heritage-able notion of aesthetic citizenship is evident in the romantic form of the work, both visually and narratively. Yet the doomed romance between Cowboy and Toshiko insinuates the failure of state multiculturalism in this work as the couple part ways, foreclosing the promise of interracial family structures. Kluckner’s following graphic novel, *2050: A Post-Apocalyptic Murder Mystery* underscores the apocalyptic flow of such heritage nostalgia towards a future-tense of what a reviewer approvingly cites as a “chilling graphic
novel” of a detective suggestively named Sara Fidelia moving her way through a “shattered Eur-Asian Vancouver, which has become a victim of over-population, climate change, and a growing gap between haves and have-nots.” In the graphic depictions of this “shattered Eur-Asian Vancouver,” Kluckner’s earlier warnings of a looming Chinese threat are reified in the dictatorship that is a thinly-veiled analogy of contemporary Chinese state structures. Caught in Kluckner’s dystopic gaze, the denizens of 2050 notably navigate a range of oppressive and non-nuclear domestic arrangements shaped by aggressive eugenics policies while inhabiting a desolate Vancouver littered with the toppled formerly beloved heritage structures of Toshiko. As the racially ambiguous Sara Fidelia moves through this troubled future, she looks backwards to Nisei Toshiko as the horizon of normative yet ultimately failed kinship arrangements. Past merges to speculative futures here as Kluckner envisions the graphic’s spectacular disloyalty
2. “We’re searching for Shanghai/ We’re dreaming of you”: Martin Wong and Orientalist Drag Performance in San Francisco, 1968-1978

A OF L
1140 OAK STREET
SAN FRANCISCO

HELLO ANGELS
HOW IS PARADISE [SIC]. STILL STRANDED HERE ON EARTH AS USUAL. SLOWLY UNRAVELING LIKE A WEA IN SUMMER. FREIGHT TRAIN THUNDER ROLLIN PAST. JUST DOING TIME AS THEY SAY. WAITING FOR THE JUDGE. I LOVE YOU BUT I COULD NEVER BE A PART OF YOU. A MOMENTARY GLIMPSE IS ALL I ASK. DON’T DENY ME THAT. THE WAY IT IS THE WAY IT IS + THAT’S ALL THERE IS FOR NOW. SEE YOU SOONER. LOVE

—Martin Wong, postcard to the Angels of Light, 1974

What does a post card want to say to you? On what conditions is it possible? Its destination traverses you, you no longer know who you are. At the very instant when from its address it interpellates, you, uniquely you, instead of reaching you it divides you or sets you aside, occasionally overlooks you. And you love and you do not love, it makes of you what you wish, it takes you, it leaves you, it gives you.


In his typographically distinctive 1974 postcard addressed to the Free Angels of Light, a radical drag performance collective living communally in San Francisco’s Lower Haight neighborhood about a mile from his parents’ home, Chinese American artist Martin Wong frames the dislocated identification of his given love from and for the
collective, as a matter of differential time as much as space. While the Angels remain transfixed in a San Francisco “paradice”—what Angel Adrian Brooks would later characterize as their “glorification of the present tense” (Thompson 454)—Wong is “stranded” on earth, “slowly unraveling,” “just doing time,” or “waiting for the judge,” while a train “rolling past” marks passage.11 The ephemeral “glimpse” he asks for is “momentary” and subjunctively desirous—“for now” and “sooner.” What seemingly melancholic arrangements of time and space keep Wong apart from the Angels’ present paradise that the postcard is dispatched to?

The prosaic answer—that Wong was simply not in town—highlights his regular migrations between San Francisco and northern California from 1968 until his departure for New York in 1978. For a decade Wong shuttled between several lives as a formally trained ceramics artist in Eureka, California where he sometimes worked as a courtroom illustrator; in San Francisco as a self-styled “tantric set designer for underground gorilla [sic] theatre group (Cockettes—later Angels of Light)” (Wong “Resumé”), and places between as a speed portraitist at California tourist spots such as Fisherman’s Wharf as ‘the Human Instamatic.’ Wong’s fluidity underscores two of the Angels’ recent “collectively authored” recollections of Wong’s seemingly fixed difference from the

11 The original postcard is reproduced in Caitlin Burkhart and Julian Myers-Szupinska, eds, My Trip To American By Martin Wong (San Francisco: California College of the Arts, 2015): 87. While Wong’s archives contain hundreds of his received correspondences this post card is a rare example of a sent correspondence from Wong and doubly rare as a communication between Wong and the Angels of Light.
group: “he was compartmentalized, and the compartments didn’t fit very well together. 

. . He did things we weren’t necessarily a part of. We weren’t a part of him and he wasn’t always a part of us. We were group oriented but he was his own entity within the group.” (Brod 119). Amelia Brod’s 2015 interview with Angels Beaver Bauer and Tahara is significant as perhaps the first time that members of the Cockettes and Angels have been prompted to publicly speak about Martin Wong’s positioning in these groups. Their recollections of Wong’s compartmental misfit signal problems of space that belie the group’s cohesive “we”—unfixed regional, cultural, and personal geographies; differentials of professional class and aspirations; and the perilous crossings of interracial desire—that assume temporal crisis in surviving members’ recent attempts to consolidate the Angels’ liberatory genealogy. Tahara and Bauer’s increasingly sharp statements sketch Wong as a queer figure of developmental crisis as Wong’s purported misfit brings the Angels’ founding anarchic and anti-normative impulses into relief, even as their narration iterates something of a disciplining “chronopolitics of development” such as Elizabeth Freeman has called on queer politics and theory to dismantle (58). Wong’s developmental problems seem to emerge from his “Chinese and academic background” personified by his mother’s purported future commercial ambitions; an arrested coming out timeline as Tahara asserts that given such a background, “he didn’t’ accept himself as a gay person”; his interracial desires as he “always fell in love with white guys [who]…. weren’t sure if they were ready for
interracial relationships”; and finally, a failure to arrive with the collective’s liberation: “he couldn’t go all the way with us. He wasn’t as liberated as others” (120). The compartmentalization that forecloses his arrival at personal and collective liberation is complicated by Wong’s demonstrated lifelong interest in exploring indiscrete and reciprocal modes of being with others, reflected in the text of the personal calling card and stamp that he designed around this time and would use for decades—IMUUR2—so why can’t Wong be part of the Angels? If we were to make a characteristically Wong-style play with the blank graphic and typographic space that arranges form, we might also ask in what ways was he nonetheless unable to be A PART and APART from this radical kinship and what might this oscillation mean for our understanding of queer interracial intimacies along the indiscrete borders of experimental domestic formations at this moment in San Francisco? Accordingly, we might also ask—recto to verso—what was the Angels’ “we” that they could not see “he” as a part of them?

That Wong was not a part of the Angels, much less the earlier Cockettes, seems tacit in his official absence from their archive—the public memories and testimonies that comprise the increasingly consolidated document and oral histories of the groups. An artist who would receive critical attention after his move to New York in 1978, Wong’s time with the Angels and Cockettes tends to serve as a colorful, if minor aside in assessments of his own individual oeuvre. Yet when we look for Wong in the memories of the groups and their archives, the fact of his social presence and significant creative
collaboration with both groups is undeniable—and as I will attempt to demonstrate in a following chapter, stunningly generative towards Wong’s later graphic collaborations with the Nuyorican and subway writing scene in New York over the following decades. Wong’s ghostly attendance in the memorialization of the Angels and Cockettes parallels his disciplinary absence and presence within the nascent Asian American movement at the same moment and its historicization in Asian American studies. Wong’s exclusion from the then-emergent gay liberation and Asian American movements underlines the uneasy confluences of race and sexuality that challenge neat delineations of discrete material and disciplinary histories taking shape in the late 1960s and the methodological challenges of writing about this moment. However, my study of Wong is less a recuperative gesture to reclaim an individual legacy or set the archive straight than it is an opportunity to detail how one small but significant collaboration in the vast constellation of creative experiment at this moment might allow us to imagine liberatory social and critical effects that impart the limits of liberation. By searching for Wong in the archives, we might better understand how the very notions of liberation and exclusion at this moment enfold multiple streams of historical weight that these liberatory movements sought to remake and thereby consider what else his work might make possible when engaging with these streams in dynamic relation.

Martin Wong was a part of the Angels as much as anyone else that intermittently participated in the notoriously fluid assemblage bearing these names. However, I argue
that Martin Wong’s creative and embodied figuration of Chineseness marks a graphic point of exclusion—a crisis even—that interrupts the San Francisco counterculture’s genealogy of “free” and its selectively historicized relation to the erotic creative labors structuring the Cockettes and Angels’ anarchic communalist-ethos. By selectively historicized, I suggest that the “free” economies of communalist groups such as the Diggers and Kaliflower that engender the Cockettes’ erotic praxis of self and collective revise the anarchist discourses of the English Diggers and Levellers against liberal governmentality only to encounter another liberal formation that Lisa Lowe explains through the global sign of Chineseness as “a figure, a fantasy of ‘free’ yet racialized and coerced labor . . . central to the development of what we could call a modern racial governmentality” (Intimacies 24). Accordingly, I examine the “free” orientalist performances of the Cockettes and Angels as a promiscuous encounter between these overlapping formations and their local resonances in late 1960s San Francisco. Such a collaboration was scripted by Wong as a manner and moment of erotic encounter, which Sharon Holland reminds us places us at “the threshold of ideas about quotidian racist practice” (9), and helps us to better understand how global notions of racial governmentality might conjoin at this moment with local iterations of racial capitalism and affective intimacies that untether autonomies. If “erotic encounter” and “racist practice” have already reared their twinned political head in this account through the exclusions of Wong’s racialized “compartmentalization,” I also suggest that the
ephemeral “momentary glimpse” of Wong’s tagline, IMUUR2, registers the erotic possibilities of radical art and queer creative praxis as the ephemeral site of this shared encounter. This connection harbors potentially surprising material affiliations between an assemblage of performers of diverse racial, gender, and class identities whose crossings break down hardened delineations between the San Francisco counterculture, a consolidating gay and lesbian political identity emerging sometimes from and in reaction to, experiments in collective living, and key enclaves of Chinese American social and familial life.

While such surprising affiliations are important for understanding the diversity of social experiment at this period, this chapter pushes back on the celebratory mythologies of the Cockettes/Angels and Martin Wong that infuse the ongoing memorialization of late 1960s San Francisco and 1980s New York. This work dwells in the messy and often retrograde attachments, affects, and practices of these collaborations and the ways they were embedded in spectacular and quotidian racist practice, notably orientalist drag performance. Wong’s absent presence highlights a range of tacit racisms that were galvanizing liberatory praxis at this moment. These tacit racisms are both enhanced and complicated by the groups’ relation to drag, in personal and theatrical performances which were often less a staging of cross gendering than an attempt to destabilize gender norms altogether and at a moment that occasioned yet predates much of the terminology we currently use to describe these terms. As Malik Gaines notes, “It is
difficult to describe the genders of the group’s members without reaching the limits of one historically inscribed terminology or another” (9). I am specifically interested in the differential resonances of these group experiments to destabilize gender norms through orientalist drag, as both archival principles as well as what Diana Taylor explains as repertoire—enactments of “embodied memory . . . all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (20). For Wong, orientalist revision would serve as a lifetime study across and within a range of minoritarian social worlds. We might certainly view this as an ongoing process of disidentification for Wong, in José Muñoz’s sense of enactments of identity by minoritarian subjects who “must work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates” (Disidentifications 6). However, if Wong’s enactments of individual identity are complicated by the choral crossings and dissolutions of IMUUR2 that were also the Cockettes and Angels’ own disidentificatory work to dismantle normative attachments, this collaboration has much to say to us about the thresholds of intersectional crossings then and now and the historical shifts of what constitutes “dominant culture” at a key moment when the dominant itself is being contested from multiple perspectives. Following Muñoz, I suggest that Wong and the Cockettes and Angels’ disidentificatory performances were indeed a twinned impetus to “activate new social relations” that were both a “blueprint for minoritarian counterpublic spheres” (5) towards a queer futurity, as much as they were attempts to recuperate a material and imagined erotic
vernacular visual history of social life that for the Angels was queerly oriental and for Wong, the possibility of a fugitive Asian American queerness. This differentially shared project suggests that a type of “erotohistoriography” might be in order, in Freeman’s sense of a historiography that can describe some of the stakes for a shared glimpse of a recursive “historicity [that] itself might appear as a structure of tactile feeling” (66) that rests between archive and repertoire for these groups. Examining Wong’s increasingly graphic imaginary that he develops during this decade amidst the sensuous performances of the Cockettes and Angels and his ongoing maternal collaborations with his mother, Florence Fie Wong, an erotohistoriography brings this historical crisis of domestic development central to this story to our present, as it excavates disregarded lineations only to arrive at affiliations that cannot easily dispense with filiation.

An important element of my labors in this chapter is to resist the present co-option of Martin Wong as a singular figure of male genius, a narrative that was certainly advanced in his lifetime in ways significant to this project yet undercut by his enduring propensity for ensemble work. Wong’s steady rise as a valuable art commodity stems from precisely his vast talent for connection, rendering him a useful middleman axis, an ideal model minority subject for the New York art market’s fantasies of a lucrative queer, multicultural art subject and object that checks as many classificatory boxes as possible to expand market reach. Any study of Martin Wong immediately raises questions of methodology and the critical relation of performance and archive. Well
known for his vast collection of New York City subway art and writing objects and ephemera, Wong also left a massive personal archive and a huge collection of (often orientalist) kitsch objects gathered collaboratively over his lifetime with his mother Florence Wong who has been most responsible for ensuring that Martin’s papers, art, and collections became publicly accessible after his death. Florence’s deft maternal curation leaves scholars of Asian American art and queer studies the rare problem of material excess rather than absence that frequently marks minoritarian archives. The specter of Martin’s coterminous personal and methodological compartmentalization haunts these materials. Given the continued absence of any comprehensive study of Wong, a critical tendency towards enumeration—indeed compartmentalization—is consistently brought to bear on treatments of his life, works, and collections. That this enumerative impulse evokes the institutional cataloguing of oriental objects, perhaps as attempts to order what Edward Said has termed the “awful dimensions” of the oriental archive, presents an opportunity to think through the thresholds of break and suture alongside categorical identity distinctions that for Wong, often mirror the container listings of his own archive’s descriptions. In one recent assessment, a critic who contends with Wong’s “malleable” identity lists no less than fifteen increasingly discrete

12 Said discusses the problem of “strategy” with regards to an orientalist project of power and knowledge relevant to my work on Wong’s archives: to “identify the problem every writer on the Orient has faced: how to get hold of it, how to approach it, how not to be defeated or overwhelmed by its sublimity, its scope, its awful dimensions” (28).
categorizations for his person and art—indeed his person seems inextricable from his art (objects)—ranging from “Asian American” and “LGBTQ” to “Hippie,” “Chicano/Latin American,” and “Social Realist” to geographical site (Norton). Such increasingly particular enumerations, I suggest, index the aggressive classificatory impulse of liberal multiculturalism at play in the art world’s commodity capitalism that attended Martin Wong’s rise to fame in New York in the 1980s.

Given the commercial and institutional celebration of Wong, I caution that we should question the ways in which we want Wong and the attached archives to critically labor for us and consider the stakes of Wong performing as a “minor object” in Mimi Thi Nguyen’s terms:

Here the concept of minor objects describes those marginal forms, persons, and worlds that are mobilized in narrative (including archival) constructions to designate moments of crisis. By way of a minor object, exclusion and normativity might be laid bare (though perhaps in no straightforward manner), and the contingent quality of knowledge or other claims fold under scrutiny… But while it can also describe the limits of a structure or practice and be met with clear violence, a minor object might also be recruited to manage or overcome those limits and their laying bare, especially through acts such as recognition and inclusion, reestablishing normative principles without necessarily being itself engaged directly. (12-13)

As much as Wong remains an excluded minor object in the Cockettes/Angels archive—themselves a minor object of San Francisco counterculture and queer studies—Wong also actively produced himself as a minor subject through his own capture of

minor objects towards a living archive. These complexities are important towards recent
disciplinary and methodological debates within and between gay and lesbian studies,
queer studies and theory, critical race studies, queer of color critique, and Asian
American studies. Wong’s talent for connection between disparate communities and his
own complex enumerations demonstrate the risks and necessities of indiscrete queer of
color epistemologies to challenge institutional “ideologies of discreteness” (Ferguson 4)
that might attempt to center Wong as a self-citational subject relative to the flattening of
sub-collective voices, particularly in the following chapter as I consider Wong’s relation
to African diasporic and Nuyorican cultural forms and artists. Yet given the layered
difficulties of thinking about these modes of relation, we always run the risk Wong
being “recruited to manage or overcome those limits” as Nguyen highlights,
exaggerating and naturalizing Wong’s middleman position—one of global capitalism’s
enduring orientations of Asian—as a comparative axis, a mode for identifying,
classifying, and sorting the many through the one. Accordingly, this study contributes to
a larger queer of color project. Much of the material I examine reiterates some of the
major questions that animate queer of color critique—reorienting queer theory from
within the history of racial capitalism and nation-state regulation; the lived experience of
queers of color; queer diasporas; and “mobility, movement, and the vexed issues of
having a home or belonging” (Tompkins 181). However, in the domesticities of the
variants of queer counterculture that Wong stakes out, the critical genealogy that this
project reflects is markedly different than queer of color critique’s affiliation with women of color and black feminist theory and practice that was emerging in precisely the same decade that this chapter studies. By locating a different set of critical affiliations operative in this moment, I hope to bring some of the fissures and overlaps between key genealogies into relief.

2.1. Bay Area Communalism and Genealogies of Free

Born in Portland, Oregon in 1946 where his maternal grandfather owned a jewelry business, Martin Wong grew up in San Francisco, the only child of his devoted, middle class parents Florence and Benjamin Wong who were both designers for industrial construction company Bechtel. Martin had been poised to follow his parents’ work with design, studying architecture at Berkeley from 1966-1967 before deciding to focus on art. I suggest that the impact of this formal and informal familial training in design is crucial to his unfolding graphic sensibility, from the architectural sets he would design for the Angels and Cockettes to his emerging study and practice of graphic notation as cultural spatial markers. Between 1968 and 1978 Wong migrated between Eureka, California and San Francisco, studying art at Humboldt State while continuing a lifelong self-directed study of Asian art in the Berkeley library and Chinese American visuality in the communal enclaves of the Cockettes and Angels and Chinatown. In Eureka, Wong majored in ceramics for two years until graduating in 1970 and working as a sometime court illustrator. In San Francisco he drifted around the
Haight, designing graphic art and theatrical sets for the Cockettes and later the Angels of Light while hustling as a street artist at tourist sites such as Fishermen’s Wharf as ‘The Human Instamatic.’ A court illustrator during these years, Wong honed his capacity for speed and sparked his enduring fascination with crime and vice, what would later figure as institutional carceral spaces. As the Human Instamatic, “a five-dollar portrait painter on Fisherman’s Wharf” who claimed to once work “27 fairs in one day” (Trebay 30), Wong coupled an entrepreneurial auto-orientalist performance of speed with a subversive machinic mimeticism in his purportedly “grotesque” (Mann 2) street portraiture. Wong’s street performance as the Human Instamatic evokes both the sci-fi imaginings of some Angels productions as well as the routinized virtuosity of the New York City street taggers he would later befriend. In his intermittent residencies in San Francisco with the Cockettes and Angels, Wong was a technical participant in theatrical performances that generally unfolded on the street as much as the stage, a coterminous and porous space for Wong that he would revise and expand repeatedly in his work. Between the streets of Chinatown and Fisherman’s Wharf, the courtrooms of Eureka, and the Pagoda Palace Theatre where the Cockettes began to perform in 1970, Wong would set the stage for a relentless (self) study of the framings of the oriental object and its erotic street graphics.

Wong’s first encounter with members of the early Cockettes and the Free Angels of Light, initially overlapping groups that would notably break by 1972, registers as
doubly ephemeral in their already sparely recollected history. The groups’ shared history has been loosely documented over the decades in a patchwork of oral interviews, photographs and film footage, and both institutional and informal online archives yet remains notoriously contested along lines of collective memory and personal infighting while punctuated by loss and ellipses as many members including Wong, were devastated by the onslaught of AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s. In Beaver Bauer and Tahara’s 2015 interview, Tahara, who was a member of both the Cockettes and Angels, states that they cannot remember when or where they met Wong during these chaotic early years—maybe at “The Stud” or “in the street”—and that they cannot recall his work until he designed a set for the Angels in 1974. The Stud, a gay bar in South of Market that was a significant meeting and party spot for the Cockettes, suggests a counterpublic zone of shared contact and queer intimacies for Wong and the group, while “in the street” marks the increasingly national spectacle of the burgeoning countercultural traffic crowding San Francisco’s streets. Viewing the street as a site of radical relation enfolds these encounters within the specific local resonances of San Francisco’s social cartographies in the early years of the 1970s. In the following section I will outline how the street figured as one possible “scenario,” in Diana Taylor’s sense of a “meaning-making paradigm” that allows us to understand some of the “social structures and behaviors” that draw “from the repertoire as well as the archive” (29). As a multipurpose and “free” site of radical politics for several intersecting movements that
shaped the Cockettes and Angels, the scenario of the street as a site of improvisational crossings unfolds how Wong’s ongoing encounter with the groups would become formalized. The Cockettes’ subsequent consolidation on the stage of the Pagoda Palace Theatre—a crucially overlooked junction between San Francisco’s counterculture and Chinese American community—revises these concurrent stagings of freedom as the Cockettes and Angels brought the street to the theatre.

The Cockettes emerged from the crazy quilt of San Francisco countercultural life of the late 1960s as a disparate group that cohered on the stage of the Pagoda Palace Theatre on New Year’s Eve, 1969. As much as the Cockettes’ birth has been mythologized as an act of spontaneous generation on the night that various people clad in an array of fantastic ensembles climbed onto the stage of the Palace and danced a can-can, they share a longer genealogy across a spectrum of communities that were all actively revising the theory and practice of “free” in the city. Living communally across several shared houses, the Cockette ecology was saturated by Hibiscus (Fig. 16), the most notorious of the group’s founders and a figure who sutures both activist and arts movements including the Diggers, the Beats and the Theatre of the Ridiculous. Born George Edgerly Harris III in 1949 to a show business family in New York, George Harris arrived in San Francisco in 1967 with Beat poet Peter Orlovsky and Irving Rosenthal, Beat novelist and co-founder of an inter-communal periodical and commune on Sutter Street both known as Kaliflower. Returning from New York where he had been working
Figure 16: Hibiscus in a Martin Wong designed peacock costume for an Angels of Light production, 1972.
on a project with filmmaker Jack Smith, a mutual acquaintance and profound aesthetic influence on the future Cockettes, Rosenthal brought Harris to the Sutter Street commune. At Kaliflower Harris assessed the currents of the city and promptly rebirthed himself as Hibiscus, a psychedelic saturated, ecstatic, androgynous persona. Several Cockettes would later remember Hibiscus’s entry into San Francisco street life as so fantastic that they didn’t initially identify him as one of many young gay men streaming into the city from across the country but a “magical creature” that danced through the streets, a “crazy person who wore all this stuff . . . barefoot in overalls and curtains and lace” (Tent 24). Notoriously anti-disciplinary, Hibiscus purportedly chafed under Rosenthal’s rigidly structured organization at Kaliflower, disturbing the community’s “monastic silence” (21) with his penchant for spontaneous campy vaudeville and showtune routines crafted with his fellow domestic laborers toiling in the free kitchens who dubbed themselves the Kitchen Sluts.14 Taking these kitchen-crafted musicals to the streets, Hibiscus would connect with an assemblage of artists, partiers, and activists bound by a mutual love of psychedelic-infused old Hollywood melodrama and glamor.

14 A visceral example of Hibiscus’s penchant for disrupting the structured domestic economy of Kaliflower is his “come bread” performances with the Kitchen Sluts, named after lyrics from the musical, Man of La Mancha, which he would continue at the Cockettes house. Assigned to bake bread for the Free City Collective program that distributed free food to a network of communes, Hibiscus began making and distributing “come bread,” ejaculating into the dough of the free loaves in ecstatic autoerotic performances. Hibiscus documented the recipe in a Kaliflower newsletter with the heading, “Mouldy Novelties from the Kitchen Sluts: Hi Honey! Here on the oasis we whores make come bread for our lover men,” replete with hand drawn images of psychedelic phalluses and a collage featuring Marilyn Monroe in a Carmen Miranda-styled fruit headdress (Kitchen Sluts 1). For Hibiscus’ later reflections on the Kitchen Sluts Floor Show and the “controversial” yet “spiritual” making of “cum bread” see Thompson, pp. 458.
Several including Tahara, John Flowers, and Rumi Missabu had been loosely affiliated with the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) while others such as Goldie Glitters had ties to the established formal San Francisco and Los Angeles drag scene. Living communally in a house at Baker and Bush streets, Hibiscus would lead a cohort of like-minded rebels from Kaliflower to this new living experience that would quickly expand to several houses. The emergent group’s chaotic domestic arrangements would morph into a performance collective that fused the domestic communalism and free street performance of San Francisco youth counterculture with the gay liberation movement’s call to come “out of the closets and into the streets!” (Wittman).

To understand how orientalist theatre performance could graphically and affectively embody the Cockettes’ and Angels’ notion of “free,” I want to delineate their ties to several connected sites of activism in the Bay area at the end of the 1960s that were reimagining the domestic along the terms of the liberal social contract as a political movement from oppression to freedom. Hibiscus and others who had migrated from Kaliflower contributed a vocal anticapitalist foundation to the early Cockettes through the Angels of Light, a free performance group whose membership overlapped with the Cockettes. Initially both groups collectively crafted drag from recycled and free materials while resisting all attempts to monetize their performances. Hibiscus would remain a passionate proponent of free street performance and subsequent tensions between free streets and paid stages would contribute to the Cockettes’ internal rupture.
as their shows became increasingly elaborate popular events. After the Cockettes’ disastrous financed tour to New York in 1971, the free contingent of the Cockettes, including perhaps Martin Wong, would break away with Hibiscus for the Angels in 1972, whose members remained totally committed to communal living and free theatre, enforcing a strict prohibition against members working regular jobs or receiving individual credit for creative work.\(^\text{15}\) Part of Kaliflower’s theoretical influence on the Cockettes and Angels’ vision of free performance stems from its participation within a broader utopic continuum of experimental communities that linked disparate historical moments of western governmental crisis and anarchic response to their unfolding radical present. Rosenthal had been notably inspired by the tenets of the nineteenth-century Oneida community in upstate New York and its’ practices of group marriage and strict domestic communitarianism. Kaliflower’s affiliates the Diggers, who would change their name to the Free City Collective in 1967, looked back even farther to a group of seventeenth-century English nonconformists of the same name that had advocated for an agrarian socialism to reform the existing social order, resisting the enclosure of common land through communal farming. Kaliflower connected with the

\(^{15}\) Wong can be identified as a silent and painted Angel of Light in footage from film student Gregory Pickup’s thesis, a 1971-1973 documentary of Hibiscus and the Angels titled *Pickup’s Tricks*. Hibiscus characteristically turned his expulsion from the Cockettes into performance art, arranging his own mock crucifixion at Land’s End beach in 1972, attended by his “adoring Angels” while several Cockettes “dressed all in black, showed up to play the part of the decadent corrupt priests, calling him names and spitting on him as he hung on the cross.” (Harris et al 88).
Diggers’ ideology of “free” through participation in the free presses, stores, and food systems that sprouted throughout the city, becoming a central organizer of the Diggers-affiliated Free Food Conspiracy (later Family) in 1968, the massive food-sharing network which Hibiscus and the Kitchen Sluts had baked for. In addition to free food distribution, the Diggers notably staged free street performance and art campaigns that complimented Rosenthal’s free press at Kaliflower and influenced the free street performance ethos of the early Cockettes and Angels.

Free street theatre was a central mode of activism in the Bay area ecology from the Diggers to the Black Panthers, and for the Diggers a means to enact personal to collective liberation. Diggers core members had initially participated in the San Francisco Mime Troupe; they exploded into the city’s political consciousness in 1966 through a series of what founder Peter Berg termed “life acting interventions” honed through the Troupe’s Brechtian theatre praxis (Hodgdon 35). These life acting interventions staged public performance to reveal alienating social relations and thereby empower people as “free subjects” who in turn might collectively rewrite the democratic social contract through a revision of domestic economies, “imagining, and then publicly enacting, new social relations around common human needs” such as the food, shelter, and clothing that were distributed throughout the city (Hodgdon 35). Living in communal households in San Francisco and Eureka since at least 1967, Wong would likely have participated in communities that incorporated some of these ideas before
meeting the Cockettes and taking up residence with the Angels in their Church Street house. Certainly his own revision of these practices would be crucial to the sociality of the New York scene he would help to nurture in the 1980s, a coast away and long after popular communalism had waned. Both Kaliflower and the Diggers highlight how the domestic was broadly conceived in San Francisco as an experimental site from which capitalist enterprise and its illegitimate consolidation of private property could be upended towards collective liberation. However, these experiments were highly variable and often renewed patriarchal social relations in their structured reconsolidation of white heterosexual masculine subjectivities as radically renewed agents of political transformation—arrangements that the Cockettes would playfully subvert through camp performance. While the Diggers and others utilized free theatre to collectively undermine the terms of private property through free exchange of materials, their labors also reconsolidated a western liberal subject through the performed cultivation of an

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16 We know that Wong was living communally in Haight-Ashbury in 1967 from his rarely-discussed participation in an iconic and very campy moment of Haight-Ashbury lore. In the “Great Ballet Bust” of April 1967, after disappearing with a group of “dancing hippies” who had crashed their post-performance party, dancers Rudolf Nureyev and Karen Fonteyn and sixteen other men including Wong, were arrested for disturbing the peace and marijuana possession at a “wild party” held at the men’s “shabby” communal residence on Belvedere Street where police also found and confiscated two reels of “pornographic” film. Nureyev and Fonteyn were found hiding on the roof—Fonteyn “crouching” in a “full-length mink coat.” Wong’s only public mention of the event, in an October 1993 interview with Elisa Lee, is notable for his retroactive recognition that he is “surprised” to only now recognize that he wasn’t “just a hippie” but the only Asian person there. I suspect that his memory of the event during the interview was triggered by Nureyev’s death of AIDS-related complications in January 1993. Wong’s own diagnosis swiftly followed in early 1994. Wong’s memory of racial otherness is enmeshed in the melancholic, present-past experience of AIDS. See Elisa Lee, “Urban Artist Depicts Chinatown Through American Eyes,” and Bill Van Niekerken, “The Great Haight Ballet Bust of 1967.” Contemporary courtroom coverage from the San Francisco Chronicle, July 12, 1967 features two rare photographs of a very young Wong.
ostensibly “free” self that envisioned “free” as masculinist self-sovereignty— to freely do what one wanted as an “autonomous life actor.” If the free networks transformed the materiality of domestic heterosexual communal life, the now “freely elected” sexual division of labor reinforced notions of essential sexual difference even as Diggers women took on both public activism and the bulk of domestic labor. Tim Hodgdon’s careful study of Diggers masculinity outlines how the group’s intensely homosocial leadership structure ignored the concurrent insights of radical feminism and gay liberation movements as it provided a space for men, now newly freed of bourgeois family structures, to shape an ideal radical warrior sourced on stereotypes of men of color as masculine and disenfranchised revolutionaries—an ideal that the Diggers would soon visualize in a significant public art action that harnessed a long American imaginary of homosocial outlaw Chinese social life.

Diggers communalism and its practice of “free love” did often seek to rearrange normative bourgeois kinships that structured the white middle class nuclear families they often hailed from. However, Kaliflower and the Cockettes provide examples of the active contestations of the Diggers’ ideal of the “free” and “autonomous life actor,” central to these still heteronormative rearrangements, differentially highlighting the erotic connections and dependencies of past and future queer kinships. Kaliflower’s polyamorous communalism featured primarily but not exclusively same-sex relationships, which sustained their broader attempts to rescript modular bourgeois
family kinship towards a wider “society of communes” bound by “nuclear family intimacy” writ large as an affective “homeyness” and articulated through shared domestic labors (Rosenthal). Cockettes domestic life was specifically arranged around the collective crafting of drag and its public and private performance; indeed the Cockettes’ first public performance in 1969 featured costumes liberated from Rosenthal’s locked costume room at Kaliflower. Lovingly handcrafting elaborate and ornamental drag from the glittering scraps of recycled urban detritus, the Cockettes’ particular expression of “free” was leveraged through a domestic economy that merged the playful and intentional repurposing of consumer commodities with their storied repurposing of gender expression. In contrast to Diggers’ free public performance, Julia Bryan-Wilson points out how Cockettes’ drag indexes their shared “lack of distinction between stage and street or public and private” as they wore their drag at home, “as much in everyday life,” as they did at the theatre (81). Cockette Sylvester would remember that “everyday life with the Cockettes . . . was like living on stage. I mean, you lived in glitter and you ate glitter—the whole thing was glitter” (Gamson 55). This glittery breakdown between public and private was central to the group’s willful confusion of domestic experiment and street performance and Bryan-Wilson argues that the communal practice of drag created a site where “equality was relatively easily established” in the notoriously volatile community: “handmaking was the sphere where feminist and gay male labors were equally valued” (88). If equality through shared creative labor was the ideal, the
relatively small number of women who participated in the Cockettes nonetheless had to fight for equal performance time and tensions between queens and “difficult” feminist women such as Beaver Bauer form a serious counterpoint to the playful accounts of the Cockettes and Angels’ stormy intimacies.

The concurrent theorization of gay liberation that influenced many of the Cockettes and Angels inherently contested the Diggers’ notions of the streets as the free site of political life and the idealization of unmarked and transparent autonomous life actors. Written in San Francisco, a space qualified as “Ghetto or Free Territory?” (6), Carl Wittman’s 1969 essay, Refugees From Amerika: The Gay Manifesto argues that the city is “a refugee camp for homosexuals.” Addressing the stream of gay youth flooding to the city from across America, Wittman likens the burgeoning gay community in the emergent Castro district to refugees and migrants that “have formed a ghetto, out of self-protection. It is a ghetto rather than a free territory because it is still theirs” (3). To form a truly free space The Gay Manifesto called for an activism that was necessarily territorial, coalitional, and adjacent to the strategies of marginalized racial and ethnic communities that nonetheless echoed the broader communalist de-institutionalization of basic needs: “To be a free territory, we must govern ourselves, set up our own institutions, defend ourselves, and use our own energies to improve our lives” (7). In contrast to the Diggers’ use of a presumed “free space” towards the theatrical cultivation of the masculinist “autonomous life actor,” this early iteration of gay liberation as free territory was
actively invested in freeing and securing space for gay people who had “been playing an act for a long time” to “come out everywhere” and “begin to be” their authentic selves (7). While the manifesto called out the “gay stereotypes” of homophile groups that deplored “gays who play visible roles—the queens and the nellies,” (4) the play of roleplaying that incited the Cockettes and Angels is muted here to promote the organized labor of collective self-governance.

From within the rupture between life actors and people acting to make a secure and sustainable life, the Cockettes and Angels would stage their gender play, at times through racial drag. Like similar contemporary groups of this period such as the Theatre of the Ridiculous, the Living Theatre, or the Cockettes-inspired Hot Peaches, Cockettes’ drag performance is most often referred to as an example of early, inchoate genderfuck in their expression of a spectrum of nonnormative and unfixed sexualities and gender possibilities at this pivotal moment of proto-queer identity. Sean Edgecomb identifies Jack Smith and his “exotic characters” as introducing genderfuck drag to the Living Theatre, a direct line of influence that certainly would extend to Hibiscus and the Cockettes. Edgecomb’s delineation of genderfuck drag, “which unapologetically hyperbolizes expressions of gendered artificiality (both aesthetic and gestural) to ‘fuck’ with gender perceptions,” highlights how the Cockettes merged a particular gay aesthetics developing on the east coast’s theatre and film scene with west coast handcrafting and San Francisco street life. While the Cockettes’ early variant of
genderfuck predates, and in important ways helped to constitute the critical grammars of “queer” and “genderfuck” still farther along the horizon, their fluid approach to drag was nonetheless deeply embedded in the concurrent notions of “free” that they were actively contesting as well as the psychedelic aesthetic infusing the Haight. The Cockettes’ playful crafting of genderfuck as a performance of utopic possibility experienced as “eternal present,” a way of life to be free of delimiting gender and sexual identifications would increasingly cite a certain ephemeral historicity of Chineseness that connects the Diggers and the Cockettes with Martin Wong’s increasingly graphic imaginary.

I want to turn to the contested figuration of an ideal “free” proto-anarchic subject that both the Diggers and Cockettes recuperated from the exclusions of the orientalist archive and repertoire and which Martin Wong’s graphic experiments would revise as the ephemeral (im)possibilities of figuration itself. Critics have long overlooked the symbolic and material importance of Chinatown and visual Chineseness in the “free” imaginary of countercultural San Francisco. Comparing works by the Diggers with the Cockettes and Angels demonstrates how both Diggers’ revolutionary masculinity and the free play of gender in the orientalist performances of the Cockettes turned on an older history of exclusions and bindings central to the staging of Chineseness in the city. Focusing on these works elaborates how the liberatory performances of these groups drew from a longer archival stratum to reimagine and even re-embody a notion of
Chineseness that has ever been produced in relation to American governmentality. This inquiry draws on Sean Metzger’s sustained study of the production of Chineseness as “a temporality through performance” emerging from what Metzger and others outline as the Sino/American interface, the field of shifting power relations that circulate and constitute objects and subjects within this dynamic transpacific interface (15). As Metzger elaborates, the constitution of Chineseness as “temporality through performance” hinges on “objects in time” rather than discrete time periods and accordingly signals “a specific form of modernity usually set in an agonistic relationship to the privileged industrial modernity of the United States,” variably instantiated throughout the long twentieth century. The visual representation and performance of Chineseness by the Diggers and Cockettes certainly manifests in overt “agonistic relationship” to American liberalism at the late 1960s, placing these figurations in a longer continuum of liberation that outlines Chineseness as a condition of “free” inherent to the possibility of modernity. The Diggers and the Cockettes’ twinned turn to archival performances of Chineseness in order to (re)present new and radically free subjectivities embedded in earlier material histories and political fantasies of Chinatown materialize around the discourse of the coolie, whom Lisa Lowe details as a central figure of freedom in the early nineteenth century that heralds the “alleged transition from slavery to freedom” (*Intimacies* 24) and the visual spectacle of “congenitally feminine” (Lee 157) coolies and hyperfeminized women. Both ideations twin the
possibility of political with sexual freedom, whether the free homosocial arrangements promised by the intimacies of coolie fraternity or the possibility of gender slippage through racial masquerade. At the heart of such retrograde motions is the possibility to sustain a utopic eternal present—outside of history, attachments, labor, discourse—that will foreclose Wong and other racialized members’ capacity to arrive at liberation.

Sparking a public sensation in 1967, the Diggers’ most iconic visual representation was the notorious five-foot high print of two Chinese “tong men” that was mysteriously pasted throughout the Bay area on freeway stanchions and banks one night (Fig. 17). Created by Digger Peter Berg and artist Mike McGibben, this striking graphic featured two Chinese men in dress of the early twentieth century resting at a building corner, the ideogram for revolution above their heads and the caption, “1% Free,” below. In a recent interview with Berg, he explains how the slogan “1% Free” repurposed a Hells Angels patch that referenced their outlaw status amongst bikers to amplify the Diggers’ maxim that they were among the one percent of the population “doing things free” (Shaping San Francisco). Berg asserts that the print and caption were meant to be “evocative, not provocative” and featured the purposely enigmatic “tong men,” whom for Berg captured the sense of “outlaw San Francisco looking but not white guys.” The outlaw tong men graphically repurpose select properties of Yellow Peril for the Diggers’ brand of radical white masculinity; trade descriptions of this now rare print echo Berg’s language of ideally “enigmatic,” “cryptic” and “threatening” figures that
look “a little bit like thugs but also very cool.” Hodgdon notes that the 1% Free print was intensely significant to the group’s iconography, fixing “an archetypal form of manhood from a Digger perspective: socially marginal, dangerous, dedicated to evading modern time-disciplined work and professional success, and free from bourgeois family responsibilities” (14). The print’s cryptic menace transforms the logic of *exclusion* grounding earlier Yellow Peril discourse into a radically exclusive revolutionary masculinity by isolating and individuating the two men. In contrast to earlier figurations
of menacing, uniform, and alien hordes, the two figures are heroically delineated, graphic cyphers for a now indigenous San Franciscan radical tradition that tacitly designates “bourgeois family responsibilities” and “professional success” as the feminized pursuits of a progressive model majority.

Given the racial fantasies embedded in the 1% Free graphic, it is significant that the two artists, sellers, and critics perhaps universally misidentify the original source photographer for the print as Arthur Genthe, whose covertly-shot turn of the century photographs of old Chinatown summon an earlier yet contiguous bohemian pictorialism from the height of Chinese exclusion. Anthony Lee details how Genthe’s pictorialism, in addition to merging commercial “studio portraiture and street life” (153) also reconfigured and aestheticized “conservative social arrangements” by photographing the Chinese in Chinatown as a “structure of racial character” that was approvingly premodern—precapitalist even—and a visual index of the Bohemian “disavowal of the crass organization of modern life and material things” (129). The source image for 1% Free (Fig. 18) should be attributed to Louis Stellman, a contemporary of Genthe whose work sharply differed in its inclusion of precise visual and written detail of contemporary Sino/American political life to provide empirical context for the rebuilt Chinatown as a modern site of Chinese American social life. Berg and McGibben’s approach is strikingly similar to Genthe and other pictorialist works in its delimiting of historical and social context for the image and its interruption of subjects’ “everyday
Figure 18: Two men, detail from photocollage by Louis Stellman, c. 1913.

presence in the streets,” which Lee describes as a method of cropping “the details of a complex Chinese social life to achieve a pictorial effect of flattening surface consistency” (143). Berg’s misrecognition of Genthe and Stellman constitutes a graphic citation; it reiterates the archival power of selection through the visual cropping of embedded Chinese social life in San Francisco while simultaneously evoking the historical catalogue of deviant domesticities long and longingly imagined through Chinatown in the specter of the tong men’s outlaw homosocial arrangements. The graphic interface of the print is both flattening and suggestive as the hint of brick evokes the distorted
temporal imaginary of underground Chinatown spatial arrangements while cropping its initial quotidian reference to everyday working class street life.

The willful identification of tong men elides the historical difference between tongs and family associations (fongs/fangs) in the fabric of early diasporic Chinese life in Chinatowns and their modes of material and social support for mobile laborers. Family associations were organized around surname or sometimes regional affiliation and provided critical material and social support for members, including communal living spaces. The fixation here on tongs, which were historically associated with crime and harbored disparate members without necessary ties of regional or familial kinships, as an indice of “cool . . . thugs” may reflect the resurgence of tong activity beginning in the late 1960s as organized crime and transnational membership surged (Lin 50). Although Berg insists that the two figures are “tong men,” the original photograph only ambiguously supports this identification: one must really want to see tong men assassins to see them. The men’s simple black clothing and seemingly cropped hair might denote two modern laboring men on a well-deserved break as much as the criminal imaginary of lounging and idle highbinders—so-called for their practice of wrapping their queues around their heads to free movement—and hatchet men. Indeed, the Diggers’ nocturnal performance of 1% Free as iconic eruption repurposes the tong men to instantiate a territorial expansion of opaque underground Chinese space, eliding the enclave’s history as a surveillable site of governmental exclusion and containment.
In the Diggers’ graphic rendition of outlaw temporality, an obverse of what Nayan Shaw notates as the sense of an abject Chinese “timeless present” of habit and repetition structuring old Chinatown temporality (*Contagious Divides* 43), the Diggers imagine liberation as outside of the liberal constraints of domesticity, labor—history itself—that Chinese exclusion and freedom previously served to structure. The spatial connotations of the tong, which literally denotes meeting hall, as a bounded site of material support and fraternity are disregarded, despite the potential amplifications between Digger and tong or fong domesticities as iterations of mutual aid. This most recent cropping of Chinese social life did not pass unmarked. Berg notes a graphic response was added to a print pasted in Chinatown as a word bubble attached to one of the men on the poster: “You round eyes are 1% free, Chinese are 101% free” (*Shaping San Francisco*).

2.2 Staging Chineseness in the Free City

In contrast to Peter Berg’s graphic evocation of the archival logics of Genthe’s pictorial nostalgia for an old Chinatown outside of historicity, the Cockettes would affect a self-conscious nostalgia for an old Chinatown that might fashion and perhaps sustain queer world building. Unlike the Diggers’ simulacra, Cockettes’ nostalgia evokes Genthe’s later melancholic works, which when faced with a rebuilt and modernized Chinatown could only find increasingly ephemeral fragments declining to moments of fantasy as trace—“a precious bit of lacquer, a charming piece of brocade” (Lee 156). The ephemeral stylizations of Chinatown that interested the Cockettes contemporize the
linked archives of old Hollywood and melodramatic stagings of the orient with the queer orientalist fantasy of Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963) or the tableaux of Steven Arnold’s *Luminous Procress* (1971) as they perform these scenarios as camp repetitions with difference. The Cockettes’ increasingly embodied citations link the visual archive of orientalist form with their present staging. Chineseness was materially enhanced through the imaginative potential of the orientalist-deco Palace Pagoda Theatre in North Beach where they held their performances. In 1969, then-student filmmakers Steven Arnold and Michael Weise created the Nocturnal Dream Show series with film aficionado, Sebastian (Milton Miron), a former accountant for San Francisco concert promoter Bill Graham. These weekly midnight screenings of underground and vintage Hollywood films at the Pagoda Palace attracted an eclectic crowd of stoned enthusiasts who would attend for the psychedelic fueled party scene and live interludes as much as the films. After taking the stage of the Nocturnal Dream Show on New Years Eve 1969, the Cockettes regularly performed at the Palace, showcasing short musical revues, sets and costumes in intermission acts that morphed into increasingly elaborate theatrical productions that would become the main attraction. While the Pagoda Palace figures markedly in the imaginative recall of former Cockettes and Angels as their house venue, its dual life as a living repertoire of San Francisco Chinese American social and cultural life remains tacit in these memories.
The Pagoda Palace at 1731 Powell Street in San Francisco’s North Beach neighborhood stood on the former site of the 1888 Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral that was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire. In 1907 the Washington Square Theatre was erected on the site, an Italian theatre that hosted opera and vaudeville shows. In 1928 the theatre was converted into a movie house in that changed hands several times over the decades before operating as the Pagoda Palace between 1967 to 1986, reopening briefly as a repertory theatre until 1994 when the theatre was closed, to sit vacant and boarded until its demolition for a subway line in 2013. As the Pagoda Palace, the theatre was a small outpost of Chinese American social life in the historically Italian neighborhood bordering Chinatown. Cockettes remember the Palace as both owned and operated by the Chew family and that it featured Chinese-language films during the day and evenings and periodically live Chinese opera. Like the word bubble added to the 1% Free print in Chinatown, the Palace also spoke back to the streets. As late as 1982 a block resident remembers how the Pagoda would “broadcast whatever sound there was from the movie they were playing out in the street,” a public and sonic “bubble of Chinese” in the Italian neighborhood (Nevius). The tacit presence of the Pagoda Palace looms large in Cockettes mythology as much for its oriental-deco style as its function as a key locus for underground San Francisco’s complex social intersections. A mélange of Haight hippies, anti-war activists, art students, underground film aficionados, and drag enthusiasts mingled at the Nocturnal Dream Shows, along with, we might imagine, the
Chew family, staff, and perhaps late night stragglers from the working class Chinese American audience that the evening films and operas catered to. The faded oriental-deco glamor of the Palace marks the archival entrance of Martin Wong into the Cockettes and Angels’ universe and its unlikely social crossings, its suggestion of queer interracial intimacies must have loomed large in Martin Wong’s imaginary. A 1970 sketch of the Palace façade by Wong compliments the first official work that he might have contributed to the group: a poster for the production *Pearls Over Shanghai* of the same year. The Palace’s oriental-deco aesthetic provided an important imaginative undergirding for Wong and the Cockettes to stage the sensuous spectacle of old Hollywood orientalism; however, the porousness of the Palace and its overlapping sustenance of Chinese American and queer creative life in San Francisco remains curiously unmarked. Whatever unlikely crossings and intimacies were made possible in the shared social world of the Pagoda Palace remain as difficult to trace as Wong, who would never perform on stage at the Palace or elsewhere, remaining an invisible technician in both the Cockettes and Angels.

While the Cockettes’ own memorialization of this period renders Chineseness as a social absence and aesthetic presence, the production of fantastic spectacle that bound the Palace’s denizens between 1969 and 1972 must have been a multidirectional process. In an account from a spectator rather than a performer—although the Cockettes
continually blurred those lines—James Eilers provides one of the few reflections on the Palace’s dual lives and its entanglement of the technical and the aesthetic:

Until midnight, the Palace was a Chinese theatre, which showed films, then staged live dramas. Our special treat was to watch the Chinese-Americans strike their scenery. The cardboard sets for those dramas would find their expression in the cardboard-thin artifice of the Cockettes’ early productions. During the set change, many Chinese American men would run madly about the stage, striking sets made up of painted clouds, houses, and trees, the rudiments of art and illusion. (30-1)

Eilers’s recollections of the “art and illusion” of Chinese American stagecraft and their spatial transcriptions to the “artifice” of the Cockettes productions that would follow on the same stage heighten the sense of temporal crossings in this shared space. Eilers’s memories underscore the Nocturnal Dream Show’s capacity to render the camp artifice of Hollywood orientalism towards a choral texture any given evening at the Palace: Sebastian’s interludes between acts might feature visual and audio experiments that overlay Will Rogers’ rope tricks on the screen with “a sound track of sitar music . . . his rope tricks took on a mystical aura as if you were watching Shiva skip back and forth through the cycles of time” (30). The scenery changes of Chinese dramas by the “Chinese American men” running “madly about the stage” would form their own kinetic historicity to the traumatic present of the Vietnam War framing the Cockettes’ orientalist fantasies, taking queer embodiment for Eilers the night that the Angels of Light arrived and “surprised the audience . . . walking down the aisle dressed like Japanese women in a production of Madame Butterfly . . . [c]arrying parasols and proceeding with mincing steps” (31). In the Angels’ genderfuck drag evocation of Madame Butterfly, Edgecomb’s
“gendered artificiality” (8) turns on racial artificiality at the Palace as the hyperbolized gestural “mincing steps” and aesthetic trappings of kimonos and parasols are amplified by the orientalist-deco Palace yet still surprise the audience. The specter of America’s ongoing Pacific wars are forwarded here at the height of the Vietnam War as the martial backdrop of *Madame Butterfly* is disrupted by the Angels, most of whom had avoided the draft by either “checking the box” as admitted homosexuals or had been granted Aid to the Permanently and Totally Disabled status. Indeed, the antiwar tenor of the Palace crowd was absolute, if understated compared to college campuses, illustrating Justin Suran’s contention that navigating the draft was a catalyst for the emergence of a radical and public gay identity for many men at this crucial moment.

A founding Cockette, Sweet Pam (Pam Tent) who named her memoir *Midnight at the Palace* repeatedly and unconsciously voices the collective fascination for the Palace and its world building capacities, describing the extravagant design with “décor as exotic as Anna May Wong,” a “relic . . . well-suited to the cultural pandemonium the Cockettes would soon unleash” (28). In Tent’s account, Mr. Chew, who owns the Palace and runs the box office and candy counter with his wife and children in the midst of the notoriously drug saturated lobby area, figure as an anxious counterpoint to the carnivalesque atmosphere of the Dream Shows, evoking repetitive labors and an alien familial commercialism. The Chews are distantly benign, ignoring the late night crowd’s flagrant drug use, nudity, and public sex acts yet ever present in the chaos of the
midnight shows as a material rather than social presence that periodically explodes in the form of rental fees that fuel the group’s ongoing debates over whether to charge for performances or keep them free. If the Chews and the Palace’s daytime life inconveniently reminded the Cockettes that they had not yet arrived at the precapitalist fantasy some of them might have desired, a sense of the Palace as a live social stage for an experiment in queer life acting would notably unfold in its scenographic potential. It is the scenographic as a staging of potentiality, including the site’s commercial familial resonances, which would animate Wong’s most intimate works from this point forward.

Although Cockette productions were ostensibly collectively authored and produced, everyone agrees that Link Martin (born Luther T. Cupp) wrote the script for their most iconic production, *Pearls Over Shanghai* in the fall of 1970. Martin was an original Cockette and one of the few non-white members, claiming Inuit and Cherokee ancestry. A close photographic subject for poet Helen Adam and Jack Spicer’s lover at the time of his death with whom he edited several issues of the poetry journal *Cow*, Martin was purportedly entangled in a torrid relationship with Samuel Delany and Marilyn Hacker before joining the Cockettes in 1969.\(^1\) Cockettes musicals covered a range of loosely imaginative topics that bound the groups’ collective interests in the camp potential of old Hollywood melodrama and vaudeville, ranging from gothic

\(^{17}\) See *Cow Soup Issue* (1965), *Un-escalation Issue* (1965), and *Pregnant Cow Issue* (1966).
horror (Les Ghouls) to minstrelsy (Showboat to Oklahoma) and fantasy (Fairytale Extravaganza) to Busby-esque musical (Hollywood Babylon). Scripts were collectively assembled and often simply a series of loose cues for what would unfold as notoriously unpredictable improvisations. Madame Butterfly, performed twice in May 1970 and Pearls Over Shanghai, performed in November 1970 and August and September 1971, are both notable as two rare Cockettes productions staged more than once and together formed the orientalist repertoire of the collective. Wearing thrift store kimonos and kabuki-style makeup, Madame Butterfly (Fig. 19) bears the dubious distinction of being the only Cockettes show performed entirely in “fake Cantonese.” It ran twice, initially at the Palace and then spontaneously on the campus of Sonoma State, staged “on a little Japanese-looking bridge on an island for about 100 onlookers” (Tent 42). While the visceral effects of a heavily bearded and kimonoed ensemble of people reciting fake Cantonese for an hour can only be imagined now, we do not know how the performance was received, only that it generated no recollections of controversy unlike the previous production, Gone with the Showboat to Oklahoma. It is perhaps possible that the campus setting as a site of anti-war activism viewed the impromptu performance as a critique of masculinist militarism. A minstrel parody performed by both black and white Cockettes in blackface, Gone with the Showboat memorably climaxed with an angry altercation between an audience member and Big Darryl afterwards, ending white Cockettes’
experiments in blackface.\textsuperscript{18} Malik Gaines’s study of Cockette Sylvester, one of few works to consider the racial dynamics of the group, suggests that racist productions like *Gone with the Showboat* and *Pearls Over Shanghai* were profoundly intertextual, “collapsed genre pieces” for the group that decentered the grand narratives of the genres they parodied, “bringing various texts into contact” and accordingly “intervening against a text’s norms by ridiculously reenacting it” (149). While the Cockettes certainly used

\textsuperscript{18} I have encountered several anecdotes that Hibiscus reportedly performed at the Black Panthers headquarters in blackface, which I have been unable to verify.
camp to draw together temporally scattered cultural texts to parody and destabilize discursive consolidations, a range of embodied performances—the fake Cantonese, the “mincing steps,” and the street staging of *Madame Butterfly* and *Pearls Over Shanghai*—suggest that new forms of gestural practice and repetition were taking shape within the group’s turn to orientalist forms.

*Pearls Over Shanghai* marks a distinct shift in the Cockettes’ repertoire, as the advent of a new and contentious professionalism. The first production to be individually authored, solidly scripted, and polished through multiple performances, *Pearls* was loosely based on the 1926 play and 1941 film, *The Shanghai Gesture* and billed as a “comic operetta about white slavery and miscegenation set in the colorful world of 1930s China” (Tent 95). While many productions were ostensibly staged to feature the group’s fantastic drag, both of these productions notably used pre-made garments that infused the overall immersive design of the productions with a material authenticity that threw the Cockettes’ corporeal expressions of racial and gender drag into technical relief. The costumes for *Pearls* were unique for both their authenticity and their starring role in a Cockettes legend. Tent recounts that while high on LSD one night in fall 1970, Link Martin, Rumi and others broke into the locked dressing rooms of the Palace and stole most of the costumes belonging to a touring Chinese opera troupe concurrently performing at the theatre. Like the earlier plundering of the Kaliflower costume room, the Cockettes regarded the theft as liberation from the Chews’ commercial economy.
Tent writes that “the Peking Opera counted themselves lucky to have fewer trunks to lug back to China” and that an irate Mr. Chew was appeased when Sebastian secretly paid for the costumes out of the Cockettes’ earnings after the play sold out for three consecutive nights at the Palace (101). While the purloined costumes added a new layer of glamor and authenticity to the lavish staging of Pearls at the Palace, Pearls actually debuted on the streets of Chinatown before the theft of the costumes as an experimental performance, converging Hibiscus’s love of free street theatre and the temporal fantasies of Chinatown. Initially scheduled to debut Pearls on a bill with Captain Beefheart at the Berkeley Community Theatre, Beefheart abruptly cancelled the show immediately after meeting with the Cockettes at a restaurant where the group staged a mock orgy for his benefit. Excited to return to free street theatre, Hibiscus rallied the Cockettes and the Angels to assemble for the first showing in Chinatown’s Ross Alley—uninvited—in front of the Rickshaw Bar (Fig. 20). Echoing Berg’s sense that the exclusionary terrain of Chinatown was inherently subversive yet freely available for radical repurposing, Tent’s recollections of the show convey the uneasy sense that the group that assembled on the streets of Chinatown was both an interloper in the quotidian social life of the enclave and the true inheritors of the radical tradition the enclave signified. Tent aligns the past

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19 Tent and others refer to this opera troupe as The Peking Opera and insists that they were from China. While I have not been able to verify which troupe was at the Palace that weekend, it is more likely that the troupe was perhaps local and performing Cantonese opera although the costumes were undoubtedly imported from Hong Kong or China and not easily replaceable.
Figure 20: Hibiscus and Rumi in *Pearls Over Shanghai*, Ross Alley, 1971.
tongs who “once…controlled these narrow passageways” with the Cockettes who “now” sang “their hearts out for the curious residents who gawked from the balconies and windows . . . chatter[ing] excitedly in monosyllabic meter about the crazy Occidentals in the alley” (100). Conceding that they had forced a “drag queen rendition of fake Oriental platitudes down the throats of people trapped in their own apartments,” Tent reports that one member’s car was keyed and another had two tires slashed. Like the Diggers earlier, the Cockettes tapped into the historical continuum of the bohemian construction of Chinatown and Chineseness as a site of pleasurable voyeurism yet reverse the earlier terms of the photographic gaze to render themselves the new touristic spectacle.

While uncomfortable declensions of insider and outsider, Orient and Occident are certainly present in Tent’s written and the oral accounts from other Cockettes and Angels, the staging of Pearls in Ross Alley evokes a different possibility of cross-cultural intimacies than Berg’s account of the “1% Free” action’s instrumentalist reading of tong men. Using the Rickshaw Bar’s bathrooms to change, the group’s pianist, Peter Mintum, and Sylvester performed some spontaneous ballads for the owner and customers in the club and were invited to perform again. Like several bars around Ross Alley, the Rickshaw had a longer history of harboring homosexual customers, particularly during the war years when the city waged relentless anti-vice crackdowns on popular gay nightspots throughout the city. Allan Bérubé notes that the Rickshaw
was raided in 1943 and two-dozen customers were arrested after “a couple of lesbians protested and were beaten up,” sparking a “small free-for-all” in the club (126). Tent’s nervous narration of the Ross Alley performance in terms of spatial contestations writ as racial and sexual difference might signal that the Cockettes were not aware of the longer historical entanglement of Chinatown and queer social lives. However, some of the long-term residents who witnessed this staging might have had a longer and more nuanced memory, and I suspect that the “fake Oriental platitudes” more than the fact of drag queens resulted in the keying and tire slashing. While we cannot know what was thought and said in the “monosyllabic meter” that marks the limits of the group’s understanding and thus the archive’s exclusions, we do know that the everyday denizens of Ross Alley hosted the group that evening, providing a tacit audience and performance space. I am interested in the event for its suggestive potential, the ephemeral intimacies that must have unfolded in the cramped confines of Ross Alley as palpable frictions and surprising generosities. There is no archival evidence that Wong attended the Ross Alley performance; however, it is not unthinkable that he did attend as one of the group’s enormous entourage. Indeed the staging of this spectacle in the heart of Chinatown and the underground history of the Rickshaw and establishments like it summons a longer thread of queer life embedded in Chinatown that was intimate to the Wong family and which he would increasingly explore in his later work in the 1990s that frequently turned on the history of underground Chinese nightclubs such as
the Forbidden City and Lion’s Den where his beloved paternal aunt Eleanor Wong worked as a dancer. Wong’s intimate familial history with this rich facet of Chinatown performance draws on a different yet adjacent tradition than the Cockettes’ orientalist Hollywood imaginings. In Anthony Lee’s meditation on Forbidden City dancer Jack Mei Ling, he notes that these stages where all-Asian casts performed variety shows for mostly white spectators were both “conceived of by an audience as a space for understanding racial identities” and also a space for performers to “work out sexual identities” (283). While the Cockettes were now themselves working out sexual identities in Ross Alley, it is unclear, apart from the keying of the car, what understanding of racial identity was registered that day.

While I can only speculate on Wong’s ghostly presence in Ross Alley, *Pearls* does mark the first archival evidence of Martin Wong’s creative affiliation with the Cockettes, in the form of a poster for the second show that was held at the Palace (Fig. 21). Most Cockettes posters were informal and hand drawn, mimeographed sketches by members and friends, including Cockette Pristine Condition, who drew the alternate poster for *Pearls*. Wong’s poster—like the costumes, script, and set for this show—reflects the new level of technical expertise. By 1970 Wong was experimenting with typography and graphic arrangement, evident in his 1967 collection of poetry, *Footprints, Poems, and Leaves* and his increasing interest in assembling large visual scroll poems such as the 1968 “Firefly Evening” (Fig. 22). The *Pearls* poster does not replicate the orientalist
Figure 21: Poster for *Pearls Over Shanghai* by Martin Wong, 1971.
stylings of the production itself or the other posters but rather features psychedelic-style lettering and a hippopotamus. In contrast to the “fake Cantonese” of the Madame Butterfly show earlier that year, Wong notably includes actual Chinese characters for “night,” “dream,” “performance,” reading left to right and echoing the English lettering for “dream,” “show,” “nocturnal” that ring the hippopotamus. Flipping the Cockettes’
script, the Chinese characters are the more legible—if you read Chinese—while the English words are obscure and shadowed. The text playfully oscillates and destabilizes the notion of an intended reader and viewer; it graphically queers cross-cultural translation by evoking the pleasures of fugitive decoding, hiding in plain sight for the viewer. His increasing interest in the graphic expression of the Cockettes and Angels is evident in the projects that he undertook in both poster design and sets for these and subsequent productions. The collectively authored and drawn program for the 1972 Angels of Light show, *Peking on Acid* (Fig. 23) displays Wong’s increasing skill as a calligrapher and typographer, demonstrating his early interest in merging oriental and Asian form with psychedelic aesthetics. His fascination for the materiality of scriptural forms would take on an erotic resonance with the Angels that reflected both his self-guided study in traditional Asian art forms and an affectionate attachment to the playful humor of camp orientalism. The *Peking on Acid* program features nine pages of sexually and racially profane puns, orientalist fantasy, and four different styles of script ranging from stereotypically to imaginatively “Asian.” *Yellow Pearl*, a 1971 graphic collection by the New York-based Asian American art collective, Basement Workshop offers a compelling counterpoint to *Peking on Acid*. *Yellow Pearl* and *Peking on Acid* share a mutual interest in the materiality of the graphic form with a vastly different notion of what politics might emerge from such a project. In *Yellow Pearl* a political praxis sourced in Marxist and Third World liberation movements takes form in “authentic” Asian script
Figure 23: Details from *Peking On Acid* program by Angels of Light, 1972.
and content towards a radical and emergent Asian American aesthetic. In contrast, *Peking on Acid’s* campy play of parody, irony, and the self-referential artifice of feminized, ornamental, oriental form textually complements the sexual politics of the Cockettes and Angels stage performances, forming a complex mode of disidentification for Wong in which the blurring between embodiment and materiality of and as the textual emerges as a technē of drag.

There is no evidence that Wong designed the sets for *Pearls Over Shanghai* when it was staged at the Palace. Production sets were becoming increasingly elaborate at the time of *Pearls* and these are described as “high-cardboard décor loaded with vibrant images of pagodas and Chinese street life” (Tent 95). Wong had a penchant for transforming basic cardboard into monumental architectures and his creations notably stand out in the recollections of the Angels of Light, who by all accounts were more invested in the creative praxis of world building and scenography than the Cockettes. Tahara and Bauer remember Wong as a talented set designer with an Asian-influenced style that was both “loose and painterly, but also hard and graphic” (Brod 118). Using cardboard, paint, and tape, Wong was one of a rotating series of designers that would make whatever they felt inspired by at the time, reflecting the free-form creative ensemble of the groups as performers and crafters. In one of the few images of a Wong-designed set, for the 1975 production *Paris Sights Under the Bourgeoisie* (Fig. 24), his set for the French Revolution-themed production is visually disorienting. He endows the flat
cardboard with an unsettling depth that renders the contrast between the liveness of the performers and the decorative effect of the background as interchangeably animated. The elephants and throne are stylized as recognizably and indeterminately ‘Asian’ through the decorative inscription. The contrast between French court costumes and the oriental stylization of the background renders the scene of court absurd—visually complemented by the toilet bowl with an emerging lobster claw that perches on Adrian Brooks’ head as an elaborate headpiece—even as it excavates the material intimacies of European colonial histories. The camp oscillation between high and low would be repeated much later in New York for the East Coast Angels of Light in 1978 after both

Figure 24: Martin Wong designed set for Angels of Light production, *Paris Sights Under the Bourgeoisie*, 1975.
Hibiscus and Wong relocated. In Tent’s memoir, her only mention of Wong’s person or work comes at this end point when she reports that he worked with the East Coast Angels in New York on sets “that sometimes got lost beneath the gaudier trappings” (253) Hibiscus was partial to. In a fitting visual metaphor of Wong’s present absence with the Angels, here Angel Ralph remembers Wong crafting “a spectacular pair of eight-foot-tall golden Buddha feet that disappeared when Hibiscus covered them over with cardboard flamingoes and feathers” (253). The textures between high and low, authenticity and artifice, sacred and profane envision a graphic connection between queer orientalism and the queerness of Asian American social life in Wong’s work with these groups that would translate to his increasingly monumental textual visual projects as he turned to his storied handscrolls.

I believe that Martin Wong’s ghostly presence within the collective experiment of the Cockettes and Angels was a matter of technical misplacement in these two communities that not only purportedly never talked about race but also articulated themselves as effectively beyond categories of race and gender. As a technician rather than a performer, Wong’s misplaced racial spacing was at the back rather than the front of the stage. In the cosmology of the Cockettes, the “back” of the stage was equivalent to
the “bottom,” which theorists of queer Asian American studies reminds us is often the assigned sexual spatial imaginary for Asian men. Wong’s departures and failures to arrive at liberation evokes a connected problem of time that is shared with Cockette Sylvester who is remembered as similarly spatially and temporally out of joint, despite Sylvester’s hypervisibility as a primary stage performer and one of only four black men in the group. Considering Wong and Sylvester in tandem outlines how in these groups, whiteness as an unmarked sense of temporal and spatial immanence is thrown into relief by their differentially shared racial exclusions, experienced as distance and writ as a problem of progressive professionalization. Hailing from Los Angeles where he had performed with the Disquotays, a group of black cross-dressing and trans women, Sylvester was arguably the Cockettes’ most famous member and would go on to a successful career as a solo disco and soul singer after leaving the group during their disastrous New York trip. Unlike Wong, Sylvester performed on stage in drag but preferred elegant period dresses of the interwar years to the genderfuck creations of glitter, found objects, and long beards of many of the other members. Sylvester’s numbers were always solos and he was perhaps the only member that had been formally trained to sing, in the choir of his Pentecostal church. Judith Halberstam notes that Sylvester’s drag performance works within a different citational tradition than the

Cockettes: “the song, and the falsetto in which Sylvester recreates it, stage black gay femininity as an interwoven history shared by black sissies and their diva icons. The falsetto also shifts the scale of gender and creates a soundscape within which all the voices sound queer. Sylvester, Martha, and Izora do not wear their drag, they sing it” (191). This notion of a different citational practice is key for thinking about Wong as well, who is remembered for his similarly intense self-directed study of Asian art forms and vernacular Chinese American visuality, much as Sylvester was noted for his intense self-directed study of African American blues and spirituals traditions. Sylvester and Wong’s sense of an aesthetic genealogy was markedly different as they studied the historical reproductions of their source materials within arrangements marked by vastly different cultural traditions and histories of kinships. Although their historical relation to economies of “free” were adjacent, following the histories of un-free African American and Asian labors, the unmarked whiteness of the liberatory imperative driving the Cockettes and Angels took center stage, producing a professional unease.

For the Cockettes and Angels such study signaled a professionalism and intimation of commercial ambitions that was at odds with the communalist, improvisational ethos of the group, placing both in discordant streams of relation. Cockette Fayette Hauser’s memories of Sylvester echo Bauer and Tahara’s remarks that Wong “wasn’t always a part of us” (119); she notes that Sylvester “usually stood a few feet back, among the Cockettes but never quite of them” (Gamson, 57). A state of being in,
but not of, the group is frequently conflated for both men as being an artist rather than doing art, that is, being too “forward-looking to fully enter the Cockettes’ free-form, messy, anarchic life” (Gamson, 58) rather than experience the extended present tense of such life. The notion that Wong’s temporality was both recursive and too “forward-looking” surfaces in Wong’s postcard and Bauer and Tahara’s consternation that he would come and go: “he would spend most of his time with us and occasionally he would go into that other world and become reclusive” (119). That other world is signaled by the retrograde specter of his parents, specifically his mother Florence, who looms as a disruptive figure pushing Wong away from the group in her desire for him to become famous and monetize his art. Both Wong and Sylvester are out of step with the immanent present of the collectives which rest in an extended now outside of the purportedly reproductive interests inherent to speculation or the attachments of diasporic cultural genealogies. A telegram in Wong’s archives sent years later from Hibiscus consolidates the sense of Wong’s pecuniary positioning. Dated June 19, 1981 and filed under “Brian Wolfe”—one name that Hibiscus would use after his move to New York—in the Fales collection of Wong’s personal items, is a telegram asking for Wong’s help with a New York production:

Dear Martin, Please don’t let me down now. Please call me today 8735396, call at 1o’clock in the afternoon. I don’t have too much money but can scrape together
$50 in advance plus $20 a day and more when the show’s a hit. Please please Martin the show opens Friday and I need you here. Love Hibiscus.”

21

I do know that Wong, only recently arrived in New York, helped Hibiscus with the production. What I don’t know is if Wong helped Hibiscus for love and/or for money. If we follow his graphic imaginary both back to his parents’ home and forward to the increasingly embodied scriptural works he began to undertake, we might understand how Wong would arrange the LOVE of and for the Angels within his earthly cosmology.

3.3 Chinese Space

The eye expecting to confront static space experiences a lavish range of optical events, such as crickets in Ming jars, their syncopation like the right, then left, then right progress into the house, an experience that cannot be sustained in consciousness, because your movement itself binds passing time, more than entering directs it.

—Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, “Chinese Space”

In “Chinese Space,” poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge elaborates Chinese space as a syncopated range of “optical events” rather than the “static space” produced by the orientalist eye—syncopations predicated by the interface of movement and materiality. Berssenbrugge’s investigation of the phenomenal experience of entering her grandfather’s house in China notates the domestic as the provisional staging for the object’s oscillations between phenomenal performance and archival holdings. It suggests how specific objects and our orientations towards them might render Chinese space as

21 Fales, Martin Wong Papers. Series I, Box 1, Folder 58a. Telegram from Brian Wolfe, aka George Harris III and Hibiscus, June 19, 1978.
porous and oblique, as syncopated Chinese “optical events,” that foreclose the lyrical “I (eye)”’s attempts to order the poetic line as a straight, progressive entry to an already-given and imminently—even immanently—catalogued knowledge of self. Like Metzger’s notion of Chineseness as “temporality through performance,” Berssenbrugge’s Chinese syncopations offer one way of encountering rather than accounting for the objects that compose Martin Wong’s archival imagination and his ecstatic graphic practice in service of queer world building with the Cockettes and Angels of Light. While the Angels note that Wong “failed to arrive” at such a promised world, the syncopations of Chinese space in the Wong family itself suggest that Martin had already arrived long before meeting them. In this section I will attempt to outline how the Wong family formed the earliest graphic collective that Wong worked with throughout his lifetime and its uptake on his later depictions of Chinatown and queer collaboration in both San Francisco and New York City.

The distance and proximity between Wong and the Cockettes/Angels—“I love you but I could never be a part of you”—is echoed by Rui Tang in one of the few essays to treat Wong’s positioning in Asian American studies: “an uncertain, or indecipherable, distance echoes his encounters with the Chinese community . . . it could be said that he was part of the Asian American community, but never truly belonged to it” (111). Wong’s temporal and spatial displacements pressure the institutional memory of Asian American studies itself, demonstrating the messy multiplicity of Asian American
cultural forms at the very moment its political identity consolidates around movement activism in the late 1960s. As much as the emerging field of Asian American visual culture seems poised to study Wong, I suggest that his still-uneasy reception in Asian American studies at large hinges on the contentious afterlife of genealogy and kinship troubling the field as the twinned reach of lineation and affiliation. While Lisa Lowe’s landmark articulation of Asian American cultural forms in 1996’s Immigrant Acts identified the “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” that destabilizes the West’s “fictions’ of ‘oriental’ objects as homogenous, fixed, and stable” in order to “consolidate [its] coherence” (67), the multiply heterogeneous Wong has still not received due critical attention in Asian American cultural studies, still does not “truly belong to it.” Indeed, Tang describes how his “multiple belonging,” positions him fitfully in the field, noting such “multiple belonging, through family ties or elective affinity, as a complicated thing indeed” (103). Such a “complicated thing,” seems to be a queer thing that troubles any easy articulation of a political project that can encompass both the elective and familial in Asian American studies, despite David Eng and Alice Y. Hom’s early field intervention in 2001 with Q & A: Queer in Asian America and the substantial literature that has followed in its wake. The filial discourse of the Asian American family has shaped the field’s attempts to disinvest in genealogy and kinship as a mode of production might complicate queer studies’ investments in affiliation as a more progressive social arrangement. What David Eng has articulated as queer diaspora,
shifting focus from state-determined logics of “racial descent, filiation, and biological traceability” to “queerness, affiliation, and social contingency” (The Feeling of Kinship 13), outlines how the gap between Wong and the Angels that was scripted in terms of liberation and freedom obscures other modes of attachment.

Given his proximity to the birth of Asian American political identity in California in the late 1960s, Tang suggests that Wong’s connection to the Asian American community was markedly and multiply insufficient: no movement activism, no ties to “Chinatown San Francisco life, nor its traditional leadership there,” (105) and no strong ties to Asian American cultural institutions until some fitful participation in New York with the Asian American Art Center in the 1990s. In contrast to established projects of collective social and political identification and activism, Tang denotes Wong as an outsider given to solitary artistic pursuits, “immersed in an inner world of artistic exploration,” and primarily connected to Asia “in a highly mediated or historical form” (105-6) through the informal research on Asian art that he undertook for his work in calligraphy and set design with the Cockettes and Angels. The notion of Wong as solitary and unaffiliated with collective Asian American cultural and political life amplifies the tacit yet similarly estranged connection between Wong and an emergent gay and lesbian political identity consolidating at the same time in San Francisco. I suggest that Wong’s diffuse erotic investments and oscillations between orientalist objects and subjects limn the diversity of genealogical and disciplinary routes that he
harbors. Very recent studies of queer Asian American art have tended to focus on contemporary artists of post-1965 immigration wave rather than an earlier queer Asian American genealogy of art, in which Wong would certainly figure, as would his clandestine assembled *Chinatown USA* series of paintings that were poorly received by the Asian American community when he finally unveiled them in the 1990s. While Wong’s successes in the New York art world and the mounting interest in his work towards articulating the politics of memory and mourning of the AIDS crisis garner him cursory inclusion in Asian American art anthologies, his marked critical distance compounds his seeming isolation from the Chinese community. Such critical scarcity likely stems from his work’s graphic insistence on disturbing relations; it’s disidentification with orientalism itself seemingly recuperates the dreaded “oriental object” towards dangerously unfixed revision and notably without any articulated Asian American political positioning on the part of Wong himself. The overarching implication that Wong had very little organic connection to the Chinese or Asian American community—only a discrete familial connection and an untrained scholarly mediation—is reiterated in Wong’s Chinatown series, which inclines to camp and kitsch, formally pressuring the notion of the organic as a proper mode of lineation. I suggest that Wong’s relative obscurity stems from his discomforting attachments within

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22 The recent excellent addition to studies of Asian American art, Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe, eds. *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017) follows this critical trend of linking queer Asian American art with very contemporary artists—none before 1990 in this work.
interracial intimacies that pressure organic notions of kinship and that his work on Orientalist form has been misrecognized as the reproduction of stereotype rather than a theoretic revision of Asian diasporic visual literacy and its own promiscuous social afterlives.

Wong’s sustained, exhaustive, and largely self-taught expertise in Asian art forms and American orientalist aesthetics at this time was not a purely solitary pursuit but rather was persistently bound up with his participation in both the communalist drag collectives and his complex family life. The Angels’ statement of Martin’s failure to arrive at liberation was in part a racialized diagnosis of maternal pathology in the Wong family, implying that Martin was unable to liberate himself from his family’s assumed Confucian mode of capitalist enterprise. The identification of his mother Florence rather than Benji as the driver underscores how part of the Angels’ malice may have been lodged in Florence’s uncompromisingly public role in Martin’s life and later estate, overturning what Aihwa Ong dismisses as a “fantasy about ‘traditional’ Chinese gender roles, in which women remain fixed in the household” (152). However, I suggest that this was a much more complex relation than . With his mother Florence, Martin embarked on an early and ongoing familial collaboration that would merge with his work with the groups. As a child in San Francisco, Wong displayed an early talent for art and a tenacious capacity for self-learning that he in turn kindled in Florence. His near-expert knowledge of Asian art, antiquities, and collectibles as well as cheap kitsch
and curios was characteristically informal and self-directed, rooted in his earliest intimacies on the streets of Chinatown. Artist Julie Ault describes Wong as a young “boy wonder” artist and a precocious student of Asian objects on the streets of San Francisco. Flipping the filial narrative of parent-to-child transmission of knowledge, Martin recursively brought his mother into an increasingly shared enterprise of collecting “accumulating miscellany”:

Florence had always gone to antiques shops and bought things for fun, but it was Martin who researched and learned about objects from an early age and became a collector and connoisseur, inspiring his mother to do the same. As a kid, Martin frequently visited the Japanese and Chinese antique shops on Grant Avenue in Chinatown. He read up on everything. Impressed with so much knowledge in a young boy, the shopkeepers gave him generous discounts, thereby arousing his appetite for bargains. Martin liked to buy something he thought he could eventually sell for more, and he’d do so when the timing was right. Martin initiated Florence into collaborative collecting. (Ault “Some Places”)

If Martin “initiated” Florence into the “collaborative collecting” that would increasingly structure their small family, it was the shopkeepers who publicly “aroused” Martin into this appetitive discourse of “knowledge” and “bargains,” an erotic entrepreneurial grammar that evokes the “little scams” of Wong’s later dealings in Asian art with Sotheby’s as he would assemble one of the world’s finest archives of subway writing. Ault’s description of intergenerational familial collaboration dispels the notion that Martin had no significant ties to Chinatown, even if it highlights a sense that such ties were improper and based in economic rather than familial exchange as if it were possible for these to be autonomous. Ault’s account brings Wong closer to Chinatown, even as this evocation of Chinatown invokes the larger frame of racialized desires in the
specter of purportedly Chinese pecuniary and commercial appetites. For Ault as the 
Angels, Martin’s Chineseness figures as a suggestive commercial appetite, which the 
Angels transfer to Florence’s purported excessive maternal hunger for Martin’s 
commercial success.

The Wongs’ familial collaborations rework the consistent preoccupation with 
intergenerational conflict that shapes Asian American critique. Martin and Florence’s 
collaborations suggest a type of queer knowledge production tacit to the psychic and 
historical structures of the Asian diasporic family, as proper temporal notions of filiation 
imagined as straight lines of transmission veer to recursive paths of shared 
transgenerational affiliation. In a treatment of gender, debt, and intergenerational 
conflict within the Asian American family, erin Khuê Ninh details the psychic traumas 
enacted by and within the “immigrant nuclear family as a special form of capitalist 
enterprise,” one in which migration is unabashedly about “the hope for upward 
mobility, it is about the hope of profiting in the Western capitalist economy” that 
requires the family to function as “a production unit—a sort of cottage industry, for a 
brand of good, capitalist subject” predicated on a filial system” (2). While Ninh reads 
Asian American women authors’ literary accounts of intergenerational conflict in terms 
of indebtedness, trauma and the psychic affects of power, the Wong family’s graphic 
production elaborates a different mode of intergenerational relation. As the beloved only 
son—significantly different than a daughter—of an immigrant nuclear family, Martin
and Florence’s collaborative collecting was in tandem with a shared familial archival practice that was its own form of enterprise and would increasingly become the family’s legacy in the absence of reproduction for Martin. Florence’s maternal curation of Martin Wong as artist endows her with the position of master archivist, even while he was living. Florence’s arrangements around and of Martin are rendered in the spatial organization of the home; Ault describes the Wong home as a “dense totality,” a site “devoted to preserving and displaying everything that is Martin Wong.” Florence’s particular mode of aesthetic and deeply affective assemblage in turn moves Martin. Ault continues, “Martin seems to have been attuned to the ways Florence situated and arranged every item in the cabinets, drawers, and cupboards and on the walls of the house. Martin’s installing hand and sensibility are likewise evident all over the house.”

These domestic choreographies break down the lines between public and private archives and accentuate how the Wong home was a profoundly diasporic space with an assemblage of cross-cultural and cross-generational transits. Sara Ahmed emphasizes how diasporic domestic spaces are notably shaped by object histories:

> Mixed-race homes also gather objects around, as objects that emerge from different worlds and seem to face different directions. They may be experienced as somewhere ‘between’ the diasporic home and the orientalist home: the contact with objects resides at some ‘point’ between strange and familiar, as both within and without the familial. (150)

The oscillation in the Wong home between the collected objects and their specific domestic orientations would unfold over the decades and into Martin’s subsequent...
highly variable living arrangements in a range of cities, ethnic enclaves, and even communalist domesticities.

I believe that Martin’s initiation of Florence into collaborative collecting of these oriental objects that arranged their home was likely in tandem with Florence’s initiation of Martin’s graphic imagination in its technical capacities. Benjamin and Florence’s work as designers at the San Francisco office of Bechtel, an industrial construction company, likely shaped Martin’s technique as much as his short study of architecture at Berkeley before entering Humboldt. An elaborate series of detailed domestic and neighborhood diagrams and maps that Florence sketched for Martin in 1989 as guides for his personal organization leads me to suspect that Florence was formally or informally trained in engineering drawing and writing, a specific graphic language. Florence’s diagrams are both technical and intimate; the nested and inset diagrams capture Florence’s neat attempts to compartmentalize the chaos of Ridge Street, functioning as both a snapshot of her organizing attempts and a hoped-for daily practice: “Keep things in place & keep everything neat!” or, “A pillow case underneath the checker pillow. If you use it to sleep on, put pillow case over it.” The diagrams are nested, including a sequential hand drawn diagram for how he should assemble his couch bed and a textually detailed rendering of his chest of drawers organization that housed everything from “old Chinese dresses” and “S.F. Newspapers” to “Japanese Woodcut Prints,” new and old “Ben Davis” shirts and “Pop’s old hand knit socks.”
Martin’s artist books in his personal archive include similarly technical drawings for ideas he saw as visual books, such as *Anti-Gravity For Beginners*, a “rough draft” of a “child’s book on electro magnetism and anti-gravity. In plain English,” as well as copious notes for montages of visual ideas he saw in disordered relation. While Wong’s later art is frequently characterized as romantic, particularly his Chinatown and Loisaida portraits, scenic cityscapes, and domestic-institutional interiors, his practice with the Angels and Cockettes and beyond was often pointedly concerned with technique as praxis and the aesthetic reimagining of a technical graphic capacity that would distil and focus towards an object.

These maternal graphic orderings signal how the Wongs configured a familial unit and transmission of graphic production as an intimate genealogy of visual literacy and its documentation that eventually connected to the institutional recording of the Asian American movement itself. The awkward positioning of Wong in Asian American institutional and social life is in part a graphic problem. In a 1993 letter from Elaine Kim and Betty Kano addressed to Wong, Kim inquires about his solicited contribution to their forthcoming book on Asian American artists. Here Kim asks for “a more formal artist’s statement” that implies Wong’s submitted oral testimony was at odds with institutional forms of knowledge production:

Although we stated in the earlier letter that your artist’s statement for the profile would be taken from your interview, we have since realized that we must also ask you for a more formal artist’s statement. Although the interviews touched upon many interesting subjects that might not have been included in a formal statement, they often turned out to be too sketchy and uneven to provide enough information for a featured profile. We
also realized that many of them were dated, and perhaps do not reflect the character of your current work.23

Examining several of Wong’s preserved written artist statements and oral interviews, it is likely that he provided a thoroughly disorienting account of himself and his work. This exchange highlights the question of what forms of self-citation are appropriate to Asian American studies’ institutional memory and genealogies. Wong’s hand-drawn artist statements are graphic objects of art in their own right and have been displayed as such several times. A 1975 document titled “Resumé de Consumé,” (Fig. 25) expresses Wong’s vision of professional citation as he was concluding his collaborations with the Angels of Light. “Resumé” is written in one of Wong’s most enduring scripts, likely developed during his years between San Francisco and Eureka, and marked with his personal seal. Wong tellingly uses a zhubaiwen xiangjianyin style seal that fuses both zhuwen (red characters or yang seal) and baiwen (white characters or yin seal) style seals in a mingling of masculine and feminine energies. The typography of “Resumé” is a slightly more legible—because spaced—version of the calligraphy of “Firefly Evening” (Fig. 8), sharing the collection’s fascination with fanciful visual and textual hyperbole, puns, and irony. As a graphic of self-citation, “Resumé” rearranges the genre’s expectations of professionalism; in this chronological yet paratactic document Wong oscillates between a characteristic attention to technical detail as he notes his formal art

23 Correspondence with Elaine Kim, Series I, Box 1, Folder 30, The Martin Wong Papers at Fales Special Collections, New York University.
training and hyperbole as he accords details such as “two years Tantric set designer for underground gorilla [sic] theatre (Cockettes later Angels of Light) SF. NY. and Amsterdam” and “Established local portrait business in Eureka” equal footing—referring to his time spent in Eureka and San Francisco as the Human Instamatic—with his formal training. In both “Resumé” and the poetry collection, Wong pushes graphic form to mock the content of personal expression through the use of idiosyncratic and highly formalized scriptural experimentation that approaches the culturally indeterminate “far East” appropriations of hippie mysticism, which Wong encodes
genealogically in “Resumé” in his nod to the Beats and his travels to Asia: “Traveled to Afghanistan to visit ceramic mosque mosaic workshops in Herat and to study with tantric painters in Nepal.” The polyvalent orientalist accretions of “Resumé” illustrate how Wong’s ongoing experiments in calligraphy and typography will increasingly theorize acts of script and inscription across seemingly disparate cultural topographies.

If “Resumé de Consumé,” gently challenges the professionalization of Asian Americanness as a form of institutional documentation and knowledge production, Wong’s work from the same period also unsettles the graphic collaborations of Asian American movement artists. The previously mentioned Yellow Pearl, the seminal graphic collection of art, writing, and music by the radical Basement Collective of New York City in 1971 features similar formal experiments in text and drawing comparable to Wong’s work in the Angels of Light’s Peking on Acid program (Fig. 26). The differences between the two graphic collections are telling. In contrast to the collectively authored and drawn graphics of the Angels of Light, Yellow Pearl is more of an assemblage, a multimedia collection of individuated participants. In contrast to the orientalist camp parodies of the former, Yellow Pearl is highly didactic; form—whether illustrated, poetic, or typographic—is used to illustrate and mirror content. In Fay Chiang’s poem, the poet and artist uses the graphic space of three columns to contrast and develop three revolutionary stages towards the articulation of an Asian American subject. The first stanza details a mishmash of popular Yellow Peril stereotypes of Chinese American life;
“eggrolls and wonton soup,” a haphazard coupling of “Fu Manchu” and “Suzie Wong,” to the “murky alleys/of Chinatown” and “homes of exotic madames” (31). The second stanza shifts to a distant, seemingly objective descriptor of the Chinese as model minority: “a problemless people . . . a bit strange/but they take care of their own/are good laundrymen/and restauranteurs.” In the final stanza the poet switches to a direct address to the emergent becoming of the radical Asian American: “who are you . . . where are you . . . do you know/tomorrow becomes today/change - - /

Figure 26: Illustrated poem by Wally Lim in Yellow Pearl, Basement Collective, 1971
it is in our hands/it is time.” This approach is markedly different from Wong’s graphic sense at the same period. In *Peking on Acid*, content and form are sometimes coupled and parodied as in the profane puns of the first section pairing stereotypical “Asian” typology with stock phrases turned salacious double entendre such as “Chopped Screwy” and “Tibetan Look of the Bed.” While Chiang and Lim’s pieces attempt to summon the radical Asian American subject into being—“change...it is time”—through dialectic, Wong’s work with the Angels here—and despite the collective authorship, I am certain after looking at years of his work and their visual/textual puns that Wong was a primary author as well as calligrapher of the pamphlet—becomes increasingly repetitive and abstract, as if Chineseness, which could not be located in the playful repetition of stereotype might become an embodied practice of increasing opacities through decorative mark making performance itself.

Wong theorizes Chineseness through a revision of the decorative and the ornamental as queerly feminized visual and material performances. He would commence his Chinatown paintings in the 1980s after he moved to New York and taught himself to paint and noted once that he secretly worked on the series for years before showing them publicly. In an interview with Yasmin Ramirez in the 1990s Wong contextualizes the series as “something I always wanted to do when I first came to New York, but I didn’t have the technical facility yet, so after I did the Lower East Side paintings, that’s when I did the Chinatown paintings, like I had wanted to do them for
about 20 years and then suddenly I just did them” (“Chino Latino” 119). This admission tells us that Wong had wanted to do the series since he had hooked up with the Cockettes and Angels yet was only able to execute the series after honing his technical skills on his study of Loisaida, the Puerto Rican community of the Lower Eastside where Wong lived and which he painted for several decades. In lieu of no obvious organic connections between the Angels and Loisaida, I surmise that Wong likely connected these diverse communities through his orientalist imaginary which was increasingly a reworking of diasporic social life and aesthetic forms coupled with a sense of queer performance and staging. Likely many of the Chinatown paintings were founded on early visual experiments imagined from the Angels of Light period which Wong later learned to translate from the painterly graphic style of his set design into scenographic scenarios of domestic Loisaida and then Chinatown life. Both Loisaida and Chinatown are rendered intermittently public and private and convey a sense of ephemeral queer possibility. Wong’s own family history is intimately bound up in the history of Chinatowns across the west. His connection to the idea of Chinatown as a queer, cross-cultural space was both familial condition and elective motion. Wong’s paternal family was rooted in Arizona; his grandmother Eloisa Morales Fie belonged to an old Chicano family that hailed from the shared Mexican and Chinese neighborhood in downtown Phoenix’s frontier Chinatown. Despite suggestions that the Wong family’s Chicano roots
were perhaps fabricated, the state archive bears witness to the complexity of interracial intimacies in ethnic communities of the frontier.  

Although Wong recalled later that he never remembered any of his California family speaking Spanish, Wong’s performance of the family’s repeated shrouding and unveiling of its Chicano/a roots formed a complex site of relation for Wong, a fugitive and underground site of familial secrecy and unregulated economies. His paternal aunt, Eleanora Tam was a performer in the Chinatown circuit of risqué underground cabarets and dining clubs including the Lion’s

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24 See *My Trip to America* intro for the suggestion that Wong’s Chicano connections are fabricated. I looked at documentation of his grandmother Eloisa Morales Fie and his grandfather, Wong Fie including census reports, death certificates, and newspaper articles, which all suggest that Wong Fie was a notorious figure in Phoenix. Ostensibly a miner, Wong Fie was reputedly an underground gambling proprietor who was under suspicion for the infamous “Friday the 13th” murder in 1914 of his first wife, neé Quock Young’s, alleged lover, Wong Fong. Contemporary accounts of the murder as a lurid crime of passion delineate the discourse of pathology with which Chinese kinship and family structures were understood and stand in stark relief to the poignant absences of Eloisa Morales and Wong Fie’s marriage—his second—in official documentation in this borderland region.
Den, the Forbidden City, the Sky Room, and the Kubla Kahn. If Florence helped compose Martin’s technical sense, his Aunt Nora, a lifetime performer with whom he would correspond until his death, inducted him into a fantastical landscape of underground Chinatown that was closer to the imaginings of the Cockettes. As Wong’s merging of Loisaida and Chinatown took shape in the Chinatown USA series in the increasingly decorative surface textures of textile and text that we see in his most circulated painting of the series, *Ms. Chinatown* (Fig. 27) we have to look towards and back to his graphic imaginary that will find its fullest expression in the graffiti writing archive.

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25 See Arthur Dong’s film *Forbidden City* (2016) for insight into the performers’ history. See Harley J. Spiller for a treatment of food at these clubs.

The insides of the cars are also marked-up—generally with letters or shapes or scrawls like letters, made with thick black markers, and repeated everywhere there is space for the marks to be made, and many places where there is not.

—Nathan Glazer

What it means to be in transit then, is to be in motion, to exist liminally in the ungrievable spaces of suspicion and unintelligibility. To be in transit is to be made to move.

—Jodi Byrd, The Transit of Empire

On April 8, 1989 artist Martin Wong and his friend, artist Peter Broda, opened the doors of the short-lived Museum of American Graffiti at 6 Bond Street in Manhattan’s SoHo district. At the lively opening—“urban fabulous fanfare,” legendary graffiti writer Lee Quiñones would recall later (“Lee Quinones” 229) —attended by a local crowd of veteran and upcoming writers, no one could have known that the museum, a physical and conceptual site of consolidation and duration, would share the very ephemerality of the form it would house for only three short months. Eleven days later, a white woman jogging through Central Park was brutally beaten and sexually assaulted. Five innocent African American and Latino teenaged boys were arrested and later wrongfully convicted for the assault amidst explosive media headlines that
invented a new word for the state’s lexicon to describe this purported type of bucolic black crime: “wilding.” The police and the media’s willful mishearing that fabricated wilding reconsolidated black and brown youth in the nation’s ever-fertile colonial racial imaginary as “roving gangs” and “wolf packs” that were violently transgressing their proper spaces in the complexly segregated city. Police reported that the youth bragged about “wilding” at the station and journalists quickly surmised that it referred to rapper Tone Lōc’s 1989 hit “Wild Thing,” insinuating that “wilding” was an implicit admission of sexual violence that the media and law enforcement had systematically associated with hip-hop since its beginnings. The youth’s more likely statement that they were “wilin,’” an old word in African American slang for partying hard; acting up; or acting crazy, wild, or free—notably without any implicit connotation of violence—fell on the deaf ears of a nation consolidated around perceptions of black sociality as inherently violent (Shousterman). That wilin’ was inaudible, beyond the limits of translation for the police, media, and public would soon bleed into the purported illegibility of writing at the new museum.

Three weeks later on May 12, the New York City Transit Authority (NYCTA) would pointedly and very publicly celebrate “the final journey of . . . the last graffiti-covered train,” effectively declaring victory in their fifteen year war against the large pieces and “initials, names, and cryptic messages scrawled on subway cars” (Hays). Wildstyle, the extraordinarily complex style of writing that had been a script of choice
since the mid 1970s for such “cryptic messages” was belatedly popularized, if not at all explicated, in the Charlie Ahearn film Wild Style in 1983 that featured many of the artists showcased at the museum. 1983 was the year that the NYCTA had attempted to excise the writers’ markings by continuously re-painting the trains white, postindustrial shades of Le Corbusier’s modernist injunction that normative citizens “master” their too-decorative—that is, feminized—house with a coat of white ripolin paint as “a refusal to allow anything which is not correct, authorized, intended, desired, throughout” (188). 26 The writers however, viewed this whiteness as an invitation to further innovation, blank canvases for cumulative and increasing experimentation rather than the blank erasure and mastery intended by the authorities. By 1983 galleries were exhibiting graffiti art amidst vitriolic outpouring from critics such as Grace Glueck who decried the form’s jump from street to gallery: “after a long and scurrilous underground career, graffiti has surfaced on the chaste white walls of galleries and museums,” and collectors are “taking into their living rooms . . . the visual mayhem that daily assaults the eyes,” of subway riders. The city’s escalating tactics against the purported assault of graffiti violently irrupted when transit police murdered Michael Stewart, a young black art student, after

26 Le Corbusier outlines his “Law of Ripolin,” asserting whiteness, mastery, and industrialized space over the darkness wrought by unchecked decoration: “Imagine the results of the Law of Ripolin. Every citizen is required to replace his hangings, his damasks, his wallpapers, his stencils, with a plain coat of white ripolin. His home is made clean. There are no more dirty, dark corners. Everything is shown as it is. Then comes inner cleanliness, for the course adopted leads to a refusal to allow anything which is not correct, authorized, intended, desired, throughout: no action before thought. When you are surrounded with shadows and dark corners you are at home only as far as the hazy edges of the darkness your eyes penetrate. You are not master in your own house. Once you have put ripolin on your walls you will be master of yourself” (188).
he was caught tagging a wall of the First Ave subway station. *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)*, Jean-Michel Basquiat’s searing 1983 response to Stewart’s murder, marks the traumatic resonances of Stewart’s death that rippled through the writing community in 1983, resonating into our own present positioning within the continuum of always already acquitted state violence against black lives. The tactics of this war were occasioned by less visible violences in the quotidian administration of brutality through the NYCTA’s neoliberal restructuring of the public authority, as thousands of formerly unionized workers were dispatched to create a burgeoning non-union management corps under the guise of combatting graffiti. Headed by David L. Gunn and mayor Ed Koch, the NYCTA had embarked on a five-year plan in 1985 to rid New York’s subways of graffiti, diagnosing it as the visible evidence of a larger disorder plaguing the city and entrenching the broken windows approach to urban policing and neoliberal governance as the remedy. Media coverage and policy writings on subway graffiti during this war illustrate that to the white middle class commuters they assumed composed the reading public, wildstyle’s illegibility and defiant opacity was perceived as not only a mark or index of civilizational and racial disorder but as a manifest physical—indeed sexual—threat: a graphic presence as corporeal as it was obscure, repeated incursive marks forcing space where there was none to be made. Entangled in the material constellation between wildstyle and wilding, the Museum of American Graffiti would be closed before its public mission was realized.
By August, Wong’s anonymous corporate backers had cancelled funding for the SoHo site. At the height of local buzz surrounding the closure, Linda Talisman’s interview with Wong, “Museum in Exile: Graffiti Finds a (Brief) Home,” ran in the *East Villager*. In the interview, Wong speculates that the anonymous company—archival documents reveal it as Keiho/Aegis, an Osaka-based corporation that had previously hired Wong as an art consultant amidst the Japanese buying spree of European art—were nervous that they might be publicly identified as the museum’s backers when neighborhood complaints mounted about the sudden proliferation of tags on the block’s walls and the “kids who came to [a neighbor’s] door daily, looking for the Museum” (6). Although the neighbor eventually commissioned a wall mural by LEE to stop the tagging (Fig. 28), Wong and Talisman discuss how “in the atmosphere of fear created by recent ‘wilding’ incidents, especially one in which a Japanese art student was shot not
far from the Museum,” neighborhood complaints about “packs of teenagers may have carried more weight in this frightened atmosphere” (14). Locating contemporary public fear of “twelve year olds” and youth culture at large within the national continuum of antiblackness—“people who if they saw an adult black male in street clothes, would automatically expect to get mugged or something” (14)—the urgency of Wong’s local focus on blackness and youth in the city overlays an attendant global menace threading through the notion of the shadowy Japanese backers of the museum.

At the peak of the Japanese economic bubble that would burst in 1990, yellow peril discourse waxed high in the nation. The 1983 subway writing documentary *Style Wars* inadvertently marks the anxieties engendered by the purported over-performance of Japanese industrial production by the 1970s as an NYCTA employee watches rows of freshly painted, white subway cars roll out of the yards. Watching the assembly line...
spectacle of presumably now non-unionized American workers toiling each night to paint the cars white, the employee muses, “If the Japanese can do it so can we . . .” If Style Wars marks Japan as the outsourced site of seemingly inhuman competitive production that menaces already internally threatened American labor, speculation looms as its anxious double. American fear and resentment of Japanese acquisition, ownership, and speculation crested in 1989 when Sony bought 51% of the Rockefeller Group, or, “the Center of New York,” throwing New York’s ongoing debt crisis into relief against the specter of alien ownership penetrating New York (“Japan Buys the Center of New York”). Wong’s own anonymous “Japanese landlords” were indicative of Japanese speculation in international art markets, primarily acquisitions of the Impressionist pieces such as Keiho/Aegis had initially consulted with Wong before he persuaded them into backing the museum. That Japanese acquisition of real estate and European artworks triggered territorial anxieties about Asian ownership generally is evident in the discourse of the bubble and crash. Economists and collectors condemned “questionable” and seemingly nontransparent art deals “handled away from the light of public auction,” as indicative of the “unusually secretive,” culture of Japanese business practices altogether (Sterngold). The art market’s outraged equivocation of an universally specific Asian criminality with particular practices of non-transparency and implied theft was writ larger in the IMF and U.S. Treasury’s barely coded economic language of an opaque and “specifically Asian pathology” operative in the impenetrable
“crony capitalism” (Kang 412) that had produced the initial Japanese bubble and crash of the 1980s and the ensuing ‘Asian crisis’ of 1997-8. As Laura Hyun Yi Kang recently argues, such “crony capitalism” discourse evoked older orientalist tropes of markets that must be rendered properly penetrable to Western domination. A sense that world order had taken a wrong, perhaps atavistic turn towards “an untenable Asian permutation of an original and righteous Western capitalism” (422) loomed as Asia’s “immature institutions” figured as the “modern substitute for ancient ‘Oriental despotism’ or ‘Asiatic absolutism’” (417). Accordingly, the Museum of American Graffiti’s mediation of the youthful local writing scene coupled with the global panic of Japanese art and real estate acquisition enfolds the specter of differentially improper economic subjects: the young criminalized black and brown writers as aggressively bad debtors and Wong and his anonymous Japanese backers as toxic speculators. In this earlier iteration of what Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva describe as the “immanent risk of foreclosure” (362) that instantiates the subsequent 2008 subprime crisis, 1980s New York City graffiti writing configures at an earlier moment when neoliberal governances are employed towards the enforced transparency of the “immature” debtor and speculator. Embedded in racialized economies of inscrutability and immaturity, the broadened visibility and recognition that Wong and the artists envisioned at the Museum of American Graffiti in 1989 foundered to such immanent foreclosure.
Wong ends the interview by raising the possibility of another beginning. He muses that they might reopen without financial backing, “in a small storefront as ‘the rowdy bar,’” where “people will be able to come and hang out and get rowdy. But they would have to be 21!” (14). While the writing that was literally on the Bond Street walls marked the museum as an economically illegitimate, racialized space within the neighborhood, Wong’s characteristically playful wink towards an adult “rowdy bar” underscores how public perceptions of the museum’s multiple improprieties hinged on the implied conflation of inherently sexualized temporal as well as spatial transgressions. Wong would publicly voice his frustration for the balance of his too short life that the museum, like writing itself, was representative of a youth movement ahead of its time and in the creative vanguard of a lagging national recognition. However, his stated hopes that such a form could be incorporated into progressive multicultural inclusion is foreclosed by his tacit acknowledgement that the interracial and intergenerational mingling sited at the museum composed a threat to the structural order of progressive maturity itself. Institutional notions of proper—that is, straight—posterity and reproductive futurity embedded in the very notion of the “American Museum” were foreclosed by the fugitive ephemerality of the form itself as much as its spatial infraction of public and private property. As a vernacular project of minoritarian and diasporic world making, writing’s criminal anonymity and subjection to constant erasure confounds institutional demands for what Jose Muñoz has identified as the
legitimacy of “proper evidence” (“Ephemera and Evidence” 8) that the ephemeral—and what Wong’s own corpus marks as decidedly queer—performance eludes and refuses.

In 1989 AIDS-related deaths continued to soar in the city as the museum’s backers prepared to pull funding. A New York Times editorial celebrating the approaching horizon of public safety—public writ as white, heterosexual, non-drug users—once “all susceptible members” of “specific risk groups” (“Opinion”) became infected indexes the twinned pathologies of racial and sexual threat imagined by the editorial author to be assaulting such a narrowly composed public.30 Wong himself would be diagnosed in 1994 and his lifelong study of the ephemeral graphic would increasingly resonate with a heaviness it had always gestured to—the intertwined weight of precarity, displacement, and loss gathering to past and future memory.

Demands for the form and its anonymous practitioners and backers to produce their papers were untenable. The museum departed SoHo and left only traces of its brief domicile in LEE’s mural, itself only trace by 2012, or, “DESTROYED” (Quiñones, “Murals”).31 Wong’s final words in the interview are melancholic, belying his typically upbeat tone and they forestall any future permanency while holding out for possibility:

30 See Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy” and Gran Fury, “Control, A Project for Artforum,” for contemporary responses to this article.
31 LEE’s artist website maintains a photo gallery of murals and train pieces by the artist; the majority are captioned “DESTROYED” (Quiñones “Murals”). LEE’s melancholic recitation is at odds with the current marketing vogue for pairing New York luxury buildings with the preservation of “gritty” graffiti as surplus in the city’s relentless process of gentrification. For examples, see Greenspan and Walker.
“we’re not really closed, we’re in the process of moving . . . Since we’re like a museum of deposed royalty, I guess you could say we’re a museum in exile now.”

Following the museum’s swift closure, its contents would return with Quiñones’ sense of “erratic motion” to their former home in Wong’s legendary apartment at 141 Ridge Street (Fig. 29) in the Loisaida neighborhood of the Lower Eastside where he had resided since 1978 until he would depart New York for his parents’ San Francisco home in 1994. The domestic re-exile of the writing archive in 1989, arguably the finest collection of its kind in the world, evokes a similarly fugitive archive across the Atlantic in 1989 that Stuart Hall notes also could not be “properly heritaged” (11). Assembled by art historian Eddie Chambers, Hall notes that his collection of black diasporic visual arts materials “existed for many years in boxes in a filing cabinet in Eddie Chambers’ bedroom in Bristol before they found a resting place—in AAVAA, the Asian and African Visual Arts Archive” (11) in 1989. As a postindustrial urban form entangled within African diasporic art’s genealogies, the writing archives echo Chambers’ collection in their shared status as art that resists and is resisted by the state imperative to collect, order, and classify what counts as “the Heritage,” in Hall’s formulation. That Wong’s home was at times a type of “alternative boys club” that the Museum of American Graffiti stated it was not in an official policy notice, highlights the multiple modes of
shifting improprieties tacit to the interlayered socialities of Ridge Street and a messier domestic housing than Chambers’ seemingly discrete filing cabinets. The sheer volume and diversity of visitors and the shifting residencies of the Ridge Street apartment reflects Wong’s talent for connection that initiated the Museum. It served as a studio, refuge, marketplace, and hang out to an ensemble of East Village artists, all-city writers, and neighborhood hustlers. As an intimate locus of the “not-quite-correct, ungovernable dimension” of art (Trinh 6), the Ridge Street apartment was a social space of queer,
diasporic, cross-cultural, transgenerational, and interracial exchange. These interlocking economies of material, affective, and creative exchange at 141 Ridge Street highlight Wong as an ambiguous middleman—alternatively patron, fellow artist, co-conspirator, collector, dealer, fanboy, and fence. Wong lovingly assembled the graffiti writing collection over a decade, most often trading his own steadily appreciating paintings with younger writers. When he could not trade he would buy, financed by his “little scam” (Trebay 30) of combing auctions for unrecognized Asian art works that he would resell for profit. When he could not afford to buy or trade he supported writers with free or reduced materials from Pearl Paints, the Lower Eastside discount art supply store where he worked and befriended young writers such as DAZE, many of whom had been ruthlessly discarded by the art world by 1989. Such a home that Wong and the writers might have envisioned for this archive could never find form in the regulating and regulated economies of the museum without transforming the definitional structures of the museum itself and its relation to value. The official Museum of American Graffiti’s nascent attempt towards permanence foreclosed at this time, Wong prepared to leave Ridge Street in 1994 for his parents’ home in San Francisco where he would die of AIDS-related illness in 1999. As he departed, Wong gifted the bulk of the collection to the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY), by all accounts because no one else wanted it at the time.
While the collection currently rests in one possible version of public respite that Wong envisioned in 1989, at both MCNY and Fales Special Collections at New York University, the questions that the collection and the condemned museum provoke are unended. This chapter considers how the “process of moving” conditioning such a “museum in exile” connects Wong’s own migrant social and artistic practice with the ephemeral insurgency of graffiti writing from 1970 - 1999 in New York City. Martin Wong arrived in the Lower Eastside of New York in 1978 from California where he had participated in both the northern California underground arts and crafts scene and radical drag performance in San Francisco. Critics often regard Wong’s subsequent immersion in the Nuyorican and graffiti writing communities as a generative break in the trajectory of his own artistic development as he moved from ceramics, drawing, and design to the largely self-taught style of painting that he is now celebrated for. Many of his paintings chronicle the seemingly cryptic and anonymous markings on the bones of what Quiñones describes as the “radical deforestation” of the Lower Eastside during this period (“Lee Quiñones” 228). In this chapter, I consider a broader notion of generative break that enfolds separation as an intimately radical, sometimes violent suturing as I attempt to limn Wong’s vision of an erotic graphic continuum between Chinatown and the orientalist camp aesthetics of the Cockettes and the Angels of Light with the inscriptive insurgencies of the New York subway writing movement. In a 1996 interview with Yasmin Ramirez he notes that he didn’t have “the technical facility”
(“Chino-Latino” 119) to execute his early vision of what would be his Chinatown paintings until he had moved to New York and executed the Lower Eastside paintings, a recursive movement back in memory built on future skill. That the generative break is also a generational break as Wong immerses himself in Nuyorican aesthetics and the young writing community signals the complex economies at stake in the creation of affiliative, diasporic communities that this project describes and their multiple and often unsettling differentials of exchange. I suggest that such passages ask us to think of three seemingly discrete cultural groupings— New York subway writing, “free” San Francisco drag performance, and Asian diasporic art—as projects that Wong saw as moving in unlikely, indiscrete relation at a pivotal historical moment of crisis.

Thinking about the relationship between the collection of graffiti art and ephemera assembled by Wong and a broader notion of the hip-hop archive is an overarching concern of this chapter. The question of whether graffiti writing is one of the purported “four elements of hip-hop” at all is always contested and fundamentally bound up in questions of the blackness of subway writing as script and performance, the obscurity or visibility of the artist as writer, and the capacities of the graphic to make space where there is no “space to be made.” Most of the competing origin stories of writing predate the emergence of hip-hop that practitioners and scholars generally link to the parties in the South Bronx in the mid-1970s. These origin stories are less important for providing anything like empirical evidence towards the origins of graffiti writing—
let alone it’s organic or artificial connection to hip-hop—than they are for illustrating the expectations and frustrations of origin itself with regards to the artifice of writing and its potential kinships to the sonic hip-hop archive. Competing and overlapping origin stories outline how the earliest documentation of graffiti writing—embedded in a patriarchal demand that it produce its papers—has shaped its subsequent institutional study and practice. I consider the writing collection gathered by Martin Wong at the Museum of American Graffiti in 1989 as a transformative site and moment of the writing movement that poses a problem and an opportunity for hip-hop historiography. I suggest that Wong’s assemblage, curation, and his own ongoing visual citation of this collection and the movement it represents was his interjection of an unabashedly queer visual and performance history into the field of hip-hop’s own often radical reworking of origins. Much as Wong remains invisible within the history of the Cockettes and Angels of Light, he remains an outsider in accounts of Nuyorican aesthetics and almost entirely invisible within the histories of hip-hop culture that accept writing as an element. Considering Wong’s queer social curation of subway writing fundamentally challenges the notion of predominantly male “founding fathers” as the earliest authorities of the hip hop archive and oldest keepers of its origins and genealogies. I ask what conditions of possibility underpin Wong’s cultural brokerage with regards to the writing archive and suggest that the collection is both an expression and enactment of an informal yet critical mode of diasporic historiography he brought to bear on the larger
hip-hop archive. As overlapping origin stories meet up at the Museum of American Graffiti and its charged social arrangements, I suggest that Wong’s archival practice renders genealogies as indiscrete possibilities that have much to say about the limits and transgressions of textual documentation, the radical erotic potential of acts of graphic inscription, and a sense of queer legacy, akin to Sean Edgecomb’s sense of generational passage through performance (36), that troubles the notion of a straight (or) forward hip-hop family tree itself.

4.1 Words on the Streets: Writing the Hip-Hop Family Tree

“You know what bugs me, they put hip-hop with graffiti. How do they intertwine? Graffiti is one thing that is art, and music is another” (George 46).

Grandmaster Flash’s attempt to clip graffiti off of the hip-hop family tree opens a historic 1993 conversation in The Source with the two other “founding fathers” of hip-hop: Kool DJ Herc and Afrika Bambaataa. Flash’s disavowal of graffiti writing returns as a sound bite every few years to re-ignite the always fiery debate surrounding hip-hop’s origins and composition, often parceled within a larger critique of the four elements notion of hip-hop culture as inorganic, unauthentic, and as Flash elaborates, a “media thing” (Edwards 15)—even when such a critique is presented in inorganic and unauthentic form itself.33 In the 1993 conversation, Herc and Bambaataa immediately

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33 In Paul Edwards’ The Concise Guide to Hip Hop Music (2015) writers BLADE and FARGO are presented as responding to Flash’s earlier statements from the 1993 conversation that the four elements is a prepackaged
double down on Flash, arguing that while the writers were tagging prior to “the whole word hip-hop,” the forms are tied socially and generationally through figures such as Phase II and Herc himself, who was initially a writer before turning DJ. They contextualize this earlier history, noting the ways in which youth mobility in the city at the time was shaped by the critical need to visually communicate street gang movement that was dying down by the later 1970s. While many thoughtful arguments for and against hip-hop’s kinship with writing have been raised over the decades, Flash’s disavowal always re-emerges with punctuated regularity in literature, interviews, and online forums—an almost always extra-contextual “changing same.” That Flash’s authority as a “founding father” is still frequently invoked to shore up sonic hip-hop against graffiti’s inorganic graphic imposition underscores the frictions, breaks, and enjambments of hip-hop’s genealogical consolidation as it follows its own forms as cut, sample, and remix. In Black Noise (1994), Tricia Rose’s inaugural scholarly study of hip-hop and rap music, Rose elaborates with Arthur Jafa’s thoughts on the stylistic organic continuities of African diasporic culture shared between the four elements as “flow, layering, and ruptures in line” (38). Rose links the sonic or gestural break to graffiti’s “long-winding, sweeping, and curving letters . . . broken and camouflaged by sudden

“media thing.” Edwards notably presents their response entirely out of context. Presumably in the interests of keeping the work “concise” as the title indicates, Edwards cuts a series of statements by writers, DJs, and MCs that seem to refute the four elements approach to hip-hop and then rearranges them as if they are in organic conversation. This is a common strategy in a vast array of popular works on hip-hop.
breaks in line. Sharp, angular, broken letters are written in extreme italics, suggesting forward or backward motion” (38). Rose’s methodology, which “grounds black cultural signs and codes in black culture and examines the polyvocal languages of rap as the “black noise” of the late twentieth century” is rooted in a long tradition of Black Studies focused on music, sound, and literature to which she gathers subway writing as kindred visual art and performance. Finally viewing Wong’s collection installed at the MCNY in 2014, writer LEE meditated on writing’s social and aesthetic forms in terms that echo Rose’s thoughts on “the line” in hip-hop: “Things come and go, and not always on a straight line. A straight line fixed to an objective can look stagnant, whereas an erratic motion creates energy. Which movement in time has ever been able to draw a straight line to save itself?” (“Lee Quiñones” 28). While writing and sonic hip-hop undoubtedly speak to each other through shared continuities of African diasporic experience, the at times markedly divergent literatures of writing and hip-hop stem from certain graphic “ruptured lines” between sound and sight, practice and artifact—“graffiti is one thing that is art, and music is another”—that will require “polyvocal” voices and interrupted, not-straight, lines and forms to understand the textures and ephemeral fragments of the writing archive that Martin Wong gathered in the 1980s.

At least four different origin stories intersect at the writing archives assembled by Wong: one textual and officially documented, one oral and unofficially documented, one oral and officially documented, one textual and unofficially documented. Most
accounts of New York graffiti writing begin with the textual and officially documented story of a Greek American adolescent delivery boy from 183rd Street in Manhattan’s Washington Heights who called himself Taki 183. Taki 183, the official sources say, became the first all-city writer in 1971, tagging his name across all five boroughs as he rode the train on his delivery rounds to mounting public fascination. The mythology of Taki 183 consolidated around a 1971 New York Times article, “‘Taki 183’ Spawns Pen Pals.” One of the first media mentions of tagging, this now iconic headline is still dutifully reproduced in film and print accounts of writing, most often as a graphic flashpoint that signifies the movement’s earliest arrival in broader public consciousness. While the black and white newsprint reading “‘Taki 183’ Spawns Pen Pals” provides immediate historical recognition for practitioners and scholars, the article’s author, Don Hosan Charles, remains strangely anonymous. One must dig to excavate Charles, who was presumably a temporary staff writer for the Times, His relative anonymity as the first “official” documentarian of writing creates an uncanny echo with the form and its willfully clandestine origins. With the circulation of “‘Taki 183’” a certain discourse becomes enscripted into the imaginary of American urban life: that the writers were part of a swelling American youth culture, that they were willfully anonymous (etymologically, literally without name), that anonymity meant the same thing to everyone, and that they were a non-identititarian movement—“teenagers from all parts of the city, all races and religions and all economic classes.” “Taki 183” also relays the
assumption that the mark making is an assertion of individual subjectivity through repeated public naming, a written territorialized declaration of individual possession. While many tags were springing up throughout the city, Taki 183’s prolific, all-city markings mark him as the first writer to shift from a situational practice of minor vandalism to a studied occupation. Although the tone of this early New York Times report was paternal and gently remonstrative, Taki 183 is nonetheless one type of model for American democratic inclusion and liberal individualism that would imminently clash with the racialized and sexualized trope of the “wolf pack” in governmental and media discourse.

Embedded in the Taki 183 account is an earlier oral account that is somewhat officially documented yet continues to circulate more as insider lore. Some dutiful historians touching on the Taki 183 story may provide further detail that writing had perhaps initially taken form in Philadelphia through a tagger named Cornbread. Born Darryl McCray, Cornbread was purportedly the first youth to begin serially tagging his chosen name in an American urban center. McCray has recounted that food service staff named him Cornbread while serving time in the Youth Detention Center of Philadelphia because he would ask every day why they didn’t serve hot water cornbread instead of stale white bread. After returning to the public school system in 1967 he began tagging the city with his new name, initially to woo a classmate, writing, “Cornbread Loves Cynthia” across the city. Cornbread’s courting of Cynthia was the romantic catalyst for a
more sweeping passion; he continued tagging and noted in 2001, “I became obsessed with this name” (Haegele). When a friend named Cornelius was murdered in 1971 and newspapers reported that the infamous graffiti writer Cornbread had been killed, Cornbread unleashed a massive all-city tagging campaign to prove that he was alive. This public tagging spree culminated in his arrest after breaking into the Philadelphia Zoo at night and spray painting, “Cornbread Lives” on an elephant. Cornbread’s exploits predate Taki 183’s in New York and offer a different set of discursive registers. Unlike the Taki 183 story, Cornbread’s deeds are largely undocumented save by oral accounts and living memory. Cornbread and other’s accounts often fuse into the mystique of urban legend; for example, Cornbread is said to have tagged the Jackson 5’s jet at the Philadelphia airport. Like the Philadelphia Zoo elephant account, these stories are rendered larger than life and were not visually documented or covered by the press. Cornbread’s story does index how the earliest graffiti writers were almost exclusively African American teenage boys who in Philadelphia emerged as writers during a period of escalating gang warfare and legislated violences, including youth reform programs and serial incarceration in the postindustrial city. Finally, Cornbread’s innovations—his will to tag widely and publicly, his “obsession with his name”—signal a broader meditation on black life and death absent from the Taki 183 story. On reading that Cornelius was misidentified as Cornbread, McCray makes his will to life explicit from within the sutures between life and name: “I called the newspapers and said ‘I’m
Cornbread, and I’m not dead. You better straighten this out or I’m gonna tear this city up.’ I knew it was up to me to bring my name back to life” (Haegele).

In a third story, the crossings between black life and death evoked in Cornbread’s account are even more marked, despite the event’s oral and long undocumented status. This account graphically embeds subway writing within an older African American experimental jazz tradition in textual, sonic, and visual performance that resurfaces in 1973 at the very moment writing begins to escalate. Following the death of Charlie Parker in 1955, markings in chalk and charcoal began to appear throughout New York around subway stations that read “BIRD LIVES!” The anonymous writer was unknown yet the markings became for a time what we would now call viral—Ralph Ellison mused that it was “beatniks”(195)—and we might speculate, began to link graffiti, the subway, and black sonic and visual performance in New York’s consciousness. The “BIRD LIVES” markings would not be attributed to their authors for twenty years. In 1973 jazz poet Ted Joans recounted in conversation that upon learning of Parker’s death he had “shed inner and outer tears,” gathered up three “hipsters,” and had each ride the subway in a different direction writing, “BIRD LIVES!” along the route (qtd. in Kohli 100-101). Joans’ retrospective account of sorrow and celebration along the subway line suggests transformation, an active reworking, of death and forgetting to life and remembrance through anonymous acts of imaginative praise that gather the collective from within individual continuity: a different way of making marks where
there is no space to make them. Both the Bird Lives! and Taki 183 stories feature a
shuttling between anonymity and public sight and the movement of creative dispersal
specifically allowed by the trains. However, Joans’ account highlights a different
measure of racial and cultural diversity that is forged in creative collaboration rather
than the representative sampling found in “Taki 183.” The writing movement has
consistently included people of variable race, ethnicity, age, and genders; however, by
1973 when Joans revealed the authors of “BIRD LIVES!” writing had de facto become
associated with working class African American and Puerto Rican male youth in New
York, as in its earliest iteration in Philadelphia. This was further reinforced as the form
began to evolve in tandem with a mounting legal and legislative apparatus in 1972 when
Mayor Lindsay declared graffiti a criminal epidemic. The state shift from the Taki 183
story’s liberal sociology to an increasingly neocolonial narrative that renders writers as
an indecipherable territorial threat is reflected in the accompanying literature that has
inordinately impacted the ways we might study writing’s origins.

A final origin story, textual but not able to be documented in any official
capacity—indeed comprising a graphic mode of documentation that aims to utterly
destroy official power and its very capacity for documenting—arrives later, yet points to
an even earlier moment. In the mid-1970s, a writer from Far Rockaway who initially was
known as Stimulation Assassination: Tagmaster Killer and soon after, RAMMELLZEE—
legally changing his name to such in 1979—began to leave tags and throwups on the A,
1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 lines, pushing a spikily distinctive form of wildstyle.\textsuperscript{34} Inspired by earlier masters Phase II and DONDI, RAMMELLZEE initially bombed these lines with the United Graffiti Artists crew until quitting in 1980 as he began showing his work on canvas in galleries and museums. RAMMELLZEE’s quick switch in 1980 from the trains to the international art market demarcates where Martin Wong enters the history of writing. In the early 1980s Wong began befriending many of the young writers who had transitioned in the late 1970s to the gallery scene. It was from writers such as RAMMELLZEE, Lady Pink, LEE, DAZE, CRASH, Zephyr, DONDI, and Futura that Wong initially began acquiring canvas pieces and black books when the art world had started to dispense with them soon after welcoming them into the galleries.

RAMMELLZEE spent the balance of his creative life on the subterranean frequencies of the art market as an artist and performance artist, embedding his insurgent theory and practice of writing within an idiosyncratic cosmology that theorized the form’s speculative origins. Greg Tate details how RAMMELLZEE’s cosmology was predicated on “the notion that Writing was actually an act of war, a military assault he code-named ‘Gothic Futurism’ and ‘Ikonoklast Panzerism’”:

There is another theory of writing’s origins which says it all began with the medieval monks of the 14th and 15th centuries, who produced illuminated manuscripts in the script we now call Gothic. In this version, the monks were

\textsuperscript{34} This writer legally changed his name to RAMMELLZEE in the late 1970s and those who knew him before the name change have refused to reveal his birth name, even upon RAMMELLZEE’s death in 2010. RAMMELLZEE stated repeatedly that his name was not a name but an equation.
prevented by the Catholic church because their letters had become so ornate that the Pope and his bishops could no longer read them. (128)

RAMMELLZEE viewed the subway writers as the contemporary inheritors of a monastic tradition intent on disrupting state power through the act of rendering text visually illegible. The present insurrection of this long war would be enacted by the practice of “armoring” letters by adding barbed arrows and points to their forms as a militarized practice of ornamentation. Struck by the visual spectacle of the nearly illegible popular wildstyle script shooting by on the fast-moving trains, RAMMELLZEE began turning his letters into moving “tanks” that would effectively battle and erase state power at the level of writing. In his 1979 treatise, Iconic Treatise Gothic Futurism, RAMMELLZEE identifies the emergence of wildstyle on the moving trains as the contemporary flashpoint for renewing the ongoing battle for liberation against state systems and structures and then extends this war to increasingly cosmic scale.

RAMMELLZEE paired his theory and practice of textual writing with performance, building massive armored suits from found objects in his Bowery loft for decades that he would wear publicly as a mode of armored persona. Identifying RAMMELLZEE as “an incarnation” of Afrofuturism; Mark Dery describes his “gadgetry-encrusted exoskeleton”:

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35 RAMMELLZEE’s full treatise is very difficult to find. I refer to a pdf version published online in 2017 that is no longer recoverable. Sections of the treatise are available on post.thing.net, https://post.thing.net/node/3086.
The B-boy bricolage bodied forth in Rammellzee’s ‘bulletproof arsenal,’ with its dangling, fetish-like doll heads and its Computer cobbled together from screws and wires, speaks to dreams of coherence in a fractured world, and to the alchemy of poverty that transmutes sneakers into high style, turntables into musical instruments, and spray-painted tableaux on subway cars into hit-and-run art. (183-5)

Rammellzee’s samurai robot drag as Gothic Futurism merges Afrofuturist bricolage with the visuality of Japanese mecha manga and Medieval typologies into a graphic cosmology of the letter as an insurgent act of writing and being written. Central to this performance was the notion of a cosmic struggle over writing as knowledge itself, a battle for epistemology that he envisioned as materially connected to the electromagnetics of the Allen Belt and increasingly subject to state “disease culture” which could only be countered by “antiknowledge” (Iconic Treatise). Rammellzee’s meditations on knowledge were partly shaped by the Supreme Mathematics and the Supreme Alphabet of the Nation of Gods and Earths (or Five Percenters), a teaching in which he had become fluent during his earliest days of tagging as he rendered his name as an equation.36 Rammellzee’s syncretic fusion was a precursor to the symbolism of the later Wu-Tang Clan who were similarly influenced by the Five-Percent Nation and added the martial monasticism of the Shaolin monastery in China to their repertoire. While MCs and DJs have long provided the most explicit sonic interchanges between African diasporic, Islamic and east Asian forms—from artfully cryptic verses that play

with Five-Percent doctrine to seamless samples of kung fu film clips—RAMMELLZEE’s embodied figuration of a cipher between mecha and Mecca indicates how writing also encompassed an orientalist imaginary predicated on cryptic decoding as a form of knowledge. This syncretic theoretic repurposes orientalist epistemologies for liberatory purposes, graphically explicit in RAMMELLZEE’s striving for an “antiknowledge” that fuses orientalist ornament and anticolonial armament. If the performative display of the graphic, gestural, and sonic cipher in hip-hop was initially—and in many cases remains—a matter of insider knowledge and sociality, the advent of commercial hip-hop culture increasingly render such forms as public theatrical spectacle.

Martin Wong’s collection of early RAMMELLZEE works and affiliated writers such as A-ONE and TOXIC was comprehensive. I suspect that his attention to collecting this particular grouping of writing culture demonstrates his interest in some of the shared points between RAMMELLZEE’s extra- and intra-terrestrial theories and his own work. Wong’s investments in script and writing were conditioned by his sojourns with both the Angels of Light in San Francisco and his deepening imbrication in Nuyorican and subway writing culture by the early 1980s. Before he ever met the writers Wong had already connected the potential performance of New York street mobility with the graphic. In a 1990 interview he recollects that shortly after moving to New York he began developing his distinctive sign language paintings in 1979 after an encounter on the subway with a deaf commuter who handed him a “Hello, I’m Deaf” card with an
American Sign language (ASL) alphabet on the back (Ault “Some Places”). Critics have primarily focused on Wong’s rendering of brown fleshly hands posed in sign language within his first painted works such as My Secret World (1978-81) or Psychiatrists Testify: Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder (1980) as well as many of his subsequent paintings picturing the Loisaida neighborhood and Nuyorican life. However, Wong’s sign language forms also connect to his earlier work during his sojourns with the Angels of
Light. As he became a painter in the late 1970s Wong was also creating dozens of penciled and inked handscrolls on rice paper, some nearing four feet long. These handscrolls rendered his earlier poetry and prose narratives as vignettes, stories that predated his arrival in New York, in cramped, disembodied hand performatives (Fig. 30). These handscrolls form a direct link between Wong’s earlier calligraphic poetry works during his years with the Angels of Light—some of which were also rendered in scroll form like the long poem, “Firefly Evening” (Fig. 22)—with the multiple threads of textual inspiration he found enscripted on the trains. I suggest that Wong’s transition from orientalist psychedelic calligraphy to the fleshly hands, and then graffiti writing highlights the graphic as a lifetime project for Wong that became increasingly embodied yet always socially indexical as he slowly became an insider on multiple fronts of diasporic cultural life. His later recollections of his earliest work on the sign language hands are also interwoven with his immediate fascination with graffiti writing upon moving to New York:

When I first came to New York, I could see that the graffiti artists were really experimenting. There was a different script being invented every week—there’s Broadway script, ‘wild style’, and all the others. I wanted to have my own script. But it’s not just a graffiti script. I used to collect old manuscripts too. One time I had a ninth-century Kufic manuscript that I brought back from Afghanistan. When I elongate the fingers in my paintings, a lot of times it relates to the stylization that happened in Kufic, when they tried to use it in architecture. (qtd. In Ault “Some Places”)

Wong’s Kufic-inspired handscrolls underscore the intense experimentation with writing practice and stylization during this period among a range of artists meeting on the streets. Wong’s historical attention to both Kufic and East Asian graphic forms dovetails
with RAMMELLZEE’s interest in medieval stylization and script. In a 1984 interview with Yasmin Ramirez (writing at this time as Yasmin R.-Harwood) Wong describes himself as a “Chinese landscape painter” with his integration of multiple forms of text within his paintings: “If you look at all the Chinese landscapes in the museums, they have writing in the sky. They write a poem in the sky and I do that, too.” Wong’s interest in writing and stylization is partly sourced in his ongoing study of world art; however, critics are often over-eager to attribute Wong’s studies to a keen, if amateur, disciplinarity. Rather, I will argue that Wong’s graphic works and curation of writing disrupt conventional epistemologies as surely, if less spectacularly, than RAMMELLZEE’s historical-speculative cosmology as he begins to think of graffiti writing as a multifaceted diasporic form increasingly subject to a desirous mode of visual documentation.

If RAMMELLZEE’s origin story of writing rendered the war on graffiti most explicitly through his willful typographic obscurity, his wildstyle mecha performance coupled with Martin Wong’s longstanding interest in the orientalizing documentation of street performance index something of the visual discourses of this war. The series of laws developed to control subway writing show us how state speech on subway writing publicly scripted certain peoples into quotidian colonial relations in the postindustrial city at this moment. Of all the elements of hip-hop, graffiti remains the only element that is practicably illegal. The war on writing that began in the late 1970s engendered a series
of so-called quality of life laws, vandalism ordinances, and policing strategies that have had a disproportionate impact on African American and Puerto Rican communities in New York. Hip-hop scholarship that focuses on New York as a postindustrial space from the postwar to contemporary period highlights how devastating policies of disinvestment, urban renewal, and housing and development legislation shaped the material conditions that made the South Bronx the cradle of hip-hop. Of the many violences of New York City planner Robert Moses, his Cross Bronx Expressway’s brutal dismemberment of the borough still resonates with his neocolonial refrains of hacking through “an overbuilt metropolis” with a “meat axe,” or that one “cannot rebuild a city without moving people, just as you cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs” (Berman 294). That Moses’ urban violences in the Bronx occurred in tandem with an act of territorial settler colonialism exacted upon Native Americans in 1958 is not often connected but demonstrates the twinning of indigenous dispossession and anti-black violence on a shared rural-urban frontier. Moses’ appropriation of 1300 acres of land from the Tuscarora Nation of New York State to construct a hydroelectric station to power the city had the effect of critically damaging Native American sovereignty in the Supreme Court Ruling, Federal Power Commission v. Tuscarora Indian Nation (1960) while sparking one of the earliest iterations of the Red Power movement that would cohere

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37 See Rose, Robin D.G. Kelley, Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America. More recent works such as Jeff Chang’s popular Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation follow this cultural materialist approach.
through the following decades. The material interconnections between the Cross Bronx Expressway and the Tuscarora appropriation exemplifies what Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd has written of as “the transit of empire”; how, “as a transit, Indianness becomes a site through which U.S. empire orients and replicates itself by transforming those to be colonized into “Indians” through continual reiterations of pioneer logics” (xiii). Against New York City’s series of legislative and criminal laws that regulate transit—the Cross Bronx Expressway, the subway, the flow of hydroelectric power from the territory—subway writing was portrayed as effectively disorganizing these sites of multiple colonial contestations. As public interest mounted in the cryptic signs engendered by transit’s infrastructures, state attempts to generate knowledge in tandem with the exercise of legislative and policing power took an increasingly visual turn.

The accompanying academic legislative policy literature from this war details how the purported threat of writing entailed a massive effort to visually identify, classify, and order not just the writing but the writers themselves as personifications of the graphic disorder. In 1979 sociologist Nathan Glazer, a colleague and sometimes co-author of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, wrote an article in Public Interest about the threat of subway graffiti. Glazer’s 1979 jeremiad against the proliferation of tagging in the wake of Taki 183’s civic fame articulates his vision of erupting social disorder predicated on an idealized commuter—himself—whose anxiety stems from the imperiled vision occasioned by these unknowable cyphers while in transit:
The insides of the cars are also marked-up—generally with letters or shapes or scrawls like letters, made with thick black markers, and repeated everywhere there is space for the marks to be made, and many places where there is not. Thus the maps and signs inside the car are obscured, and the windows are also obscured so that passengers cannot see what station they have arrived at. The subway rider . . . now has to suffer the knowledge that his subway car has recently seen the passage through it of the graffiti “artists” (as they call themselves and have come to be called by those, including the police, who know them best). He is assaulted continuously, not only by the evidence that every subway car has been vandalized, but by the inescapable knowledge that the environment he must endure for an hour or more each day is uncontrolled and uncontrollable, and that anyone can invade it to do whatever damage and mischief the mind suggests. (Glazer 4)

The commuter’s inability to see markers of spatial order—maps, signs, station markers—is bound up with what Glazer characterizes as being “assaulted continuously” by “evidence” and “inescapable knowledge” in an uncontrollable environment subject to invasion. The entirety of Glazer’s essay is remarkable for his seemingly effortless conflations of Yellow Peril-style fears of being invaded and penetrated by foreign ciphers with the conjoined demand of the settler and slaveholder for unimpeded surveillance over territory. Glazer’s document also alerts us to the official importance of cartography in the crackdown on subway writing. The writers themselves understood the stakes of territory and cartography on multiple levels, from the need to read and write territorial gang signs in the earliest years, to the life power of writing one’s chosen name on an all-city mobile infrastructure, to the outright de-territorializing defacement
of subway and city maps that Wong preserved in the writing archives, some personally
dedicated to him.38

While Glazer’s essay remains an important touchstone for the virulent outrage
the purported epidemic of writing sparked in law enforcement and policy makers alike,
his essay conveys a no less intense longing. In an impressive litany of practically creative
disciplines and punishments he considers for the problem writers, Glazer suggests that
one-on-one youth workers might deter the troubled youth, but for graffiti’s perilous
allure:

[B]ut one wonders whether the youth workers might not be converted by the
graffiti artists, who do not believe they are doing anything wrong. They do see
their graffiti as art and self-expression (and create albums in which fellow
graffiti artists reproduce miniatures of their designs—the police have a few of
these, which are quite beautiful examples of urban vernacular art).” (7)

In Glazer’s bracketed aside the neoconservative policy sociologist slips into art
appreciator; the unnecessary detail of the beautiful “albums,” and “miniatures” of this
“urban vernacular art” comprise an unusually attentive sketch of the writers’ legendary

38 I identified several maps covered with tags scattered through Wong’s archives at Museum of the City of
New York and Fales. One of the pieces, by STASH TWO shapes a map of New York into an illegible
wildstyle tag and is sent to Wong by fax, addressed “Attn: Martin Wong / Here’s the map I owe you!
STASH TWO Fax Art ©.” I am uncertain whether Wong commissioned this work or it was a gift or
exchange but I noted enough map-based art to suspect that it was an important theme for artists that moved
from the subway to the galleries. See “Graffiti: assorted artwork (artists incl. Crash, Stash, and Laroc,” series
III, box 4, folder 45, Martin Wong Papers ca. 1982-1999, Fales Library and Special Collections and “Martin
Wong Personal Materials: Correspondence,” series 3, box 2, folder 14, Martin Wong Papers, 1980-1995,
Museum of the City of New York. These pieces also dovetail with the series of annotated maps of
Chinatown and 141 Ridge Street sent to Wong by his mother. See “Wong Fie, Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin
(parents),” series I, box 1, folder 60, and “Martin Wong scrapbook,” series IV, box 7, folder 8, Martin Wong
Papers ca. 1982-1999, Fales Library and Special Collections.
black books, of which Martin Wong was a preeminent collector. While a conservative policy journal seems an unlikely venue for Glazer’s oscillations between revulsion and attraction, repression and desire, his detour into the sublime, the very undercurrents of creative erotic longing, would be increasingly amplified in the popular visual documentation of the movement soon after. While the city and state moved quickly, punishing the criminalized practice and erasing their marks, the larger quandary facing policy makers who sought total eradication of the practice required more knowledge of the shadowy practice and its evolving technologies. Non-writer artists and cultural critics would be more than happy to supply this specialized knowledge, as writing increasingly became encompassed by the commercial consolidation of hip-hop culture in the early 1980s.

A cluster of early documentarians sprang into action during the first years of the 1980s. Primarily photographers, these early chroniclers produced visual and textual works that identified, classified, and decoded writing while increasingly denuding the previously anonymous writers themselves. The popular documentation of writing—the obverse of the police capture of black books noted by Glazer—shifted from newspaper journalism to book-length works with the publication of graphic designer Mervyn Kurlansky, writer Norman Mailer, and photographer Jon Naar’s collaborative text *The Faith of Graffiti* (1974). A photographic collection of early tagging in New York, *The Faith of Graffiti* (titled *Watching My Name Go By* in the U.K.) included a rambling introduction.
essay by Mailer and photographs by Naar arranged by Kurlansky. It established the
genre of the graffiti photo-documentary as a graphic composite of text and images,
formally indicated in the title page credits, “Documented by Mervyn Kurlansky and Jon
Naar. Text by Norman Mailer.” Kurlansky, a cofounder of the London-based graphic
design firm Pentagram, had provided the impetus for the text after seeing subway
writing on a trip to New York, highlighting the work’s graphic sensibility in both form
and content. The frontispiece of the work is a large, close-up photograph of Taki 183’s
tag, consolidating the 1973 article as the movement’s urtext in this first publication on
subway writing. Naar’s photographs follow in the long tradition of street and social
documentary photography that extends to Jacob Riis while invoking the specifically
New York resonances of Walker Evans’ anonymous subway shots and Helen Levitt’s
street documentation of youth cultural practices. Most of the photographs feature tags
and a few larger throw-ups, as the full-car pictorial ‘pieces’ had not yet made a formal
entrance by 1974. Tags and throw-ups are shot far- to medium-distance, most often
within the context of their surrounding street, subway, or city skyline environment.
Commuters and passerby unwittingly inhabit the disheveled urban landscape framed
by Naar and provide an important sense of spatial scale and social contrast for the tags
and throw-ups. Only a few photographs feature the writers engaging in their practice; of
these, almost all are anonymous, faces pointed away from the camera. While the graffiti
photograph most closely adheres to the local New York tradition of street photography,
the manifest settler colonial discourses of the war on graffiti are also incorporated through the photographic valences of the western survey photograph. The logic of the nineteenth-century survey photograph, a large-scale landscape shot designed to empirically document resources through its application of the graphic visuality employed by surveyors, is indexed in the increasingly monumental shots of assembled tags and the accompanying graphic charts that catalogue the tags and artists. Jack Stewart, another early documentarian, was a visual artist who enrolled at New York University in 1975 to formally study the graffiti he had been photographing since 1970 on his train commutes. Stewart’s work shares and extends Naar and Kurlansky’s empirical bent. His legendary dissertation project, *Subway Graffiti: An Aesthetic Study of Graffiti on the Subway System of New York City, 1970-1978* (1988) was the first scholarly study of the form and was notably developed through ongoing workshops with the writers whose work he photographed throughout the decades. The later published form, *Graffiti Kings: New York Transit Art of the 1970s* (2009) engages its subject in a categorical fashion to build objective distance: extreme close-up shots of tags without the framing of everyday life and scholarly documentation. Tags are catalogued and ordered, the writing itself forms the subject, and the broader social world of the form is included in the work’s methodology rather than through the framing.

While the earliest print books of graffiti documentary utilize a range of empiricist photographic and textual devices to define and order the emergent form, I suggest that a
coterminous discourse of submerged desires underpins these knowledge projects. I suspect the tradition of orientalist street photography associated with Arnold Genthe and others, was increasingly incorporated within the genre, particularly Genthe’s framing of what Anthony Lee tags “desire and difference” as the “organizing motifs” (7) of urban street photography of early twentieth-century Chinatowns. Norman Mailer’s essay in *The Faith of Graffiti*, paired with the empirical bent of the visuals, begins to anticipate Glazer’s slide to “conversion” and an increasingly naked will to “desire and difference” as the organizing trope of both the literary and visual documentation that will follow in the genre. Here Mailer as a disingenuous middle-aged author posing as quasi-anthropologist “A-1” frames writing as both an outburst of tropical exotica and a mystical symbolic structure that Mailer describes but cannot interpret. Accordingly the essay’s bewilderment performs the very “conversion” that Glazer had argued the graffiti artists threatened in its fusion of aesthetic and mystical unknowing. Where RAMMELLZEE’s graphic poetics of “antiknowledge” refuses to decode the marks or person of the willfully and necessarily anonymous subway writer—what Byrd has characterized as the “suspicion and unintelligibility” of those in transit—these foundational works obligingly attempt to decode the writings on the wall for the viewer

39 While Mailer’s essay uncritically reproduces colonial aesthetic structures of a “monotonous, iron-gray, dull brown brick environment” metropole and the tropical edenic peripheries, his insight that the city’s war on graffiti was perhaps bound up in the ongoing Asia Pacific theatre of war—“the graffiti of New York was defoliated, cicatrized, Vietnamized” is historically acute and to my knowledge, not picked up in subsequent literature on the form.
and reader as a project of knowledge. In 1984 photographers Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant released *Subway Art*, a collection of photographs renowned as the “bible” of New York City writing culture since its publication. Lauded as a serious collection of photography in its own right as much as an important artifact of subcultural documentation, *Subway Art* was a catalyst for the arrival of increasing public pleasure in viewing writing in book form. The subsequent proliferation of coffee table books, catalogues, and flashy websites are indebted to this work’s depiction of writing which turns to portraiture and an enhanced focus on the decorative. In contrast to the primarily tagging-focused works of Kurlansky, Naar, and Stewart, this collection coincides with the rise of the ephemeral and pictorial “piece,” the often massive whole car paintings rendered on trains in the waning days of the city’s war on writing. In a 2009 interview that describes Cooper as a “chronicler of the furtive arts,” she recounts how her interest in the subway writers was initially sparked by her earlier work photographing “creative play” in Haiti. Cooper’s interest in creative play is evident in her focus on the process of writing, rather than the writing itself, which she notes she “still can’t read” (Graustark). Trained in anthropology, Cooper brought an ethnographic eye to documentary as furtive chronicling, emphasizing the figurative appeal of the writers themselves as much as the writing. While Naar and Kurlansky’s work complimented early journalism and public policy pieces which were overwhelmingly concerned with the extreme youth of the earliest writers—often elementary to middle school aged—and their potential
reformation amidst the sociological problem of their burgeoning antisociality, Cooper and Chalfant’s work announced that subway writing had come of age.

This book circulated perhaps the most iconic image from this golden age of burners and pieces in Cooper’s photograph of the writer DONDI straddling two train cars as he finishes what would be the masterpiece, *Children of the Grave Again, Part 3* (Fig. 31). Cooper’s photograph of DONDI serves as the frontis of *Subway Art* and as the cover itself in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition. The shot of DONDI balanced with agile precision between the cars was the centerpiece of the photographic series that forms the heart of the work. Expanding on the classificatory methodology of Stewart, Naar, and Kurlansky, *Subway Art* is organized as an outright manual for the illicit practice, guiding the reader through the technical process of writing in a series of highly aestheticized portraits. The centerpiece series of DONDI invites the reader to travel with him and his crew through a long night and was premised on revealing the mystery of how a writer could finish a whole car piece in one night. Shooting the process from start to finish on the night of May 31, 1980 in New Lots train yard, the series forms the bulk of the section titled “Techniques.” Cooper and Chalfant pair a step-by-step visual and textual exposé of how a master executes the full car piece as a burner:

A subway car is sixty feet long and twelve feet high. To do a top-to-bottom in the yard, where there is no convenient platform to stand on, a writer must climb up the side of the car and hang on with one hand while painting with the other; or, if his legs are long enough, he can straddle the distance between two parked trains . . . In the tunnels and yards, the trains are parked in parallel rows only a few feet apart. This makes it impossible for the artist to stand back and look at his work as a whole. (34, 37)
Cooper and Chalfant’s simple, declarative narrative enhances the titillating quality of the ordered photographs that highlight the exposure of the previously anonymous DONDI breaking into the dark yards through a cut fence, choosing spray paint, and making sense of the seeming magic of the completed piece. While the actual piece, *Children of the Grave Again, Part 3* is still renowned amongst writers for its technical virtuosity and expansive creative vision, for the general public it was likely the figure of...
DONDI himself that made the previously cryptic writing bear flesh. Youthful, handsome, cool in denim, DONDI’s agility as he clambers up and down the sides of the train corporealized writing as an embodied persona within the public consciousness, a romantic idealization given form. Born Donald Joseph White, Brooklyn-based DONDI’s enduring reverence within the writing community as a young master is unparalleled—RAMMELLZEE remembers his first visit to teenaged DONDI’s basement workshop in his parents’ home as his first formal awakening to writing’s potential—and his mystique only grew with the communal mourning that his premature death in 1998 from AIDS-related illness occasioned. DONDI denuded as the artist and author of *Children of the Grave Again, Part 3* feeds what is often unabashedly referred to in these works as the public “hunger” for viewing graffiti pieces. Such hunger is variably bound up with the explicit revelation, or denouement, of the criminalized writer and their obscure scripts as well as the fact of the piece’s invariably ephemeral life. While DONDI’s layout in *Subway Art* purportedly celebrates the technical virtuosity of the now-adult writer and the generic arrival of the piece, Cooper’s own admission in 2009 undercuts its stated objective by amplifying the difference and desire of the body performing the act: “Once it moved to the galleries, it lost something for me. The artists deserve to make money, but I don’t want to shoot something that’s done with permission. It’s an outlaw art. That’s what makes it thrilling” (Graustark). Indeed *Subway Art* bears little difference as a governmental analytic to a work like *Vandal Squad* (2008) by Joseph Rivera, a former
Vandal Squad officer, which similarly features stunning photographs, lengthy sections that decode the writers and the writing, and a captivating narrative of crime and punishment. As the initial state war on writing wound down by the mid 1980s the most prolific writers were vanquished from the trains to galleries, soon to be unceremoniously dropped from the art world in search of the next hot trend. *Subway Art* configured the elegiac desire for an ephemeral and spontaneous movement that had dutifully matured towards the increasingly fixed visual conventions that its own documentarians had precipitated.

Cooper and Chalfant’s desire to denude the process of writing into a fixed bodily performance that personifies its sealed cryptic form and content is given dramatic treatment in the theatrical medium of film during this period. In 1983 two films were released that focused on graffiti writing: *Style Wars* and *Wild Style*. A documentary, Henry Chalfant’s *Style Wars* followed the sociological impetus of *The Faith of Graffiti*, interviewing and following the young writers as a means to order their scriptural visual mayhem by making sense of their social milieu. Charlie Ahearn’s film *Wild Style* followed the imperatives of *Subway Art* as a fusion of documentary and drama. In *Wild Style* the visual tropes of *Subway Art* as writing bible merge with the incipient commercial branding of hip-hop as an assembled cultural form, notably curated here by Fred Braithwaite playing himself, Fab 5 Freddy. Writer Lee Quiñones, a close friend of Martin Wong’s who lived with him for a period in the later 1980s at 141 Ridge Street
plays the main character, Raymond in *Wild Style*. Over the course of the film Raymond, an aspiring writer or toy, is revealed to be Zoro, the anonymous master writer whose nocturnal compositions have been creating a stir throughout the city. *Wild Style* was loosely scripted for greater authenticity and spontaneity. Ahearn’s intent was to present a fusion of musical drama and documentary, drawing a cast of local writers, b-boys, DJs, and MCs who all played themselves. Even the romantic plot in the film between writers Raymond “Zoro” and Rose “Lady Bug” was partially documentary; master writers Quiñones (LEE) and Sandra Fabara (Lady Pink) were an actual royal couple of the writing scene as they were in the midst of a relationship that would last four years. While the MC’s (including RAMMELLZEE), DJs, and b-boys were self-named, they were not, unlike the writers, necessarily anonymous and the film turns around this trope of anonymity and celebrity. Later Quiñones would recount how Ahearn aggressively pursued him for the role as the “elusive muse” (Gale) of the film, which he had initially repeatedly declined. One of the brightest masters of the writing movement at that time, Quiñones felt that revealing himself publicly as LEE would be at best compromising for his work and at worst, legally dangerous. Ahearn’s determination to reveal Quiñones as LEE mirrors Cooper and Chalfant’s impetus to denude the writers they photographed ‘in the act.’ Indeed, LEE did not paint the huge mural that forms the visual and dramatic centerpiece of the film as scheduled: he reportedly just didn’t show up. LEE’s evasions caused Ahearn to bring in DONDI to execute the piece for the film, later cross-editing
the footage of DONDI’s painting with close-ups of Quiñones. *Wild Style’s* deliberate doubling, cutting, and unmasking of LEE and DONDI as Zoro invokes the iconography of masked Zorro, the pulp hero and vigilante of the Pueblo of Los Angeles created by Johnston McCulley in 1919. Like Don Diego de la Vega, both DONDI and LEE serve as representative figures of shrouded folk heroes that are simultaneously eroticized and criminalized to titillating effect by Cooper, Chalfant, and Ahearn. Zorro’s graphic penchant for carving a “Z” with his rapier and his secret headquarters through a series of subterranean tunnels and passages evokes the labyrinthine underground of the MTA transit tunnels which writers regularly hazarded to navigate in their efforts to bomb trains. The notion of the writer as a romantic outlaw in the mold of Zorro is given full figuration in *Wild Style* and will in turn consolidate around the increasingly hypervisible and hypermasculine form of the MC, one of the other four elements of hip-hop linked in this film that was central for bringing the “culture” of hip-hop to mass popular consciousness.

A year later the young writer SHARP, a close friend of Martin Wong’s, would explicitly fashion these discourses of desire and difference into a whole persona in a televised interview on writing with Chester Pannell for Videowave media. Perhaps in an attempt to both reclaim the anonymity that documentary was discarding as well as amplify the illicit fugitivity of the writer, SHARP conducts the interview in full-blown disguise (Fig. 32). The still from the video shows SHARP resplendent in blue-mirrored
sunglasses, a leopard print scarf wrapped as muffler, a cut-off denim vest overtop a hoodie itself topped with a black leather kufi hat—a look that evokes Grace Jones’ penchant for shades, scarf and hoodie at this time. In this paranoid performance, SHARP’s sartorial excess effectively armors him; no inch of flesh or identifying characteristics are exposed. At the same time, SHARP’s disguise signifies pure excess; his fleshtight anonymity far exceeds the legal stakes of recognition the interview might bring while the dizzying clash and jumble of pattern and successive layerings tip his performance to camp spectacle. If Subway Art and Wild Style present writing as an increasingly figurative rather than scriptural graphic form that can provide knowledge of writing at face value, The Faith of Graffiti and Style Wars present the obverse, seemingly objective methodology that is no less invested in the capture of knowledge. A
different way is suggested in the earliest writing film, *Stations of the Elevated* (1981), a
documentary by Manfred Kirchheimer. The forty-five minute documentary simply
follows the marked and painted trains with no voice-over and a soundtrack by Charles
Mingus. *Stations of the Cross*’s documentary unfolds as layers of implicit citation rather
than explicit narrative, enacted through a dynamic series of moving differences and
overlaps between forms and mediums as we follow writing along multiple transits. As I
turn to Martin Wong’s own paintings, aesthetics, and curation from this period as he
began to assemble the writing archive, I suggest that Wong’s labors couple this citational
methodology with SHARP’s camp performance of theatricalized anonymity as he begins
to visually trouble the discourses of graffiti writing documentation.

4.2 “BY WHATEVER CHAINS OF DESIRE”: Erotic Economies of
Writing

In a handwritten artist’s statement from a showing at Semaphore Gallery in 1985
Wong conveys something of the erotic bindings he imagines arrange the street scenes
that house what would become a signature iconography for the artist: twin kissing
firemen pictured amidst the rubble of the Lower Eastside:

*TAKING IT DOWN TO STREET LEVEL THIS TIME, I WANTED TO FOCUS IN CLOSE ON SOME OF THE ENDLESS LAYERS OF CONFLICT AND CONFINEMENT THAT HAS US ALL BOUND TOGETHER IN THIS LIFE SENTENCE WITHOUT POSSIBILITY OF PAROLE. BY WHATEVER CHAINS OF DESIRE, BE THEY FINANCIAL, CHEMICAL, OR KARMIC... SATAN RUNS ALL THE RACKETS IN NEW YORK CITY. IN THE YEAR ZERO (AB-BD) WHEN HE OFFERED CHRIST DOMINION OVER THE CITIES OF THE EARTH, IT WAS UNDERSTOOD THIS WAS A DOMAIN HE HAD CLEAR TITLE TO. AND WHETHER OR NOT HE ACTUALLY WENT FOR THE DEAL STILL REMAINS TO BE SEEN. ALWAYS LOCKED IN. ALWAYS LOCKED OUT, WINNERS AND LOOSERS (SIC) ALL, IT IS ONLY WHEN WE ARE DOWN FOR THE FINAL COUNT, THAT THE TWO TWIN FIREMEN (SLEEP AND DEATH) COME SILENTLY TO RECLAIM THEIR*
OWN, FOR ONLY THEN, WITHIN THEIR OWN PEACEFUL REALM ARE WE ALL TRULY EQUAL, CAUSE GOD IS STRONGER THAN DIRT  (Human Instamatic 91)

Wong’s rendering of the twin firemen, Sleep and Death or Hypnos and Thanatos, remains one of his most striking visual refrains and has been long remarked upon by viewers and critics as the manifestation of his turn to overtly homoerotic themes and imagery in his paintings by the early to mid 1980s. A constellation of interwoven psychic and material economies subtends the vision of the firemen conjoined in romantic embrace: “endless layers of conflict and confinement” occasioned by “financial, chemical, or karmic” bondage, “winners and losers,” “deals,” “rackets,” and “title.” Wong’s thoughts on the field of “street level” bindings does not quite approach the extraterrestrial scale of RAMMELLZEE’s cosmology but signals the theatrical potential of writing now embedded in its world mythology and optical practice at this period. Wong’s mounting meditations on the materiality of such “chains of desire” as Satan’s route to “dominion” of the streets, of Hypnos and Thanatos’ haunting equality or leveling, and his own editorial of “sentence” to suggest unended life at a moment of mounting AIDS-related deaths will become increasingly inflected with a graphic excess in his own works and curation. These works will recite and rework the public figuration of the young street writers and their intensely homosocial networks. Tavia Nyongo’s account of “punk’d theory” orients us to the degree to which Wong’s theorization of the streets is a queer theorization and practice. Wong’s queer theorization as curatorial practice collides with the increasingly fixed racialization of the writers, the racialized
chains that bind writing to hip-hop in the field of the “straight-street nexus” (28), within
the de- and re-territorial thrust of subway writing as urban vernacular form. I suggest
that Wong’s recitation, collection, and curation of street art effectively “punk” the hip-
hop archive. Wong’s intense archival investments in the cultural imaginary of writing
flow from his longstanding analysis of orientalist form and performance and a capacious
sense of merging cultural diasporas at the intersections of writing. From Cooper and
Chalfant’s strip tease of the writing process in Subway Art to Wild Style’s
misidentifications of an overlapping LEE and DONDI as romantic outlaw Zorro/Zoro, I
argue that a cluster of Wong’s visual and textual works encode and enscript the history
of writing and its contemporary documentation within a long history of orientalist
visuality that Wong’s work tags as diasporic and packed with queer potential. Wong’s
keen analysis of the public fascination with writing as an erotically charged and
embodied performance that documentarians were organizing into a frozen commodity
is linked to his earlier life in California as a street artist. His techno-orientalist
performance as speed portraitist the Human Instamatic, coupled with his experience of
orientalist drag theatre with the Cockettes and Angels of Light had prepped Wong to
recognize the increasingly orientalist framings of writing documentary and their
attendant economies. In this section I look at several of Wong’s under-examined visual
works that serve as a graphic historiography of the overhangs between Rammellzee,
Subway Art, and the Angels of Light. Looking at these works’ deep excavation and camp
re-presentation of diasporic street art, I conclude with a return to the Museum of American Graffiti’s foreclosure and the economies that underwrite this site.

To my knowledge, a tentatively dated 1990 portrait titled *Top Cat* (Fig. 33) has not been commented on by reviewers, critics, or scholars of Martin Wong’s work. It was included in the 2016 retrospective at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic*. In the installation, *Top Cat* was grouped with two other works, *C76*, *Junior* (1988), and *Reckless* (1991) as part of an informal collection of Wong’s prison paintings. Prison paintings were a key genre in Wong’s oeuvre, from his earliest visual and textual collaborations in New York with Nuyorican poet and playwright, Miguel Piñero to explicit renderings of a range of carceral scenarios in later works such as *Mintaka* (1992) and *47-04* (1992). *C-76, Junior* and *Reckless* both feature the same inmate, modeled by SHARP, born Aaron Goodstone, the disguised writer in the Videowave interview, who frequently posed for Wong over their long friendship. I have not yet identified the model for *Top Cat* but like SHARP, he is of ambiguous African American or Puerto Rican presenting appearance. The painting’s focus on the young man in a cell certainly fits within Wong’s repertoire of the incarcerated love object, as the curator perhaps suggests by placing *Top Cat* in this trio. However, I suggest that the portrait no less indexes a deep history of writing itself and its public framing by the end of the 1980s. I argue that this history forms a coherent subject in Wong’s work that is most
obvious in his street paintings yet has only been implicitly connected to the interior prison paintings through his early association with Miguel Piñero, who I will return to. The canvas of Top Cat is a repurposed painting—frame and all—that Wong painted over, mimicking the subway writer’s practice of “going over,” or tagging/painting over a previous writer’s work as an act of besting. The realistically rendered tattoos are the first inscriptions that the viewer may notice. The inmate’s name we can assume, is Top Cat and the suggestive evocation of the “top” is reiterated in the bursting outlines of his white briefs, amplifying the expected trope of constrained to bursting sexuality in the confines of the prison—chains of desire rendered in endless layers of “conflict and confinement”—as well as the motion of “going over” the canvas as synecdoche of the writer or perhaps even Wong himself as the fill artist. The iconography of the writing in
the work suggests even more expansive citations to the broader field of writing composition in which Wong plays here. Consider that a writer named Topcat 126 was a legendary and visually enigmatic tagger in the earliest days of the form. Topcat 126 came to New York from Philadelphia in the late 1960s and is universally credited with introducing the first serious typographic shift in writing, spreading a style called Broadway Elegant that took New York taggers by storm in 1969. In Wong’s painting, the portmanteau of Topcat is split to “Top Cat” to emphasize his ‘topness,’ suggestive of both his erotic and stylistic preeminence. His name is rendered in Broadway Elegant script, which features long, curling slender letters with platforms on the bottom of the letter stems. Wong’s visually ornate and coded citation to Topcat 126 and Broadway Elegant is amplified by the figuration of Top Cat posed as odalisque in the work. Wong’s portrait merges orientalist tropes of coded and cryptic knowledge with the implicit desires framed in graffiti documentary, rendering these desires as explicit, exaggerated, and contested. The indentations of the frame, which has also received the “going-over” treatment, produce the effect of rays of vision emanating from Top Cat’s eyes back to the viewer, breaking the panopticon-effect of unmarked and invisible viewers and demanding identification of viewership. The square formed by the recessed indentations link Top Cat’s eyes and hands with the triangular point of his briefs and the Broadway Elegant inscription. In the carceral confines of Top Cat, Wong embeds another type of “disciplinary performance” (Nyongo 27) than the viewer might impose.
on the fixed brown body in the cell by invoking the formal outlines of writing’s
genealogical history and subsequent orientalist presentation.

Taken together as an ongoing meditation on carceral and inscriptive fixedness
and fixation, Wong’s paintings here turn over and through the power encodings of gaze,
and the manifest intimacies and vulnerabilities of the young Puerto Rican and African
American men who inhabit Wong’s penitential imaginary and the actual writing
community. *Top Cat* raises complicated questions about the depiction of black men as
captured bodies that haunt the very moment in which Wong is painting and collecting.
The ongoing legacy of contemporary Robert Mapplethorpe’s fetishizing portraits of
black men produced during this period and Keith Haring and his foundation’s
exploitation of the young tagger LAII raise the question of how Martin Wong’s work
and archival legacy complicates these issues. *Top Cat’s* carceral scene and odalisque
presentation point to how Wong’s erotic portraits complicate the notion of reproduction
in their frequent formal and social citationality and even parody of the increasingly
fetishized depiction of graffiti art and artists. The genealogy of the writing archive
presented at the Museum of American Graffiti has not often been carefully considered
by critics, most of whom seem to assume that his early work in New York with Miguel
Piñero forms the social, material, and symbolic substrate of the writing collection and
that the Puerto Rican presenting men figured in the prison paintings. This assumption
leads critics to implicitly assume a direct genealogy extends from Miguel Piñero,
rendering the archive’s conditions of becoming as situational or locational. Recent research on his long friendship with writer SHARP, a biracial African American man who served as Wong’s ideal Puerto Rican model for the prison portraits that accompany Top Cat as well as depictions of Loisaida street life, have added complexity to this account. Almost no research considers Wong’s long collaboration and correspondence with writer Angel Ortiz, or LAII, who was an important collaborator of Keith Haring’s as an adolescent. I suggest that to appreciate the crammed intersections of signification embedded in a minor work like Top Cat, we must attend further to Wong’s scriptural textual experiments with Piñero and their circuitous extension to writers SHARP and LAII. As I conclude this chapter, I will suggest that such a delineation of a “start” with Piñero is ultimately gestural—the handscrolls already demonstrate that his inscriptive experiment predated his collaborations with Piñero and his arrival in New York—and that we must also look back to Wong’s earliest collaborations within the purportedly free yet deeply racialized economies of the Angels of Light and the Cockettes and his ongoing revisions of queer collaboration.

Martin Wong and Miguel Piñero embarked on a series of graphic collaborations soon after meeting at an ABC No Rio show in 1982.40 A co-founder of the Nuyorican Poet’s café with Miguel Algarín and others and a major playwright and poet, Piñero

40 Yasmin Ramirez has been the primary chronicler of Wong and Piñero’s collaborations as well as Wong’s overall relationship to the Nuyorican movement and the Loisaida neighborhood. See Ramirez, “La Vida: The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong.”
initiated Wong into Nuyorican social and artistic life and likely sparked his enduring visual interest in carceral settings and narratives. The nearly two-year period of their creative, sexual, and financial interactions is enfolded within a series of their graphic collaborations that paired oral or sonic memory with an increasingly embodied process of graphic inscription wrought by Wong. Their collaboration ended in 1984 when as Wong notes, “he just didn’t come home one day and I didn’t know what happened to him” (Ramirez “Chino-Latino” 113). The most iconic of the works that emerge from Piñero and Wong’s association, *Attorney Street: Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero* (Fig. 34), was acquired early in Wong’s painting career by the Met as a “masterpiece” and fuses Piñero’s poetry within multiple modes of script: reproduced graffiti writing, Wong’s paradoxically disembodied fleshly sign language hands, printed text in the sky and on the handmade frame (the Chinese writing in the sky), and etched text on a range of material and painted surfaces. These collaborations were multimedia and multilingual; the text was garnered from Piñero’s spoken memories, poetry, and talk stories that Wong transcribed and rendered as visual narrative during the period they periodically lived together at Ridge Street. As the most celebrated of Wong’s works, *Attorney Street* has functioned as a type of graphic Rosetta Stone for critics who lump the carceral (Piñero), graffiti writing (reproduced here by Wong), the sign language hands, and Nuyorican aesthetics (the streets of Loisaida) into a massive graphic conflation. While certainly the connections between a work such as *Attorney Street* and the writing
archive are manifest in the crossings between Wong’s inscription of Piñero’s talk stories
often delivered as toasting—a precursor of MCing—and Loisaida as a rich site of writers
and writing, the dearth of attention paid to Wong’s assembly of the writing archive
proper is evident in the vague critical determination of the archive as something
situationally tagged onto his residency in Loisaida and thus always conflated with
Piñero. Certainly Wong’s fascination with Piñero as enfiguring multiple processes of
inscription is evident in subsequent works after Piñero’s departure and death in 1988
such as Portrait of Mickey Piñero Tattooing (1988). Here Wong does not include literal
speech from Piñero—this moment of lived intimacy has passed—but rather he
meticulously records the act and record of Piñero’s own self-inscription as he tattoos
himself in prison. Behind Piñero a white wall with blurred and marked out writings fuses towards indeterminacy with his white shirt, rendering Piñero’s body and the walls of the prison as spatially contiguous and porous, fleshly surfaces for inscription. It is important to note the theatrical quality of Wong’s rendering of the carceral scene of writing, both here and throughout his and Piñero’s works. These were not simply graphic transcriptions of events but transcriptions of fused imagined and remembered scenarios crafted by the playwright and rendered in scenographic terms. Even Wong’s storied study of bricks—he purportedly spent his first years learning to paint in the Lower Eastside by painting the bricks he saw outside his window—is a classic exercise of the technical scene painter of the theatre stage. The white scene of Wong’s prison paintings is similarly dramatic. Asked what about jail as “a subject matter” was so fascinating, he replied, “Just the fact that it’s white on white” and that they were a “relief” to the brick paintings” (Ramirez “Chino-Latino” 116).

Roy Pérez writes of the historical resonances of Piñero and Wong’s collaborations, specifically the way in which Wong’s Asian racialization as the inscrutable and unattached El Chino Malo, the name he was tagged with in Loisaida, stands in for a queerness that can be conveniently distanced from the Nuyorican archive. Pérez writes of the sense that Wong had lingered “too long and too eagerly in Nuyorico” (278) and that his “queer advances toward ricanidad in particular,” in his demonstrated personal and aesthetic interest in Puerto Rican men, have “unwound and reframed” the
“sexual and cultural contours of Nuyorico by effacing Piñero’s homoerotics and shifting the origin of the queer gaze over to Wong and his body of work which is subsequently figured as “less ambivalently queer” (279-80) due to his Asian racialization. Pérez’s meditation on the complexities of Wong’s excess and lack in Loisaida and Nuyorican cultural memory as “Chino-Latino” through his family’s Chicanx connections, his excessive lingering in Loisaida, and his subsequent effacement from the cultural registers of the Nuyorican archive draws on Sara Ahmed’s thoughts on proximity and distance. Pérez employs the spatial theory of proximity which “allows us to talk about desire as a poetics rather than as a sleuthing of the implicated subjects’ interests, cathections, and sexual practices . . . the term proximity gives us closeness without becoming and nearness without arriving; approximation gives us work without completion and semblance without fidelity; and in Spanish, lo proximo moves us forward, reaching for what’s next” (281). Working with Ahmed, Pérez makes a case for Wong’s Asian queerness as a texture of intimate estrangement in the Nuyorican archive which he notes aggressively bifurcates “race and sexuality into separate histories” and thereby allows us “to attend to the gaps and contradictions where queerness seems to be the missing conjunction but where its denotative confirmation is either ignored, inaccessible, or unspeakable” (281). While Pérez mentions Wong’s work with the writers, many of whom were Puerto Rican, he does not follow this thread to the hip-hop archive, within which Wong’s writing collection certainly stands in a tangled
genealogical relation. Like the Nuyorican archive, the hip-hop archive also separates race and sexuality into different histories. Thinking back to Grandmaster Flash’s interjection that “graffiti is one thing that is art, and music is another”—that the two ought not “intertwine”—I ask what might extend to the hip-hop archive and what different valences Wong’s counter-documentary and queer curatorial practices might disrupt. How might proximity and distance shift or deepen when we consider Wong’s engagement with the writing archive as socially conditioned through a range of collaborations with the writers as the AIDS crisis rearranges the spatial, temporal, and social coordinates of the city? Following these threads, I identify a grouping of understudied works by Wong along with the enigmatic Top Cat that connect the writing archive to Piñero certainly, but also his Chinatown paintings and an increasingly self-aware meditation on not-free economies.

The Museum of American Graffiti was enmeshed in many economies beyond the primary backing partnership with Keiho/Aegis. The “chains of desire” that bind the writing archive to the idea of the museum were forged in the circuit between curation and care that thread through Wong’s social ties and creative collaborations with writer Angel Ortiz, or LAII (shorthand for both Laroc, LA ROCK, and Little Angel II as he was sometimes called) and Aaron Goodstone, or SHARP. These are extraordinarily complex personal and professional relationships to parse and I do not attempt to try. I do gesture to them with a perhaps more direct “sleuthing” than Pérez will concede because the
deeply indiscrete affective and material exchanges of these relationships are central to
the assemblage of the archive and museum. They also present a snapshot of the
staggering challenge of studying intersectional life ways conjoined in conditions of
precarity and crisis which the foreclosures of the Museum amplify. Born to a Puerto
Rican family in the Lower Eastside in 1967, Angel Ortiz belonged to a younger
generation of writers than veterans LEE, CRASH, Lady Pink, or DAZE, who all counted
Wong as a close friend and had maintained a supportive and fairly equitable creative
connection though the 1980s and 1990s as Wong mentored them on the transition
between train to gallery. A neighborhood tagger who wrote as LA II, LA2, or LAROC,
fourteen-year old Ortiz met Keith Haring in the summer of 1981 when Haring was on
one of his rambles through the “dangerous” landscape of Loisaida with Fab 5 Freddy.
Ortiz’s ensuing collaborations with Haring index a sense of what made writing seem
“one thing that is art,” that MCing, DJing, and b-boy ing and b-girl ing were not. The
overlap between the writers and the East Village art scene was apparent in Wild Style’s
cast, which included liminal figures between the gallery scene and street art in Ahearn
himself, Fab 5 Freddy, and Fun Gallery curator Patti Astor. If hip-hop is a fabricated
culture, its earliest packager was Brooklyn-based cultural broker, visual artist, director,
and actor, Fab 5 Freddy (Fred Braithwaite), who connected the downtown art scene with
the Bronx party scene in the years of hip-hop’s emergence and consolidation. Artists
such as Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat emphasize the diverse circulations between
emergent hip-hop culture and the New York art world, which are rendered most starkly in the fraught economics centering around Angel Ortiz. Turning to the modes of exchange between Haring and Ortiz is helpful as a counterpoint for Wong and Ortiz’s even longer association, which has not been examined but provides an entry point for thinking about the transactions of the archive and Museum. Ricardo Montez writes of Ortiz and Haring’s “artistic and economic exchange” (425) in terms of a queer economy of “trade,” or the “inextricable relationship between race, desire, and capital gain” (426) as they traveled together on and off for several years as collaborators. Montez describes how Ortiz’s distinctive tags crowded and enlivened Haring’s works as “a dizzying movement that distracts viewers from Haring’s easily consumed figures” (438), fundamentally changing Haring’s art, even as Ortiz was relegated to an adolescent “sidekick” rather than an equal collaborator. Noting how Ortiz has been significantly disregarded by the art world and effectively disinherit by the Keith Haring Foundation through a series of bad faith personal and financial transactions, Montez details the intricacies of the racist and erotic dynamics of trade and the consumptive appetites of the objectifying art world.

Montez’s study of trade unpacks a mode of artistic transaction that is operative in the financial conditions of Haring and Ortiz’s collaboration. I would add here that a
major element of Ortiz’s surplus appeal was not necessarily only in the discrete works themselves, which Montez is most formally concerned with and would almost always be attributed (at least in terms of ownership) to Haring, but most notably in the public performance of Ortiz tagging as LAII. Photographs from their collaborations during these years demonstrate how the performance of tagging that documentary photography and film presented as romanticized objects of titillating mystery and unveiling were also presented as real-time spectacle by Haring and LAII. Photographs of the duo working on *Sarcophagus* (1983) typify these performances as LAII embodies the
budding mystique of the hitherto anonymous writer. In contrast to SHARP’s excessively layered disguise in the Videowave interview LAII is almost always bare-chested and underdressed beside the always fully clothed, art school postures of Haring, most pointedly in a Tony Shafrazi Gallery mail out invitation to an exhibition of Haring’s work titled “Keith Haring (with LA2)” in 1982 (Fig. 35). In the Sarcophagus photographs, LAII is framed as musculously intent on executing the tags, which ultimately serve as decorative “fill” for Haring’s figurative outlines. In the execution of a piece by a writing crew, the task of doing the fill would be assigned to the toys, the aspirational and less experienced writers in the quasi-apprenticeship system of subway writing. Despite their profound artistic conversation and shared performances, LAII is virtually absent in Haring’s diaries, noted only in 1983 in an orientalized definition of New York City writing:

His “signature” is a typically New York version of what I feel is as close as the Western World has gotten to a serialized form of writing similar to Eastern calligraphy. His particular “tag” or signature stood out from the rest of the graffiti writers whose works I saw every day on the streets of New York City. We began combining our two styles to create an overall surface of intermingling lines. All of the work we have done is about “surface” and usually covers and transforms an object it is applied to. (115).

In Haring’s formal rendition of this collaboration, LAII’s tag is a new version of an essentially fixed oriental “calligraphy” of surfaces that needs Haring to help create a new dynamic “surface” of intermingling lines to transform an object. However, the frequent critical byline of LAII’s effect on Haring’s art is also steeped in primitivism. Critics infer that the raw dynamism of LAII’s tags had liberated and mobilized Haring’s
vision and art for an attuned audience yet fail to note that it was the live spectacle of Ortiz performing as the body of LAII that in part generated the erotic energy associated with Haring’s work. The necessary liveness of their twinned performance and its residual surplus rest on assumptions of whose movement counts as liberation, evoking the residual saturations of the “free” economies of the Cockettes and Angels of Light. That any collaboration was inherently not-free would be a demonstrated theme and fact of Martin Wong’s own collaborations with LAII.

In another minor work, a little-circulated 1984 collaborative painting, Angel Ortiz (Fig. 36), by Wong and Ortiz, Wong returns to imagery of the angel, a subject that he had not depicted since his earlier graphics for the Angels of Light in the 1970s. Set in a plain wooden frame likely made or found by Wong, this painting features Ortiz as both Cupid, cherubic in the rounded plump lines of his body and deep red background, and Eros, embodied erotic desire. The tension between Cupid and Eros that takes form in Ortiz is playfully alluded to; traditional tokens of symbolic romantic longing such as Cupid’s golden heart and bow contrast with Ortiz’s white snapback hat and high-top sneakers. The snapback hat in particular evokes his photographic presence with Haring as he characteristically performed his tagging in a snapback, a marker of the youth culture increasingly associated with hip hop. Ortiz flies above the Loisaida skyline, styled here by Wong as turrets and towers that evoke a Renaissance landscape mythically interwoven within the broken brick bones of the Lower Eastside. Where
writing in *Top Cat* is blatantly eroticized, *Angel Ortiz* potentially disrupts the public fetishization of LAII the tagger that is implicit to his performances with Haring. The work’s conflation and exaggeration of the syrupy romantic-erotic transfer between Eros and Cupid is undercut by the detailed citation of Loisaida street fashion. In contrast to his works with Haring that served as fill, Ortiz’s distinctive tags serve as the optical focus here, covering the entire frame. Wong’s campy rendition of Ortiz-as-Cupid is effectively given the “going-over” treatment of an inferior for a superior writer, or
“topped” in the manner of *Top Cat*. Both *Top Cat* and *Angel Ortiz* explicitly reference writing and its formal and social history. In the very process of the composition, Wong punks this history; he highlights what Nyongo, by way of Toni Morrison has noted as an “African Americanism” in the terminology of “going over,” and extends it to a grammar of domination and submission. While domination and submission certainly connote erotic exchange, Wong’s revisions and recitations of going over conceivably intimate any number of possible modes of relation that certainly might include, but are not limited to, the queer trade between Haring and Ortiz. Together Wong and Ortiz paint within a very different relation to subjectivity than the Haring-Ortiz collaborations. Their signatures in the bottom left corner and LAII’s tags center Angel Ortiz as an artist in his own right, and yet his identity is fluid and mobile in the repetition of his distinctively variable self-naming as LA II, Laroc, LARock and Little Angel. The signature tags are interspersed with calls to RFA (Ready For Action), the Lower Eastside crew that he tagged with. Ortiz’s physical depiction by Wong is effectively blurred and rendered non-identifiable by his own tags, the writer taking up space where space can now be made, as the work makes clear that the figural representation of Ortiz the angel is secondary to the inscriptive repetitive practice of Ortiz’s chosen names. LAII / Laroc / LARock / Little Angel / RFA: these are variations of the changing same social relation that marks Angel

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41 References to the writing practice of “topping” are less consistent than “going-over” but denote executing a superior throw-up directly above, rather than over, an inferior throw-up as a more passive-aggressive statement of skill.
Ortiz’s dynamic being in the world. Where Haring and Ortiz’s work fixes the tags into a notion of oriental serial calligraphy that magically and freely “covers and transforms” an object to a valuable art commodity, Wong and Ortiz’s work meditates on the tag as autograph, a serial writing of the self within, between, and among the constraints or perhaps chains, of relation that encircle 141 Ridge Street.

Although Haring and Ortiz’s collaborations trouble the interconnected fields and currents of race and sexuality, I don’t hold up Wong and Ortiz’s collaboration as a good versus bad collaboration. Roy Pérez’s pointed question of whether or not Wong reproduces “the colonial order of viewing subject and viewed object” with his own “fetishizing gaze and the ways in which it reproduces or interrupts the classic objectification of the brown body” (280) haunts the prison paintings and Pérez notably leaves it unanswered. While Montez and Pérez delve into the layered complexities of Nuyorican social life and history, tropicalization, and for Pérez, the possibilities and failures of Asian/Latino exchange as an iteration of José Muñoz’s “brown commons,” the entanglements of the writing archive and the question of its blackness add another layer to these questions. This complexity is most pronounced in Wong’s intense creative and personal relationship with the writer SHARP, Aaron Goodstone, who is featured in the remaining paintings exhibited with Top Cat. A multiracial African American man, Goodstone was a serial model and inspiration for Wong’s portrayal of Puerto Rican masculinity, a visual racial/ethnic blurring that evokes SHARP’s previous blurred
performance in his camp disguise as the anonymous young writer. Wong’s depiction of
SHARP includes a series of prison paintings and outdoor streetscapes of Loisaida such
as Sharp & Dottie (1984), Down For the Count (1985), and the later collaborative painting
Sharp Paints a Picture (1997). In 2013 artists Danh Vo and Julie Ault began excavating the
backstory to Wong’s little-known Riker’s Island series of prison paintings, which were
briefly installed in a neighbor’s apartment as a private showing, likely in the mid- to
late-1980s. These paintings were not the prison scenes narrated by Piñero or featured in
his play Short Eyes but of Wong’s own imagining and featured Goodstone as an inmate,
posed in a graphic array of voyeuristically framed positions of sexual violation and
physical constraint. Ault describes the works as featuring “an ambiguous tension
between force, complicity, and mutuality [that] takes center stage” (“Martin Wong Was
Here 93). Goodstone recounted to Danh Vo in 2013 that upon first seeing this
installation, he had felt “increasingly transgressed,” and had taken “three paintings
hostage” (94). He confronted Wong and a long conversation ensued, with the result that
Goodstone returned two. Wong’s depiction of Goodstone as the ideal Puerto Rican
model in a series of prison rape scenes brings us to a horizon of transgression that is not
often marked in scholarship on Wong. Wong himself was conscious of this violation,
admitting to an audience in 1991 that he thought his compulsive paintings gave
Goodstone “psychological problems” and that he only stopped painting him for a few
months when he told Wong that “it was a violation of his personality” (Burkhart 94).
If Goodstone and Wong’s relationship is most charged in the context and presentation of the prison paintings, writing itself is a contiguous subject, bound up in a complicated erotic, financial, and citational practice. Both *Down for the Count* (1985) and *Sharp Paints a Picture* (1997) feature the process of writing itself as the dramatized subject. In SHARP’s 1984 television interview for Videowave he suggests that he is in disguise to protect himself from the authorities as well as rival writing crews. *Down for the Count* narrates the culmination of SHARP’s stated territorial scuffles in the legendary street fight between SHARP and Wong and SHARP’s rivals, imagined here as a boxing bout with a victorious SHARP and the rival being carried away by the enigmatic twin firemen. While Wong purportedly punched the writer in the nose, in the painting Wong depicts himself as a child, huddled fearfully against SHARP’s side. A critic dismissed Wong’s figural composition here for its embarrassing invocation of
Francisco Goya’s *The Third of May, 1808 in Madrid*, highlighting how Wong did indeed embed this street famous episode within an aura of heroic struggle that alternately self-deprecating and a sincere gesture of his belief in the almost mythological import of street writing. Wong’s own figuration here also evokes his later painting, *Ms. Chinatown* (Fig. 27), in which his Aunt Nora poses as odalisque in the interior of an underground nightclub that opens onto a street scene of Chinatown. Like *Down for the Count*, Wong is a child, pressed close to his aunt’s side in both of these visual renditions of highly gendered scenes that gesture to the shared landscape of ciphers and street codes. Like the earlier *Angel Ortiz, Sharp Paints a Picture* features the writer painted by Wong, with an overlay by SHARP. Unlike LAII’s full “going over,” SHARP’s writing here showcases the work of a mature artist; the writer’s tags are rendered on canvas hanging on a chain link fence, suggesting movement from street to gallery. The marks of his professionalism are accentuated by the pass hanging around SHARP’s neck. Wong adds a ventilator, invoking his earlier disguises and perhaps serving as an impudent poke at SHARP and their earlier contest over Goodstone’s body, which Wong had so completely and willfully exposed. Always the meticulous documentarian, the ventilator chronicles the shift in writing practice by the 1990s to alleviate some of the demonstrated health risks of writing that had begun to plague veteran writers such as RAMMELLZEE. SHARP’s maturity as artist and young adult imbues him with a temporal sense of growth and futurity as he meets up here in the ongoing conversation between the two as Wong
approaches death. In Goodstone’s email to Danh Vo he some thirty years later, he reflects on the trauma of the prison paintings in the longer context of his enduring friendship with Wong that would endure until his death in 1999:

In retrospect, it was a beautiful painting from the vantage point of artistic creativity—funny that, at the time, I was unable to appreciate its artistic merit given that this was some deep dark fantasy of Martin’s . . . It was hard for me to absorb this series, it really felt like a violation at the time. In retrospect, it is like a love letter, it is a beautiful rendition of the expression of creativity; all matters of the heart are pure. Perhaps unrequited love or unreciprocated love is the purest as it involves no human contact . . . In the end, this is part of the complex lexicon of the artist—confidant—collector—friend—relationship. (Ault “Martin Wong Was Here,” 94)

SHARP’s generous and intimate enjambment of memories encloses the unbearable binding of sexual and racial violences, love, personal violation, tenderness, and willful transgression. Such an enjambment accentuates SHARP’s equivalence of unrequited love with the distance of purity, or “no human contact” as their exchange unfolds amidst the sex panic qua AIDS epidemic of 1980s New York. Such a fantasy of distance will be intensified by Wong’s own articulation of distance at the time of his diagnosis in 1994 to Angel Ortiz. While Sharp demarcates their love with the invocation of a sexual discreteness that attempts to ameliorate Wong’s willfully indiscreet paintings of him, the “complex lexicon of the artist—confidant—collector—friend—relationship” sketches the terrain of the writing archive that SHARP moves through.

Goodstone’s reflections on the prison paintings sketch the “fruitful collective foundation” of the relationship between Wong, SHARP, LEE (Lee Quiñones) and DAZE (Chris Ellis) that undergirds the Museum of American Graffiti and the writing archives:
For years we were intrinsically linked and shared commonality and social context that had nothing to do with art. And we had a strong bond as aspiring artists scratching out the beginning of what might become history. It was a time of support, and every dollar Martin made in the art world he redirected toward our movement, which he saw as something to be nurtured and preserved. Martin changed the creative focus of all of us. (Ault “Martin Wong Was Here” 94-5)

While Goodstone does not include Angel Ortiz in this collective foundation, Ortiz and Wong’s exchanges mark another, seemingly more familial transit of these adjacent and intrinsic links. While the bulk of the writing collection is housed at the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY), many of the black books reside at Fales Special Collections at NYU along with a mass of personal correspondence and ephemera that speaks to the MCNY collection. The splitting of these collections—necessitating a critical and sometimes literal transit for the researcher between the two sites—articulates the interlocking economies of Wong’s social and professional practices. Indeed, the gaps and overlaps of the broken writing collection are perhaps the most indicative testimony to Wong’s enduringly indiscrete way of being in the world. A series of letters that Ortiz sent to Wong over the course of his incarceration from 1992-1994 underscore this break and the difficulty of piecing together the social fabric central to the Museum of American Graffiti. We do not have the letters that Wong surely sent to Ortiz and we have only one unsent letter from Wong at Fales, kept apart from Ortiz’s letters held at MCNY in the graffiti archive. In Ortiz’s letters sent to Wong from the period of his incarceration at Ulster, Riverview, and Cape Vincent Correctional Facilities, the young writer articulates an intensely complex nexus of sometimes reciprocal and shared, and at
other times individual and staggeringly unequal and inequitable needs, hopes, and memories. These connections are rendered in terms of transaction, exchange, request, pleading, scolding, familial debt and responsibility, and sharing. As Ortiz’s incarceration stretches from months to years, Wong’s enduring reciprocity is sometimes rendered by Ortiz in familial terms, as the only person besides his mother who continues to write and a seemingly steadfast provider of money, clothing, food, mail, future hopes, and neighborhood gossip. In the last months of their correspondence Ortiz sends Wong a letter wishing him Happy Mother’s Day, two days later a homemade Mother’s Day card replete with a poem and illustration of a red heart bound in lengths of purple ribbon set amongst the stars. In Wong’s unsent and perhaps unfinished letter to Ortiz, dated Aug 19, 1994, Wong writes:

Oye me negrito!
What’s up my little angel
Glad to hear you’re coming out soon. Meanwhile I’m still stuck in this hospital. Now I’m in isolation because they think I might have tuberculosis. Well, maybe I needed a vacation anyway. They are really treating me like I’m radioactive or something. Everything I touch automatically becomes a toxic waste.42

In the last letter penned by Angel Ortiz to Martin Wong on August 29, 1994, we understand that Wong has finally informed Ortiz that he has been diagnosed as HIV-positive. What Wong did write to Ortiz is likely unknown to any but Ortiz, who responds first with expressions of concern and care and then a request that Wong return

the Haring pieces he had sold to him when “my mind was not together if you know what I mean.” Ortiz concludes with a series of affectionately scolding directives to take care of himself, to keep making art, that “I would like to hear from you once a week,” and finally in closing: “love is on your side . . .”43

I suggest that the spatial force of proximity and distance does not fully account for the queer temporal heft of Wong’s interruptions into writing’s seemingly spontaneous irruption in New York City and the emergence of hip hop culture. In the multifaceted intimacies that arrange Wong’s theorization and curation of this movement, the spatial metaphor of proximity, as near but not necessarily touching, does not quite capture the sometimes painfully interdependent economies that cohered at 141 Ridge Street. As Wong’s embedded exchanges with Ortiz and Goodstone index in the grouping of minor works that by all rights belong with the writing archive, modes of intimacy emerge in cross-cultural and interracial collaboration that are not necessarily determined by explicit sexual interactions. Amy Sueyoshi’s work on an earlier bohemian, Yone Noguchi, shows how “intimate struggles” at the intersections of such associations open us to thinking about a range of nuanced connections forged in mutual need. I want to turn forward in time and back again to the Museum of American Graffiti in 1989 and the finances that subtend this venture. The canvases and black books that

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were briefly housed in the Museum of American Graffiti were only a part of the larger collection. In addition to the aerosol art on canvas and black books by writers such as LEE, DAZE, CRASH, BLADE, Lady Pink, A-ONE, Delta, QUICK, NOC, Futura 2000, Tracy 168, Sane, ZEPHYR, and with especially large selections by Rammellzee, Sharp, Phase 2, and LA II, Wong amassed one of the most remarkable holdings of material culture artifacts connected to writing as a movement—and Wong’s early insistence that it was a movement clearly galvanized many of the writers into believing it was so. His passion for writing itself was complex and immanent in the range and depth of materials collected: rare underground zines and newsletters; an enormous collection of newspaper, magazine, and journal articles; a trove of photographs; unpublished book manuscripts by critics and writers; tickets and court records from writers who had been apprehended by the loathed Transit Authority police—the notorious Vandal Squad—; even old high school homework assignments by his friend Daze.

Wong’s process of acquisition was embedded in interlocking social and material economies that aspired to the utopic spirit of “free” exchange as practiced by the Angels Light and yet expressed Wong’s definitive awareness that no exchange was free but inherently bound up in weight and heft. As stated earlier and repeated again here, he most often traded his own steadily appreciating paintings with writers. When he could not trade he would buy, reselling his own art and the valuable art and collectibles that
he hunted for at auctions and thrift stores with his sharp eye. When he could not buy or trade he would support writers with free or reduced-cost materials from Pearl Paints. Julie Ault details how Wong kept a Mondrian sketch next to his sink, consigning it to Sotheby’s in 1989 with a request that it be designated “To benefit the Museum of American Graffiti” (“In Eureka”). In a 1998 interview Wong describes his “little hustle” of how he would buy antiquities at Christie’s East and resell at Sotheby’s for considerable markup: “I bought a Sixth Dynasty gilt bronze dragon head for $50 and later sold it at Sotheby’s for a lot of money. I found an album that I realized was an original of the Ten Bamboo Studio, a book of poems illustrated with the first attempts at color-block printing, and paid $30. I got $1800 for that” (Trebay 30). While he was only a modestly successful artist for much of his time in New York, Wong’s access to legitimized art economies such as Sotheby’s was predicated on a certain class position that many writers could not access as well as his early self-education in the San Francisco Chinatown collectibles stores. Wong also collected in earnest at a particular moment in the unfolding of hip-hop history. By the time films such as Wild Style brought hip-hop culture to mainstream attention in the early-1980s, the local gallery scene and international art dealers had already made celebrities out of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat and artists who had transitioned from trains to canvas such as LEE,

44 See “Correspondence: Sotheby’s,” Series I, Box 1, Folder 51, Martin Wong Papers, Fales Special Collections, New York University for the receipts of Wong’s transactions with Sotheby’s to finance the Museum.
DAZE, Lady Pink, RAMELLZEE and Fab 5 Freddy were exhibiting in Europe. By 1985 the graffiti movement was pronounced dead by the galleries and with subway writing becoming increasingly difficult, many writers and artists dropped out and disappeared. Lee Quiñones recalls that “it was about this time that Martin began to actively acquire my work, saying, ‘Just when it all seems done, this is when I am going to buy.’ He was wholly committed to supporting our work in a difficult time’” (Corcoran, 228). It is the years during which the writers emerged from anonymity to publicly transition as successful and then “deposed” canvas artists that Wong’s own work as artist—collector—curator forms a generative counterpoint with.

The few official documents tendered by the Museum attest to the interlocking contestations within this project, most often referred to as a labor of love for Wong. Wong custom-designed the official Museum letterhead in a classical, authoritative Roman script. The typography complimented the few typed documents for official public circulation and contrasts with the creatively informal, yet legally binding handwritten bills of sale between the Museum and street famous artists such as Tracy 168 (Fig.) These documents demonstrate Wong’s attempts to rewrite graffiti as an authentic and valuable object of serious study counter to its perceived illegitimacy and legislated criminality. The Roman font attempts to visually impress graffiti’s legitimacy within the “recognized” long tradition of western art, or “the Heritage.” The statement ties institutional recognition to successful participation in an international art economy,
emphasizing the commercial success of legendary writers such as DAZE and LEE as painters. However, the anticipated future absorption of the museum remains speculative and vague; it wills its absorption into an unnamed and future “larger institution” that perhaps Wong and the writers could not envision amidst the NYCTA’s state-mandated eradication of the form. An inside reader would have noted that Wong strategically names the museum’s objects “graffiti,” the criminalized term for the practice, rather than “writing,” the practitioners’ own selected term, highlighting the dueling sites of authority that must impossibly authenticate such a museum. Another type of inside reader might note that Wong playfully proposes a show “dedicated to the former Miss Subway contestants.” This camp reference to the serial placards of portraits of Miss Subways winners placed on the trains between 1941 and 1976 evokes a complex public performance of idealized wholesome womanhood at odds with the criminalized youth marking the trains.

The handwritten bills of sale for the Museum suggest other modes of underground economy operative to its official acquisitions (Fig.38). The agreement
between Tracy 168 and the Museum is handwritten in Wong’s distinctive writing; his script crowds and occupies the cool distance of the Roman letterhead’s textual landscape, evoking and replicating Glazer’s observation of subway tagging as making marks “everywhere there is space for the marks to be made, and many places where there is not.” The finely detailed, even elegiac litany of subway writers whose works had presumably been eradicated by the chemical “buff” used to whiten the trains is sustained through the attention to their name markings, a communally-performed practice of respect, and for Wong, a particular practice of care often embedded in his
attention to the graphic in his own art. Documents intended to regulate the deportment of its visitors elaborate the awkward frictions between authority, authenticity, complicity, and care enfolded into the Museum’s foundational documents. Site rules were posted, likely in an attempt to forestall the possibility of violent interactions between the writing community patronizing the Museum and the general public and nervous corporate backers, encircled by the ever-present threat of law enforcement. In Wong’s characteristic fusion of playful humor and gravity, the rules attempt to delineate a serious place of study from a social space. They bar people under the age of 21 without an accompanying adult, any person under the influence of any substance, and those not properly dressed. Six prohibitions are listed, progressing from broadly normative to specifically targeted behaviors: no drinking, no eating, no smoking, no radios, no outgoing calls on the phone, and finally: “No hanging out.” It closes with a seemingly stern directive: “The Museum of American Graffiti is set up for the serious study of Graffiti and not created as an alternative boys club. Anyone who visits the Museum is expected to maintain proper behavior, which reflects their serious commitment to the preservation of the art form.”45

Many recent popular and academic accounts of this collection narrate Wong as a savvy collector, attributing the depth of the collection to his remarkable foresight, his


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sharp eye for future value that must have enabled him to see the worth of these objects before the tide of acceptability had caught up with the oscillating tastes of the market. These readings rest on certain assumptions about the premature—whether the collection’s stutter step public arrivals or the writers and their street art that critics classified as primitive—and its relation to future value. These readings assume that Wong’s superior eye must have always been in the service—labored for—this future progressive public. Wong himself seemed to echo something of this notion when he founded the Museum. Quiñones recalls Wong’s jubilance at the opening: “Yeah! This is just a small whisper of what my shout will be like as a collector, as a person of foresight.” However, Quiñones immediately undercuts the suggestion that Wong’s investments were not in service to the writing community that was his community—bound by art: “this all came from an artist; he wasn’t an art speculator and he had no ulterior motives. Martin was straight from the gut and loved the work” (Corcoran, 229). Quiñones’ recall of Wong’s “gut” of “love” and his further invocation here of Wong as an angel, chews on the complex positionings of parties within colonial discourses of preservation through figurations of savior, patron, or curator of an art form. The angel that Quiñones evokes summons the free economies of the Angels of Light as well as the theatrical subtext of the mythic “angel investor” of early Broadway. Wong’s Chineseness and its resonations of acquisition coupled with an angel investor at the height of the AIDS crisis undercut the unstudied presumptions in discussions that privilege Wong’s
(Asian) “eye” over his “gut.” In this simplistic economy of sight and value, other forms of exchange predicated on the relations and intimacies of past and present loss rather than future gain are no less elided. It is from within the entwined landscapes of what Quiñones describes as “a radical deforestation” of the Lower Eastside (Corcoran, 228) and other poor communities of color in the city and the devastating impact of AIDS on entangled gay, black and brown communities in these decades that the interface between the writers’ art and Wong’s archival impulse to gather and edify the ephemeral might be imagined.
A page from writer SHARP’s black book from the mid 1980s disrupts any easy interface between reading and writing. SHARP’s cacography—literally bad handwriting—as wrought in the deliberate stylistic misspelling of his injunction, “DON’T VANDALIZE / EFEMRALIZE,” reroutes orthographic conventions through the African diaspora as an iteration of calligraphic signifying. Positioning the act of vandalizing against the act of “efemralizing,” SHARP’s insurgent call imagines a practice of art that is in, but not of, a national public. Writing’s avowed ephemerality—
its inherent dispossession—disrupts the static repose of civilizational veneers and possessive temporalities and positions SHARP’s commitment to the ephemeral as a major political action. The layered tags in this page of SHARP’s black book suggest the writer’s ongoing experimental revision of self-naming as SHARP is rendered in pencil to ink to silver marker, across multiple styles of scripts from wildstyle to bubble, interspersed with his crew REBEL$, and layered to illegibility. To read SHARP’s book requires a multifaceted graphic sense, an undulating movement between optic and textual, a sidestep shuffling through debates of surface and depth models of reading that positions the ‘efemral’ as a ghostly praxis of generative presence amidst ongoing conditions of erasure.

Stretched between the capacious archives that bear Martin Wong’s name at Fales Special Collections at New York University and Museum of the City of New York is one of the world’s finest collections of black books. Sometimes termed piece books, the storied black sketchbooks in which New York graffiti artists and subway writers honed their graphic craft intimate this insurgent cultural history and ephemeral practice of world making that SHARP’s ghostly injunction invokes and Wong’s queer curation attempted to harbor. The black books are both written and drawn, individual and collective, documentary and performance. Individual artists’ books gesture to their own layered sociality as the names of family and romantic partners are scripted, friends and
crews’ markers interspersed with the artist’s own tags as the books are shared and exchanged.

Like the autograph book, popular from the 15th to 19th centuries, the writer’s black book is a graphic assemblage of one’s shared social milieu, both real and aspirational and indicative expressions of youth cultures across time. While the history of the autograph book relays through medieval and early modern heraldry and genealogical litanies to the rise of the university as an institution, the black books of New York City’s subway artists adapt this older European form to the needs of mostly cross-cultural and diasporic youth in the post-industrial city. The imaged writings in the black books range from repetitive ball-point pen etched tags as a furtive outgrowth of high school classroom boredom to the complex planning of the inked and exquisitely hand-colored stagings of an artist’s future subway masterpiece. As repositories of personal bodily typographic rehearsal and expressions of collective visual improvisations in response to state disciplinary violences, the black book tells us something about reading, writing, and seeing the graphic encounter that propels this project.

As works of stylistic rehearsal wrought amidst the wave of national criminalization of writing, black books were also evidentiary objects of potential criminal implication. They were held close by their makers and only exchanged with other writers in strictly codified rules of co-conspiratorial exchange and trusting
intimacies. Wong’s collection of the black books at a time they were considered without artistic or historical value testifies to the artist’s imbrication in these intimate circulations and a counter mode of desire to the covetous Vandal Squad. The black book holdings of the Vandal Squad rivaled Wong’s collection and were used as graphic evidence in the investigation and prosecution of writing. A wealth of data could be gleaned from the confiscated black book; styles could be linked to artists, social intimacies could be mapped, traced, and documented. While the city’s war on writing was essentially accomplished by 1990, the policing technologies engendered from this graphic contestation have become inordinately expansive.

At around 2010 police departments began to employ software called GraffitiTracker, an increasingly massive national database of imaged tags and drawings that relies on the writer’s repetitive stylistic naming to link them with cumulative counts of vandalism, driving up punishments for taggers (usually minors) “to levels otherwise unthinkable” as Josh Kaplan notes. Kaplan details how this graphic database has enabled law enforcement to “connect people to their past actions,” sometimes inadvertently as in the numerous cases of minors’ bedrooms or notebooks being searched for another cause, only to see the repetitive markings of tags and be scanned in GraffitiTracker to often ruinous financial and legal effect for these children and their families. GraffitiTracker challenges SHARP’s contestation of “efemr alize” over “vandalize,” effectively freezing the ephemeral act and object of vandalism in a digital
archive and rendering the fleeting bodily practice as capturable for all time through state documentary.

*Graphic Intimations* has argued for the graphic as both a technology and an aesthetic that Asian diasporic artists have often utilized for experimentation to disrupt state documentary imperatives. The materiality of the criminal black book in Wong’s collections evokes the conundrum of graphic capture faced by Miné Okubo and other inmates at the midcentury. Like the writers and taggers thirty years later, Okubo and Matsuoka followed a graphic practice that was bound up in a state imperative towards documentary evidentiary utility. Utilizing and revising older graphic techniques engendered in Asian as much as Western art, including negative space, textual and illustrative figurations, and experimentation with modes of flatness in two-dimensional space, Okubo and Matsuoka use the graphic to intimate rather than document the experience of mass incarceration and surveillance of forced intimacies. An attendant will to revise and distort the documentary graphic threads through Martin Wong’s earlier graphic work with the Cockettes and Angels of Light as these collectives revise the photographic documentary of San Francisco Chinatown for queerly imagined scenarios of bodily and typographic refashioning. Staging these ephemeral scenes in the “free” public of countercultural San Francisco, the orientalist graphic of the Cockettes and Angels momentarily vandalize civic and national memory as their camp aesthetic
employs parody, profane puns and performances, and racially marked typographies and fashionings.

As the insurgent blackness of SHARP’s black book curated by Wong demonstrates, the graphic encounter is often a site of cross-cultural, interracial, diasporic, and queer interfaces. With the notion of the graphic as increasingly ubiquitous in our digitized present, Graphic Intimations considers the longer material and social enmeshment of the graphic within conditions of radical contact. This work complements and revises Asian American literary studies’ focus on questions of language as these artists and writers turn to visual means of representation that are increasingly gestural, intimating the complex social worlds towards which these works gesture. Working from within and across these moments of complex social assemblage and documentary capture, Graphic Intimations seeks out a multi-sensual practice of reading that responds to these divergent modes of writing.
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Biography

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