a project by juma m. sei

"CHINATOWN„

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INTRODUCTION

As I prepared to synthesize my time in this seminar into a course impact project, I aimed to distill the concepts that have intrigued, perplexed and frustrated me most into a meaningful reflection on the world around me. It's an admittedly selfish intention, but more than anything, I wanted to know how our persistent investigation into Afro-Asian racial formations rooted itself in my lived reality. Given this context, I found myself especially drawn to our discussion of cultural imaginaries. I've more particularly yet to shake my intellectual and personal captivation with Vijay Prashad's theory of polyculturalism.

First noting that, "moments of exchange and cooperation between peoples of Asian and African descent demonstrate a need to reexamine the way we approach history," Prashad posits that, because the historical collaboration between Black and Asian peoples eclipse their typically "multicultural" characterization, we should instead deem this coalescence "polyculturalism," (Prashad). Rather than paying "lip service to diversity," the theory of polyculturalism situates "our recognition of this history of cultural interchange [as] solidarity forged by antiracism," (Prashad). More specific to the purposes of this essay however, "Polyculturalism, unlike multiculturalism, assumes that people live coherent lives that are made up of a host of lineages," (Prashad, xii).

While my understanding of polyculturalism was somewhat complicated by my previous familiarity with multiculturalism, I found it helpful to think of the former as a tool for understanding bottom-up culture-making. Polyculturalism suggests that "ethnic" communities transgress static conceptions of identity in their daily lives, and in turn, create culture by simply being.

As someone who sees their life as a "cultural gumbo" of sorts, polyculturalism is the thesis of my existence; it sits at the epicenter of all communities that have made me, me. This project is a brief examination of one such community: Portland, Oregon's streetwear culture.

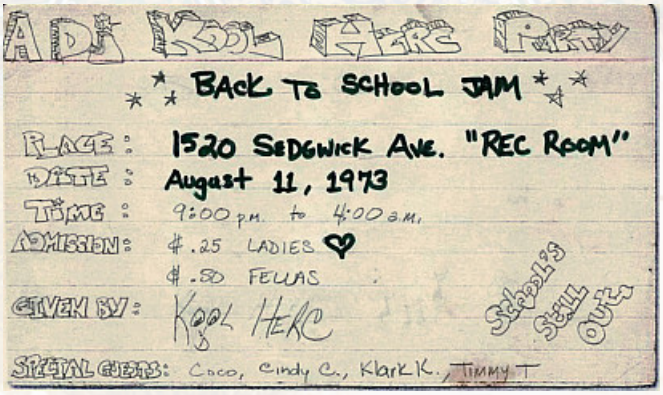
What I attempt to illustrate in the following pages is where theory meets reality: how the primary assumption undergirding Prashad's theory of polyculturalism comes to life when exploring Chinatown as Portland's streetwear hotbed. To this end, while I'm somewhat interested in the aesthetics of this Afro-Asian integration, my research has offered a more destinct understanding of how interactions between

Black-American and Japanese individuals have shaped the streetwear and sneaker industry.

Because I've chosen to spotlight as ephemeral a subject as "culture," I fully ac-knowledge that this analysis is incomplete. Nevertheless, by sur-veying the origin of hip hop and its connection to streetwear fashion, how streetwer established itself globally, the uniquely American construct of "Chinatowns," and how these disparate traditions coalesce in Portland, I hope to offer an interesting read if nothing more.

THE EMERGENCE OF HIP HOP AND STREETWEAR

Though "streetwear" is the product of numerous converging lineages, I'm primarily interested in the genealogy that traces back to 1520 Sedgwick Avenue -- a 102-unit apartment building in The Bronx.



On August 11th, 1973, Clive Campbell (otherwise known as "DJ Kool Herc") threw an iconic "back to school jam" that's now emblematic of the birth of hip-hop, (Hip-Hop Evolution: Episode 1, "The Foundation"). In a world of disco, DJ Kool Herc spotlighted soul and funk music. By weaving together his songs' "breakdowns" (those moments in a re-cord where all instruments fade to silence in order to underscore the soulful and bed-rock-like percussion) Campbell created an endless sonic "merry-go-round;" Herc's innovative record manipulation in tandem with these rebellious and nostalgic genre selections historicised this recreation room party, (Hip-Hop Evolution: Episode 1, "The Foundation").

In reflection, the emergence of hip-hop was itself a product of polyculturalism; from the ashes of urban decay, political unrest and interpersonal struggle, African Amer-icans, Latino Americans and Caribbean Americans created something beautiful, (Hip-Hop Evolution: Episode 1, "The Foundation"). This new artform was a manner of self-expression for communities that suffered at the hands of racism, police vio-lence and more -- it was a rejection of all things conventional.

As party emcee's became individually prominent and their craft became noteworthy in its own right, these individuals similarly popularized the rich synthesis of extrinsic influences that defined their fashion.

Streetwear falls in hip-hop's shadow precisely because the underground movement embodied more than mere record-play -- it was a way of life that (at least partially) seeded itself in one's attire. As hip-hop gained national recognition, so too did streetwear -- both demanding space and visibility in industries that expected subordination.

JAPANESE STREETWEAR CULTURE: "A BATHING APE" AS AN ARCHETYPE

Though the bridge that connects streetwear's avant-garde introduction to the American zeitgeist and today's multi-billion dollar industry is nuanced in its own right, a crucially important aspect of this journey is how street-wear fashion has taken root across the globe (largely a result of the spread of hip-hop). Again concentrating on the aim of this project, appreciating the genesis of Tomaoki Nagao's "A Bathing Ape" clothing brand offers an edifying archetype for understanding Afro-Asian race relationality in the streetwear industry.

Referred to by the moniker "Nigo," Nagao created "A Bathing Ape" (BAPE) in 1993 after partnering with Jun Takahashi to open a shop called NOWHERE in Japan's epochal Harajuku fashion district, (Medium). From the beginning, Nagao's creation was unshakably tied to hip-hop culture; not only did Hiroshi Fujiawara, the "Godfather of Harajuka" and one of Japan's first hip-hop DJs, aid Nigo and Takahashi open NOWHERE, but "BAPE" gained notoriety in the West by partnering with hip-hop icons such as The Notorious B.I.G., Pharrel Williams, and Kanye West, (Medium).

Beyond this personal linkage, seeing as the Harajuku district was undeniably influenced by the introduction of hip-hop to Japan in the 1980s in part, and even more archival, the influx of Western records and magazines that came from American soldiers in the 1940s, Harajuku itself

owes its evolu-tion to polyculturalism to some end, (The COMM).

Though I don't aim to be overly instructive, this organic synthesis of Japanese fashion moguls and hip-hop icons epitomizes Prashad's prupposed interacial and anti-racist solidarity. Here, I don't intend to imply that "BAPE" operated with an especially rebellious political agenda that tactically undercut the longstanding history of white oppression by partnering with the figures they did -- quite simply, this was not the case. I'm instead suggesting that they did so unintentionally; they did so by being.

Transitioning this discussion from the origins of streetwear and its global influence to a more intimate reflection on streetwear culture as centered in Portland's Chinatown, it first seems necessary to delineate the history that shaped this locale.

THE "CHINATOWN" CONSTRUCT

The first wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century, (Goyette). Seeking economic opportunities associated with the California gold rush and transcontinental railroad, these migrant workers settled in proximity to one another as a matter of convenience and familiarity, (Goyette, OLD TOWN).

Succeeding this history to the origin of Portland's Chinatown, numerous Chinese and Japanese immigrants found refuge in the area following the city's 1851 incorporation, (OLD TOWN). From this point forward however, both our national Chinatown history and Portland's local Chinatown history were marred by anti-Asian violence and racial descrimination. Given the East Asian laborers were paid lower wages than their white counterparts, white Americans scapegoated the faction for "driving down pay and taking away jobs," (Goyette). Moreover,

> "Around the turn of the century, politicians played into white workers' anxieties,

> pointing the finger at Chinese immigrants for economic hard-ship and labeling them fundamentally incapable of assimilation into U.S. society. In 1877, a congressional committee heard testimony that the Chinese “are a perpetual, unchanging, and unchangeable alien element that can never become homogeneous; that their civilization is demoraliz-ing and degrading to our people; that they degrade and dishonor labor; and they can never become citizens,”” (Goyette, US Congress).

By 1882, anti-Asian sentiment nationally coalesced into the Chinese Exclusion Act -- legislation which barred Chinese immigrants who were already living in the United States from becoming citizens, and restricted new immigrants from entering the country, (Goyette). The descrimination did not stop there -- city governments actively coloured Chinatowns as “disgusting dens of iniquity,” (Goyette).

This era of exclusion and bigotry only cemented the significance of newly emerging Chinatowns. According to Ellen D. Wu, a history professor at Indiana University Bloomington and author of “The Color Of Success: Asian Americans And The Origins Of The Model Minority,”

> “Chinatowns were products of extreme forms of racial segregation… Be-ginning in the late 19th century... there was what we can call a regime of Asian exclusion: a web of laws and social practices and ideas designed to shut out Asians completely from American life,” (Goyette).

Not only had the Exclusion Act bolstered the cohesion of Portland’s Chinatown, the inclusion of the Japanese under the Act’s 1924 provisions additionally “restricted [East Asian immigrant movement] beyond [the] wharf and train station,” (OLD TOWN).

In an environment of discrimination and prejudice, “Chinese and Japanese immigrant workers and families built strong immigrant ethnic communities, adapting the existing built environment to reflect their Asian heritage,” (OLD TOWN). These two cultures were so unitedly segregated that the city’s Chinatown was also once known as Nihonmachi, or Japantown; Japanese Internment in the mid-twentieth century prompted the loss of this identity, (Dowsett).

Having said all that I have, any delicate examination of the Burnside and Willamette-bound neighborhood in its current predicament illustrates a divorce between the district’s past heritage and its contemporary reality. Though a disjointed litter of

Chinese businesses indicate what this area once was, Portland's Chinatown is now marked by its concentration of people, "struggling with homelessness, poverty, addiction and mental ill-ness," (Zuhl).

The dilution of Portland's East Asian population into other areas of the city dates as far back as 1920, (National Park Service).

This, in combination with the 1942 repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, "allowed Chinese immigrants and people of Chinese descent access to many of the professional and commercial activities that had been prohibited to them previously," (National Park Service). Compounding this dissipation, while Chinese immigration to Portland has grown in the past decade, this new wave of immigrants have instead settled on the other side of the river in what's now called the "Jade District," (Travel Portland, Korfhage).

To some degree, Old Town Chinatown's current state is emblematic of Kay Anderson's work suggesting that Chinatowns are more of a "social construct" than anything, "Chinatown's existence is… only a geographical articulation of a racial ideology, framed by those in power who lead the dominant discourse of this subject," (Anderson, Luk, 1).

PORTLAND: A CASE STUDY

Despite what I refer to as Chinatown's diluted integrity and contemporary reality, one tradition that this area has upheld is the duality of its identity. As much as "Chinatown isn't Chinatown anymore," and as much as the area struggles to cope with its transient population, Old Town Chinatown is simultaneously the center of Portland streetwear, (Korfhage).

Within the bounds of just a few city blocks there lies (1) Deadstock Coffee Roasters -- a coffee shop and sneaker gallery, (2) Index PDX -- a land-mark sneaker consignment depot, (3) Unspoken, Produce, Laundry, and Upper Playground -- all streetwear clothing boutiques, and finally (4) the PENSOLE Footwear Design Academy -- an institution that runs the city's annual Sneaker Week (largely spotlighting creatives and retailers in the Old Town Chinatown neighborhood), (Interview with Noori Cherry, Interview with Jordan Cart, Interview with Colby Cox, Interview with Ian Wil-liams,

Interview with Herbert Smith, Interview with Jonathan Riley). Very explicitly, this is polyculturalism at its finest: in a locale immersed by the unquestionable history of East Asian immigration emerged a vibrant plethora of businesses (all streetwear-oriented) that borrow from the same tradition (hip-hop music) -- one that's inception is itself defined by polyculturalism.

Nevertheless, as I take this carnival of polyculturalism one step further, I must note that the story behind these businesses' evolution and development similarly mirrors how the founding of Nigo's "BAPE" reflects Prashad's theory; at the heart of almost all of these enterprises' lies Compound -- a streetwear and sneaker gallery that recently relocated to Portland's city-center (this move was prompted by numerous factors including repeated break-ins and a desire to conceptually start anew), (Interview with Jordan Carter, Interview with Colby Cox).

Founded in 2002 by Katsu Tanaka, a Japanese-born Portland immigrant, Compound originally began as "JustBe," (Compound). Much before Tanaka's store evolved into, "a destination for streetwear enthusiasts to shop a curated selection of toys, accessories, sneakers, and apparel," JustBe specialized in, "Japanese vinyl toy collectables," (Compound). It was only after landing an account with Nike in 2003 (not explicitly for apparel, but instead, for the art gallery), that Compound pivoted to the kind of establishment that the city knows it for today , (Interview with Jordan Carter, Interview with Colby Cox, Sole Collector).

To catalogue Compound's polycultural and tree-of-life-like status in Old Town Chinatown: (1) the founder of Deadstock Coffee Roasters, Ian Williams, started his business by selling coffee out of Compound's top floor; (2) Unspoken's founder, Ira LaFontaine, was not only once the footwear and apparel buyer for Compound, he initially sold his brand in the store before moving onto an independent venture; (3) Produce's founder, Jordan Carter, did the same -- first releasing his brand in Compound before creating his own establishment; and lastly (4) Herbert Smith, PEN-

SOLE's Marketing Designer and Director, was once a manager at Compound, (Interview with Jordan Carter, Interview with Ian Williams, Interview with Colby Cox, Sole Collector).

Aside from these very tangible influences, both the foundation of Index PDX and the more recent decision to move Laundry from Portland's East side were similarly influenced by Compound -- both wanted to be in proximity to the culture that the business had established, (The Oregonian, MacMurdo).

To some end, the sheer magnitude of Compound's influence makes sense, given the store very candidly aimed to foster organic collaboration; the philosophy underpinning Compound's intended retail experience primed the exact kind of culture-making that undergirds Prashad's theory,

> "We are a hub for the streetwear community where you can not only shop our wide selection of niche, underground, iconic, and hype brands, but a place to start a conversation… Our vision is to create an experi-ence for the Portland streetwear community that expands beyond retail… To be a leader in streetwear that continues to pave the way for future generations to come," (Compound).

This modest intention has made it such that a Japanese-owned business in an area formerly populated by Chinese and Japanese immigrants influenced the development of similarly oriented businesses that, in unison, borrow from a lineage and culture taking root in the emergence of hip-hop and (primarily Black) anti-establishment self-expression. As with "BAPE," I'm not at all suggesting that these communities and individuals intentionally came together to "fight the man" in some way or another. Instead, I'm suggesting that their existence itself does so. The definitive reality of interacial cooporation and culture-making exemplified in Portland's Chinatown is the exact stock of anti-racist solidarity that defines Prashad's "polyculturalism."

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this assignment, I outspokenly declared that this analysis would be incomplete, and I'd like to once again affirm that claim. As I've tried to follow streetwear's complicated and meandering history, I've set aside numerous conversations in order to craft a more cohesive rec-ord. For example, I haven't fully illustrated how the specter of businesses such as Nike and Adidas (both of which have headquarters in Portland) loom over the city's streetwear and sneakerhead culture. This was especially important for someone like Ian Williams, given Deadstock's in-cep-tion came from a desire to bring people in these communities together over art, (Interview with Ian Williams). In turn, I also chose not to discuss the historical tension between luxury businesses and minority communities as streetwear staked its claim in New York as the new American vogue, (Fresh Dressed).

Despite these admitted shortcomings however, I still hope to have clearly unpacked how the primary assumption of Prashad's theory (organic culture making) comes to life when exploring Old Town Chinatown as Portland's streetwear epicenter. As much as I find Prashad's work instructive and intriguing, he gives a vocabulary for understanding something that exists independent of intellectual musings -- that's what happened in the Portland.