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In the Presence of Archival Fugitives: Chinese Women, Souvenir Images, and the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair

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Fig. 1. After James J. Gibson, postcard, 1893. Digital print on cardstock, 6 x 4 in. Collection of Z. Serena Qiu. Photo courtesy Z. Serena Qiu

During an archival visit to the Chinese American Museum of Chicago in the summer of 2019, I saw a present-day museum postcard among photocopies of materials relating to the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition.¹ After remarking to the archivist that I recognized the image from a souvenir album, I was given the little cardstock print as a souvenir of my own (fig. 1). It bears a grainy reproduction of a photograph in obliterating contrast. Its lone subject is a seated figure with dark hair parted above a face corroded by cycles of photographic transference and reprinting, terminating in this postcard’s pixelated picture. The planes of the forehead and left cheek are emptied as white as the background. Garments have lost their visibility at the edges, though the collarless jacket with wide sleeves and a pleated skirt remain recognizable as a Han woman’s clothing of the late Qing Dynasty.² Nothing survives of either the backdrop or furniture except the suggestion of an armrest. If the sitter had made a special choice of fabric, decorative ribbon, shoe, or jewel, the image does not divulge it. On the reverse is a printed line of text by way of explanation: “‘Chinese Woman,’ International Dress and Costume Exhibit, World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893.” Given the appearance of archival

authority, this text looked so convincing that I took it at its word for longer than I should have. As I would discover, this citation too had been corrupted at some stage in the reproduction of knowledge by archives that were not created to serve the woman pictured.

Beginning with this multiply ruined image as my guiding star, I identify the destructive visual interest in Chinese American women at the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. I locate the production of their images at the fair within the convergence of patriarchal exclusionary law and imperialist anthropology in the United States. Gathering together one dozen photographic images that lay claim to representing Chinese women, I lay bare the material and phantasmic amplification of ontological violence through intertwined commemorative practices—the souvenir market and the archive. But pictorial and textual obscurations have also been reproduced and multiplied in these images. I address evidence of pictorial manipulation, textual occlusion, and selective archival neglect as a loss that cuts both ways. Doing so allows me to reframe the pictured women as fugitives whose limited representations reciprocally rob the exhibition, souvenir, and archive of their sovereign

authority. As Laura Hyun Yi Kang asks of building histories from corrupted sources, "How can a writing of Asian American women's history *stress*—in the sense of both emphasis and pressure—the archives not as preserving the residues of the past but as displaying an ongoing crisis of what counts as reliable historical data in different presents, and how they then induce, enable, and preclude certain narrations of the past?"³ Taking seriously the irrevocable and systematic loss of knowledge as an inheritance of Asian American scholarship, I conclude by elaborating a methodology that stakes the possibilities and limits of writing about a subject whose re-emergence into discourse will always be shaped by conditional visibility. My thinking thus steers away from scholastic investments in institutional authority and instead explores what might be gained through Asian American art history's capacity to trace the agential actions available to survivors of ontological violence and diasporic unmooring.

Between Exposition and Exclusion

News reports on the early planning for the Columbian Exposition suggest that there was a divided consciousness about the prospect of Chinese participation and their increased presence in the United States. In May 1891, the *Chicago Tribune* announced with fanfare that the Guangxu Emperor had personally accepted the invitation to exhibit.⁴ Subsequent articles published two days later eagerly reported the Chinese government's application for display space, followed in the summer with complimentary observations of the Chinese government officials visiting the exhibition grounds.⁵ And yet the same pages that galvanized growing public interest in Chinese participation at the fair with glimpses of Qing deputies concurrently stoked a hostile national anxiety regarding increased numbers of Chinese vendors and tourists to the United States.⁶ That summer, one headline put the question bluntly: "How About Chinese Visitors?"⁷

The following year, the ten-year term of the Chinese Exclusion Act would expire, which temporarily blocked the entry of Chinese immigrants of laboring classes and indefinitely dispossessed Chinese residents in the United States of citizenship, legal protection, and property and voting rights.⁸ The immigration ban was renewed the following May with the passage of the 1892 Geary Act. This law also federally sanctioned a critical instrument to the disciplinary mechanisms used against unwanted Chinese bodies in the growing American empire: mandating that all Chinese residents carry a standardized certificate of identity and residence, bearing an adhered photograph of the possessor. Noncompliance was punishable by hard labor and deportation.⁹ The Geary Act thus required that the photographic legibility of Chinese personhood be a precondition for its existence in the United States. These identifying photographs bore the visual evidence of their own function and handling, as they were inscribed, imprinted, and collected into albums as part of their disciplinary use (fig. 2).¹⁰



Fig. 2. Long Bing Cook, Si Nun, Ung Gook, and Max Gook, photograph album of Chinese men and women in Sierra County, 1890–1930, pp. 26–27. Images 2 3/8 x 3 1/8 in.; album 5 1/8 x 7 4/5 in. Collection of the California Historical Society. Photo courtesy California Historical Society

As Asian Americanist scholars have already argued, the weaponization of Chinese visibility predated this landmark congressional decision and was rehearsed at an earlier moment upon the bodies of Chinese women. By the coincident time of the exposition and the Geary Act, the presence of increasing populations of Chinese women in the United States precipitated a series of legal mandates that condoned the scrutiny of their bodies as normative and controlling behavior. Kang has traced the coagulation of a white bourgeois panic in mid-nineteenth-century California whereby any Chinese woman seen openly in public was assumed to be sexually indecent and morally threatening—thus framing later gendered prohibitions on Chinese emigration as an effort to identify and contain the excessive visibility of women.¹¹ Re-narrating documents from the 1874 legal event that was popularly known as the “Case of the Twenty-Two Lewd Chinese Women” and the resulting Supreme Court case of *Chy Lung v. Freeman*, Anne Anlin Cheng identified the moment at which the racialized and gendered body of the aberrant woman became legible through visual inventories of her appearance made by legally empowered eyewitnesses and onlookers.¹² While photography was not yet conscripted to the legal enforcement of exclusion, US port officials required that Chinese women submit photographic identification as one prerequisite to passage and disembarkation.¹³ Thus, governmental institutions invested photographs of Chinese women with the power to delimit their physical movement. In this light, the 1875 Page Law rendered “the Chinese woman” a legible body at the national register—and the containment of her promiscuous circulation and excessive visibility a public concern.¹⁴

In the anxious months before the passage of the Geary Act, national newspapers circulated the seemingly abrupt decision of the Qing Empire to withdraw from the Columbian Exposition in protest of the United States’ exclusionary laws.¹⁵ The Qing government, however, made clear that its refusal was a diplomatic gesture rather than a prohibition of contact or commerce between China and the United States. Private Chinese enterprises were still encouraged to participate in the fair through the waiving of export taxes to Chicago.¹⁶ The withdrawal, however, produced a dangerous silence at this international forum where political authority was measured by material and visual presence. The absence of Chinese sovereignty was especially profound at this memorial celebration of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, which located the founding of the United States in the excision of unwanted peoples from its imperial territory.¹⁷ The lack of Chinese state authorship enabled and threw into relief the multiple claims of authority over the narratives of China’s past and control of its future—claims made on behalf of the United States by burgeoning anthropologists, merchants, and photographers, and the economies that sustained them.¹⁸

There was one prominent display of Chinese authorship, located among the ethnographic villages in the fair’s entertainment annex known as the Midway Plaisance. It was a building complex that included a theater for Chinese operas and plays, a tea house, a restaurant, a shop, a temple, and dioramic scenes of quotidian life in China animated by performers—a production that continues to be remembered as the Chinese Village.¹⁹ It was organized, financed, and managed by three Chinese immigrant men operating as the Wah Mee Exposition Company. Details of their lives are scant in the pamphlets and stationery that they distributed for posterity, but their community significance was summed up in the inaugural edition of the *Chinese American* newspaper, published by journalist and activist Wong Chin Foo. The company was led by Hong Sling, who had worked his way up the Union Pacific Railroad to a managerial position and settled in Omaha, Nebraska; Dr. Gee Wo

Chan, a medical doctor and herbalist who first arrived in the United States as part of a Qing government delegation to observe the 1884 New Orleans Exposition; and Wong Kee, the owner of a profitable grocery on Clark Street in Chicago.²⁰ Since the organizers operated as a private enterprise, they could not apply for building space on the main fairgrounds; the Midway offered the only expository address available to them. Being located in this annex made them vulnerable to the interpretation of more imposing imperial forces.

The World's Columbian Exposition set an administrative and ideological precedent for US fairs by including a district for ethnographic villages in the fair's management and organizational narrative. These "villages" were erected both on the main fairgrounds surrounding the Anthropological Building and in the Midway Plaisance—the latter categorized as "Isolated Exhibits" of the former in official guides, and both sites at least nominally managed by the exposition's anthropological department.²¹ This superstructure indelibly shaped the fairground's topography into an asymmetrical display of power, where imperial exhibitors displayed the colonized and subjugated bodies in the service of anthropological and political edification, and at a remove from the neoclassical White City. The fair's main grounds and Midway annex thus spatialized the ideological distance between "civilized" and "uncivilized," enforcing an imperialist distinction between fairground exhibitor and village dweller, anthropological observer and living specimen.

Scholars have already demonstrated that this spatialization at the World's Columbian Exposition was readily analogized in the fair's photographic economy.²² Breaking with conventions of past US expositions once again, the exposition's board oversaw the commercial production and distribution of official reportorial and souvenir photographs.²³ As the exposition progressed, photographers dispatched by national illustrated papers and enterprising publishing houses and studios secured their own images in variation to the official images.²⁴ The fair's segregated zones thus neatly described who stood on either side of the camera and who controlled the reproduction of pictured bodies. Especially within the Midway, photography became a heightened extension of the exposition's spectacular imperial vista. Audiences could unimpededly rehearse the dual extraction of entertainment and education from the body laminated within the bound photographic image and the imaginative control it afforded. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay offers an elaboration of the material function of photography in the construction of such optical power. Describing the act of taking such photographs as both entitled and extractive, Azoulay calls the resulting images "petty sovereigns," ultimately instantiating what "prefigures and conditions the closing and opening of the shutter."²⁵ The act of taking a souvenir photograph thus presumes the availability of its subject and naturalizes the conditions of its own making. Such photographs, in other words, materialize and further reproduce the power dynamics that enabled their existence.

The extraordinary volume of Midway souvenir ethnographic photographic albums found in archives of the World's Columbian Exposition invites meditation on their endurance (despite their generally fragile materiality). In her inventory of the affective investments in souvenirs, Susan Stewart observes that these multitudinous objects are called into existence to compensate for the scarcity of their referents: a non-repeatable event, an ephemeral experience, bereavement.²⁶ The souvenir's value lies not in its own material but in what it connotes about an/other being or encounter. Reading Stewart's souvenir askance, we might also say that souvenirs shore up their value by heightening imaginative absence or distancing their referents. The ethnographic souvenir market of the World's Columbian Exposition—which peddled images of Chinese women, colonized peoples, and so-called

“vanishing” races—allowed its consumers to buy material assurances of the containment and scarcity of particular bodies.

Partial Glimpses of “the Chinese Woman”

The archives have so far yielded souvenir albums and guidebooks that point to two such places on the fairgrounds where a visitor might encounter a Chinese woman and take away a visual receipt of doing so. One cluster of images captures a woman located in the diorama of daily life in the Wah Mee Exposition Company’s Chinese Village complex.²⁷ A single exposure of the diorama was the basis of at least three different halftone souvenir images deposited in different archives. Viewing them together gives a sense of the visual and textual mechanisms that corroded the image itself through the extractive process of knowledge production.

The iteration of the photograph published in *The Photographic World’s Fair and Midway Plaisance* shows a brick-faced structure with multiple compartments receding away from the camera;²⁸ in the first of these sits “the Chinese Woman,” whose figure within an array of furniture and hangings is flattened by the angle of her capture and the abstracting pattern of the heavy gate that confines her (fig. 3). While the composition of this photograph departs from contemporary ethnographic pictorial conventions established by practitioners including John Thomson, J. T. Zealy, Herbert Lang, and Jessie Tarbox Beals—whose works featured either a picturesque tableau or a figure before an emptied background²⁹—this image describes a variation of those representational priorities. Its oblique vantage point allows it to fully describe the material enclosure of the seated woman. It also pictures the uninhibited space of the visitor and photographer in the foreground, thereby defining the Chinese woman’s location through and inseparable from the position of surveillance.

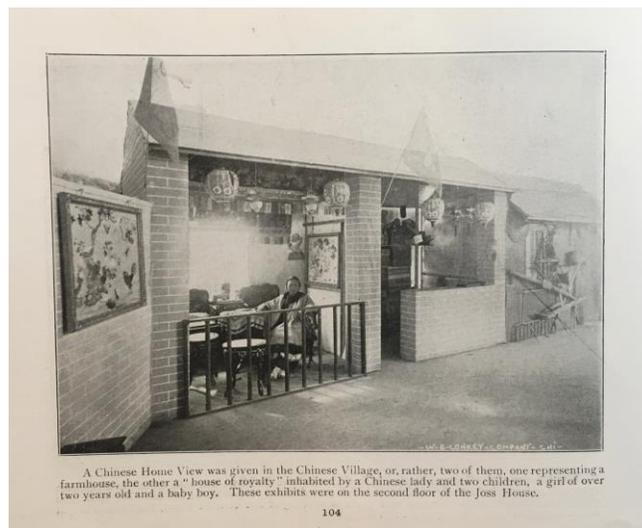


Fig. 3. Photographer unknown, illustration in *The Photographic World’s Fair and Midway Plaisance* (Chicago: Monarch Book Co., 1894), 104. Collection of the Dibner Library of the History of Science and Technology, Smithsonian Libraries and Archives. Photo courtesy Z. Serena Qiu and Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

The two other examples—from an unidentified souvenir album in a private collection and a clipping among ethnologist Stewart Culin’s scrapbooks, respectively—are evidence of pictorial manipulation to further detain the photographed subject. For photographs intended for halftone reproduction, it was common practice for an engraver to touch up a photographic plate to correct for over- or underexposure before the image was printed.³⁰ That is to say, there was room in the process for an engraver to re-capture a fugitive subject. In the first, an engraver incised a schematic rendering of trusses and beams in the overexposed upper quarter of the image. Although these architectural insinuations could not be mistaken for part of the photographic exposure, they forcefully denote an indoor setting—thereby enclosing the diorama in a doubled assurance of the woman’s containment.³¹ In the other, an engraver’s hand rearticulates the Chinese woman’s fleeting face by fixing the printing plate with a crudely drawn smiling expression—an augmentation that would have required erasing this portion of the actual exposure (fig. 4).³² The gesture anxiously and excessively traces and reifies its subject as an image, and in doing so destroys the representational command of the photograph.



Fig. 4. “Models of Typical Houses of the Chinese Village,” halftone illustration in the Stewart Culin Papers, Brooklyn Museum Archives. 2 x 3 in. Photo courtesy Brooklyn Museum Archives

All three reproductions bear a second form of over-inscription that further betrays the image’s sovereign, illustrative function. Each is accompanied by captions that describe the image in excess of what it can picture—either naming what cannot be represented (such as the climate in China or the displays beyond the frame) or emphasizing that which is beyond visibility (the character of Chinese women or the significance of a face that escaped photographic capture). Ali Behdad has termed these linguistic appendages the “excessive textual anchorage” of Orientalist photography, which seeks to emphasize through textual reiteration the significance of what is pictured. The effect, however, can be at odds with the image itself and only undermines the fragility of its representational purpose. The captions anchoring the pictured diorama not only undermine the illustrative capacity of the photographs as photographs but also overburden the image with presences that it cannot

vouchsafe. Behdad also reads the captions as an overcorrection for the photographs' potentially fluid and multiplied meanings in excess of the sovereignty implied in their production, "demonstrating a profound anxiety about the potentially *ungoverned* plurality . . . contained within."³³ At the end of this article, I will consider what some of these ungovernable potentials might be.

There was at least one more Chinese woman whose presence on the fairgrounds survives in secondhand accounts in the souvenir-based record. The International Dress and Costume Exhibit on the Midway, popularly known as the Beauty Show, advertised a panoptic tableau vivant of forty women representing different nations, including one from China. The exhibit was organized by three American businessmen, W. G. Press, J. A. Edwards, and W. M. Knox, but the particulars of the women's employment and identity remain unknown. The official guidebook suggests that the spectacular visibility of these women was a condition of their state of near-captivity; that the women ate and slept in the exhibit building and were chaperoned on their half-days off: "What do the beauties do? . . . Well, the principle thing they do is to be looked at."³⁴ As a demonstration of the Chinese woman's exceptional spectacularity, she was one of five whose photographic portraits were reproduced alongside the text (fig. 5). Her image shows a waist-length likeness that has been cropped in on her face, hair, and clothing as thickly significant surfaces of her nationality and femininity. Her only designation is "Chinese Beauty." Although guidebooks noted that photographs of the women were sold as souvenirs in the building, I have not seen other traces of this woman's face among exposition souvenirs.

She does, however, survive in other forms through commemorative institutions, though perhaps begrudgingly. While the Beauty Show compelled, advertised, and attempted to capitalize on the total visual availability of the women on exhibit, the "Chinese Beauty" proved uncooperative. One of N. D. Thompson's popular souvenir books, *The Dream City*, described her on display:

It is not known whether . . . the promoters [of the Beauty Show] chose this lady, or engaged experts from the Flowery Kingdom to feast their eyes on the loveliness of Asia and select the fairest; but it is certain that the little person took small interest in the business, for she was often seen fast asleep in her chair, oblivious to the indifference with which the male generation of Caucasians passed her on their way to Fatima's Sultanic bower at the north end of the room.³⁵

Jewell Halligan and John McGovern's *A Portfolio of Photographic Views of the World's Columbian Exposition* similarly reported:

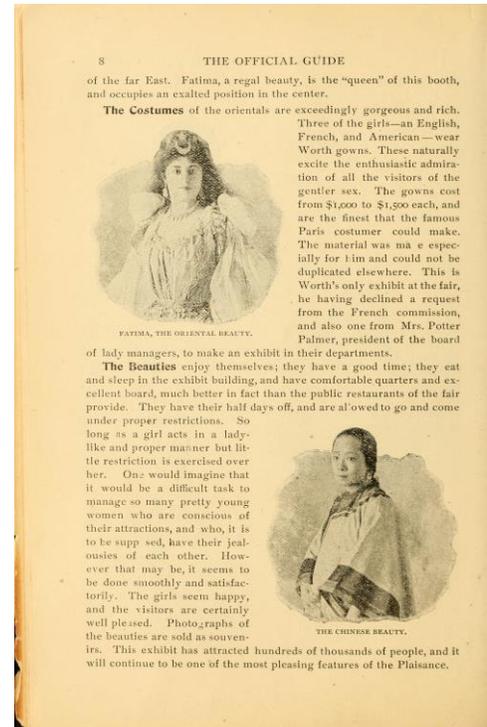


Fig. 5. Maker unknown, "The Chinese Beauty," halftone illustration in J. J. Flinn, *Official Guide to the Midway* (Chicago: Columbian Guide Company, 1893), 8. Collection of the Library of Congress. Photo courtesy Library of Congress

The Chinese woman sat in a space at the Beauty Show which was marked with the name of her proscribed empire. Beside the attractions of forty Caucasian nations her loveliness paled its ineffectual fires.

Young men laughed at the idea that she should be called beautiful, and stern duty kept China at home in the laundries of the city. On warm days the little woman might nearly always be seen asleep in her chair, oblivious to the slights of humanity, and probably dreaming of mandarins.³⁶

Both accounts describe with measures of scorn and disappointment the "Chinese Beauty's" unavailability in the display's optical regime through her sleep. The way these writers strip her of aesthetic value or interest might be read as vindictive reactions to her noncompliance with being visually engaged. Furthermore, that the accounts both describe the "Chinese Beauty" as oblivious describes a broad unacceptance of her choice to be unknowable to her observers—observers whose lack of knowledge of this Chinese woman cannot be reconciled and who must displace their ignorance onto her. As souvenir books, these passages inadvertently preserve a scene in which the "Chinese Beauty" eluded encounter and scrutiny. I have wished and tried to read her action as a refusal to pose for the audience and her own disinterest in the visuality of the program, but these fragments of her presence rebuff me as well. She has been long beyond the reach of wishful interpretation and reconstruction.³⁷

Some Unaccountable Appearances



Fig. 6. James J. Gibson, "The Chinese Beauty," 1893. Halftone photographic reproduction on bound paper, 6 x 9 in. Collection of the Chicago History Museum Archives. Photo courtesy Chicago History Museum Archives

Besides the women pictured in the diorama and at the Beauty Show, images of a third Chinese woman proliferate in the exposition's souvenirs and archives: the woman on my own postcard souvenir. However, the more I attempted to locate her residual presence in the archive, to pin down her location and corporeal intersections with the fairground, or the facts of her biographical anchorage, the more she robbed me of my certainty that I could know her. At one point, she passed through the photographic studio of James J. Gibson, who was contracted to make portraits for exposition work passes. He profited by making photographic souvenir portraits for visitors as well as laborers and performers from the Midway.³⁸ Gibson made two photographs of this unknown Chinese woman; the first shows her seated, as reproduced by the postcard, and the second shows her standing with her hands clasped and feet hidden, with no other objects in the frame (fig. 6). A number of his plates of Midway subjects reappeared in souvenir albums; the sale of these likenesses to third parties was a major source of Gibson's revenue.³⁹ There is evidence in Gibson's surviving papers and in the scrapbooks of the exposition official Herber De Long that Gibson also sold cabinet cards and unmounted prints of Midway sitters singly and in sets.⁴⁰

This woman appears again within a collection entitled *Oriental and Occidental, Northern and Southern Portrait Types of the Midway Plaisance*, printed a year after the close of the fair by N. D. Thompson upon recognizing the popularity of the firm’s previous Midway souvenir album. *Oriental and Occidental* featured a set of eighty original plates but little further information on the process of their assembly.⁴¹ This publication also had the distinction of publishing captions for each subject, written by Frederick Ward Putnam, the Exposition’s Chief of Anthropology and Director of Harvard’s Peabody Museum; it thereby leaned upon his authoritative claim over the pictured images. In the woman’s waist-length portrait, she is angled slightly to the right of the camera while her eyes lead her head toward the upper left, thus exposing the textures of her costume and the structure of her features beneath her averted eyes (fig. 7). An engraver’s emphatic hand is visible here as well. The photograph is captioned “Ah Que. (Chinese.)” and preceded by the portrait of Wong Kee of the Wah Mee Company, who Putnam incorrectly described as a resident of San Francisco.⁴² It is difficult to read Putnam’s brief biographic caption for her without skepticism and impossible to quote him without extending his undue and harmful authority into the future narratives of her life.⁴³



Fig. 7. Place & Coover, “Ah Que. (Chinese.),” c. 1893–94. Halftone photographic reproduction in *Oriental and Occidental, Northern and Southern Portrait Types of the Midway Plaisance* (St. Louis: N.D. Thompson, 1894). Collection of the Quaker & Special Collections, Haverford College. Photo courtesy Haverford College

I also discovered that this Chinese woman was not, as my postcard described her, the “Chinese Beauty” of the Midway Beauty Show, whose likeness was printed in the exposition’s official guidebook. In fact, her relationship to the exposition cannot be clarified at all with existing records. Yet the souvenir industry, lubricated by Gibson’s output, reproduced her image under the erroneous title of “Chinese Beauty” and others (she was once called a “Japanese lady”), producing a misidentification that has been calcified through the archive and its further reproduction in scholarship and collectible ephemera.⁴⁴ The survival of her image in this form illuminates the paradox of a system interested in the particularity of Chinese women but blind to the singularity of one Chinese woman compared to another. To ascribe to this sitter’s portrait the features, actions, or characteristics that belong to another woman thus compels them to visualize something they absolutely cannot. The texts’ and captions’ overture of ethnographic credibility curdles upon contact with the image and ultimately overpowers the veracity of the photograph as a promised scrutable object. Intentionally or not, souvenir albums conjured and animated for their unknowing audiences a Chinese woman who was neither the woman in the Beauty Show nor the pictured woman but a corrupted afterimage. Gibson thus appears to have participated in an undoing of his work as a portraitist, wherein the individual likenesses of his sitters were dissolved by the ethnographic eye in search of generalization.

This woman’s likeness becomes further entangled with one other phantasmic sighting, this time at the Midway’s Chinese Theater. The Wah Mee Company hired a theater troupe from China to perform at its theater for the duration of the exposition. As was the convention in

Qing-era theater and Cantonese opera, female roles were performed by male actors—a fact of ethnographic significance but inconsistently conveyed or understood by those reporting on the fair.⁴⁵ The theater program printed by Wah Mee offered some guidance. Its front leaf shows a halftone photograph reproduction showing two of the actors in costume; the taller of the two, standing to the left, wears a jeweled dress concealing his feet, and his half-tonsured hair is visible beneath the laid wig with hair ornaments (fig. 8).⁴⁶ Although a cast list was included in the program, there seem to have been multiple misrecognitions of the actors as Chinese women, preserved and perpetuated by souvenir albums and reports. *Campbell's Illustrated History of the World's Columbian Exposition* and the *Official Guide to the Midway* both report having encountered “actors and actresses” at the Chinese theater.⁴⁷ In a *Chicago Daily Tribune* article titled “Fair Faces at the Fair,” which casts its own version of the Beauty Show, a line drawing of a figure in a Chinese woman's costume from the theater program appears beside a caption reading “Soo Pang, Chinese”—the name of an actor who was listed in the role of Princess in the same program (fig. 9).⁴⁸ This confusion between representation and body served only to obfuscate and conceal potentially knowable subjects.



Figs. 8, 9. Left: Hong Sling, *Program Chinese Theater Wah Mee Exposition Company*, 1893. Pamphlet with halftone photographic reproduction, 8 x 11 in. Collection of the Field Museum Archives. Photo courtesy Field Museum Archives; right: Maker unknown, “Soo Pang Chinese,” illustration from “Fair Faces at the Fair,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 15, 1893, 35

The woman who had her portrait taken by Gibson was conjured into this tangle of misgendering, over-inscription, and factual obscuration by one of the best-known souvenir compendia of the fair, historian and ethnographer Hubert Howe Bancroft's *Book of the Fair*. Bancroft was the rare observer who noted that the female characters on the Chinese stage were played by men. Unfortunately, he presented this knowledge through a narration of watching Soo Pang dress for his part, describing with horror a transformation that his subsequent language attempted to reverse and denude through aggressive expository force.⁴⁹ He accidentally unraveled his own efforts in the collectible expanded edition of the *Book of the Fair*, which included ten folios that each contain ten matted souvenir

lithographs, photogravures, or etchings. The fifth folio included a chromolithograph after a watercolor by the illustrator Thure de Thulstrup, titled *Interior of Chinese Theatre, Midway Plaisance* (fig. 10). In it, the stage and its setting are coterminous with the picture plane, such that the viewer is given impossibly close optical access to the female character standing in the left foreground, who stands apart from the rest of the cast and musicians arranged in the middle ground and background. Bancroft’s cover sheet for the print announces the authenticity and accuracy of the image beneath, noting: “The female characters in Chinese plays are impersonated by young men, and the figure in the left foreground, in which the artist depicts the painted face of the actor with rare skill, is a fine example of one of these characters and is remarkably true in detail.”⁵⁰



Fig. 10. Thure de Thulstrup, *Interior Chinese Theatre, Midway Plaisance*, c. 1893. Chromolithograph illustration in Hubert Howe Bancroft, *Book of the Fair, Fin de Siècle Edition*, vol. 5 (Chicago: Bancroft, Co., 1893), 22 x 17 in. Collection of the Newberry Library. Photo courtesy Newberry Library

The image itself, like many of Thulstrup’s souvenir World’s Columbian Exposition illustrations, was not necessarily drawn from observation but adapted from the exposition’s ethnographic photographs and souvenirs. One of his sources was an interior view of the Chinese theater also published in *Campbell’s Illustrated History of the World’s Columbian Exposition* and *The Chicago Times Portfolio of Midway Types*, featuring five actors in men’s costumes.⁵¹ The female character offered foremost to the viewer, contrary to Bancroft’s description, seems to have been modeled on the standing portrait of the Chinese woman by Gibson—whose clothing was elegant but too common to be consistent with the theater costumes shown in the Wah Mee program. Further, the skirt on Thulstrup’s figure is sideways, with the front facing the viewer rather than situated at the wearer’s front, as it looks in the portrait photograph. In this final translation of the photograph, one Chinese woman’s likeness has been fully untethered from corporeality to furnish a pictorial signifier under which the identities of multiple “Chinese women” have converged and been diffused. Its existence throws into radical uncertainty the ultimate authority and sovereign promise of institutionalized taxonomies of race and gender: expositions, anthropological disciplines, imperialist photography, and our archives.

Fugitive Women within Captured Images

Having lingered upon these pictorial traces of the World Columbian Exposition's Chinese women as subjects beyond past and present knowability, there is a danger in rescripting them into Orientalist tropes that reduce them to mysterious and inscrutable signs. There is also a danger in treating their images as theoretical illustrations of a historical mechanism that does not serve them or as enigmatic signifiers in the service of other protagonists.⁵² At the other extreme, it would also be misguided to make presumptive conjectures about these women's inner or corporeal lives and repeat the violence of ventriloquy or trespass that they have already suffered.⁵³ Neither would it do to redemptively endow them with agency in the face of overwhelming circumstances; such interpretive acts only ease the conscience and grief of a bereft art historian, who shuffles pictures around a page to delay recognizing the irrevocable loss they represent.

Instead, what is sustained in the ethical and methodological pause that Lisa Lowe compels of us when she writes: "I do not move immediately toward recovery and recuperation [in the imperial archive], but rather pause to reflect on what it means to supplement forgetting with new narratives of affirmation and presence"?⁵⁴ What if we were to ask Anne Cheng's question: "Is there room in the dehumanizing history of race to talk about a figure whose survival is secured through crushing objecthood?"⁵⁵ What methods are available to the Asian American historian for holding loss and survival together, for attending to fragmentary personhood without reaching for the same epistemological tools that have called Chinese women violently into archives and effaced their presence there? Rephrasing Behdad's formulation, what *ungoverned* pluralities can be found here? And is there a way to reimagine the stricken resemblance that connects these individuals with the other Chinese women in America—Afong Moy confined to her seat within a Chinese furniture salesroom in Manhattan; Pwan-Ye-Koo looking away while a daguerreotypist captured an aspect of Barnum's prized "Living Chinese Family"; Yut Gum holding still for someone to measure her head and hand for engraved illustrations in *the New York World*; Anna May Wong given over and over in celluloid—whom we are left to grieve through images?⁵⁶

Before moving forward, I wish to look back again to the twenty-two women who were detained in 1874 and to the Asian American scholars who have searched for them. In her laborious historical reconstruction of the events from news reports and legal records, Sucheng Chan liberated the women on her own terms: "The circuit court's decision freed Ah Fong, but . . . her twenty-one companions remained in custody. I found no report on what happened to them; presumably, they also gained their liberty eventually."⁵⁷ Cheng's narration draws pointed attention to the women's archival absence: "We have no further information about any of the women after their trial. No follow-up news stories, no census records, no memoirs—they seemed to have disappeared into the streets of Chinatown."⁵⁸ I find in Cheng's phrasing—"disappeared into"—the possibility of something miraculous: that these Chinese women who survived such prolonged and violating scrutiny then vanished toward—*into*—lives beyond institutional notice. Is it possible to feel relief about this?

Then what of the Chinese women of the World's Columbian Exposition, who were (photographically) captured by a convergence of disciplinary technologies and injurious motivations? Searching for their traces within archival organizations that privilege other names—anthropologists, exposition officials, photographers, collectors—compelled me to acknowledge a discrepancy in attention. Namely, that this compounded interest in these singular Chinese women of the exposition amplified their impenetrable anonymity in the

commemorative institutions of the exposition. I have not found a single reliable imprint with which to follow any of these women into the broader vista of a life beyond the Chicago fairgrounds. With the possibilities opened up by Chan, Cheng, and others, I want to imagine what other terms and means we have of recognizing how these women have survived, existing beyond archival fragments that fail to give them away. Might we see the photographs as the corrupted index of a fleeting presence, as a pause in these women's ultimate escape from surveillance and further epistemological extraction? Might we read the overburdening of these pictures as the failure to capture securely an ultimately fugitive subject? What if I defied the institutions that have made it my scholarly imperative to claim knowledge of these women, and instead abet their ongoing escape?

Notes

My gratitude to the Baird Society Resident Scholar Program and the Mellon Humanities + Urbanism + Design Initiative for their support of my research, and to the colleagues and women of color who have given me invaluable feedback along the way.

- ¹ I use the terms "exposition" and "world's fair" interchangeably to describe these events in the US context. My terms are based upon usage in John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle eds., *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015 [2008]).
- ² Rachel Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century: Textile Artistry and Commerce in the Late Qing* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 40–41.
- ³ Emphasis original. Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 150.
- ⁴ "China's Official Acceptance: The Department of State Receives Official Information from the American Minister," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 15, 1891, 3.
- ⁵ "China Applies for Space: Invitation to the Fair Accepted—No Time will be Lost," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 17, 1891, 17; "To Look Over the Site: Foreign Ministers May Visit the World's Fair City This Week," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 8, 1891, 2; "Nearly All Will Come: Many Foreign Ministers Will Start for Chicago Today," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 11, 1891, 2; "An Address Made in Chinese: Pung Kwang Yu Proposes a Toast," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 14, 1891, 1; "Good-by till the Fair: Foreign Diplomats take their Departure from Chicago with Regret," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 1, 1891, 8.
- ⁶ Newspapers intensified the fear that Chinese vendors and visitors to the 1893 fair would become illegal residents in the United States after the event closed. Krystyn Moon contextualizes news reports alongside the detainment of Chinese theater actors en route to the 1893 Chicago fairgrounds. See Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 81.
- ⁷ "How About Chinese Visitors?: Vice-President Bryan Gives the Treasury Department a Puzzle to Solve," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 12, 1891, 8.
- ⁸ An act to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to the Chinese, May 6, 1882, Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789–1996, General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11, National Archives.
- ⁹ Act to Prohibit the Coming of Chinese Persons into the United States (Geary Act), May 5, 1892, Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789–2011, General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11, National Archives.
- ¹⁰ These state-sanctioned uses of photographs with Chinese subjects intersect with invasive visual practices forged by amateur and enterprising photographers of San Francisco's Chinatown, including

Isaiah West Taber, Arnold Genthe, Edwin Deakin, Laura Adams Armer, and D. H. Wulzen, among others. See Anthony Lee, *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

¹¹ Kang, *Compositional Subjects*, 118–23.

¹² Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 32–35; Samuel Freeman Miller and Supreme Court Of The United States, *U.S. Reports: Chy Lung v. Freeman et al.*, 92 U.S. 275, 1875.

¹³ George Anthony Peffer's research in the United States Consul in Hong Kong during the 1870s indicates the use of photographic identification with regard to constricting Chinese women's passage; Anna Pegler-Gordon elaborates upon the unofficial use of photography in the enforcement of the Page Act. See George Anthony Peffer, "Forbidden Families: Emigration Experiences of Chinese Women under the Page Law, 1875–1882," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 6, no. 1 (Fall 1986): 33; Anna Pegler Gordon, *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 28–29. My thanks to Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander for bringing these sources to my attention.

¹⁴ An act supplementary to the acts in relation to immigration (Page Act), 18 Stat. 477, 43rd Congress, Sess. II, Chap. 141, March 3, 1875. While the text of the Page Law specifies its prohibition against the immigration of women from "China, Japan, or any Oriental country," its implicit target was Chinese women, who comprised a significantly larger resident population in the United States in the 1870s compared to women from Japan or other Asian countries. See Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 11; Kang, *Compositional Subjects*, 122; Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 31. See also "Appendix A: Chinese Population in U.S. by Sex—1860–1980 (U.S. Census Bureau Publications)" in Judy Yung, *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1896), 118.

¹⁵ "China Will Not Exhibit at the Fair: Resentment at our Discrimination Policy the Cause of this Decision," *Chicago Daily Tribune* December 15, 1891, 1.

¹⁶ "China Will Not Exhibit at the Fair," 1; "China To Be Represented at the Fair: Private Enterprise Will Assure a Good Display from the Flowery Kingdom," *Chicago Daily Tribune* December 20, 1891, 1.

¹⁷ George Brown Goode, the World's Columbian Exposition's Commissioner General, has been widely quoted in describing his organizing vision for the event: "If I understand rightly the spirit of the proposed exhibition, it is to show the history of our continent since its European occupation and its influence upon the history of the world. It is to expound, as far as may be, the steps of the progress of civilization and its arts in successive centuries, and in all lands up to the present time and their present condition; to be, in fact, *an illustrated encyclopedia of civilization*" (emphasis original). George Brown Goode, *First Draft of a System of Classification for the World's Columbian Exposition* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1893 {1892}), 653.

¹⁸ On the main fairgrounds, Chinese displays were furnished by Americans, such as a display of model ships and sedans organized for the Transportation Building by the United States Consul to China Edward Bedloe; and a display of quotidian objects representing American Chinatowns in the Anthropological Building by the ethnographer Stewart Culin. See M. P. Handy, ed., *World's Columbian Exposition 1893 Official Catalogue, Part VII. Transportation Exhibits Building, Annex, Special Buildings and the Lagoon, Department G* (Chicago: W. B. Conkey, 1893), 42; "Folk Lore of China. Taught by Shrines, Games, and Amulets at the Fair," *Chicago Daily Tribune* June 25, 1893, 25.

¹⁹ *Wah Mee Exposition Company, World's Fair, Midway Plaisance, Jackson Park, Chicago, Ill. Guide Book to the Joss House, Temple of China, Chinese Theater, Tea Garden, Café and Chinese Bazaar*, document 1233, folder A-124: Hong Sling Files, Field Museum Archives, Field Museum, Chicago.

²⁰ Variations on Wong Kee's name in exposition ephemera and news reports included Wong Lot, Wong Kai Kee, and Wong Ki. See Wong Chin Foo, *The Chinese American*, June 24, 1893, n.p.; Huiping Ling, "Chinese Chicago: Transnational Migration and Businesses, 1870s–1930s," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 6 (2010): 269–70; Mae M. Ngai, "Transnationalism and the Transformation of the 'Other': Response to the Presidential Address," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (March 2005): 61–62.

- ²¹ Hubert Howe Bancroft, "Anthropology and Ethnology," *Book of the Fair: An Historical and Descriptive Presentation of the World's Science, Art, and Industry, as Viewed through the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893* (Chicago: Blakely Printing Company, 1893), 7:629–64; Curtis Hinsley, "The World as Marketplace: Commodification of the Exotic at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 349–51; George R. Davis and Frederic W. Putnam, *Plan and Classification of Department M. Ethnology, Archaeology, History, Cartography, American Bureau, Collective and Isolated Exhibits* (Chicago: World's Columbian Exposition, 1892), 35–36.
- ²² See Melissa Banta and Curtis Hinsley, *From Site to Sight: Anthropology, Photography and the Power of Imagery* (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 2017 [1986]), 61–63; Hinsley, "The World as Marketplace," 351–58; Julie K. Brown, *Contesting Images: Photography and the World's Columbian Exposition* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 103–13.
- ²³ The official exposition photographer, C. D. Arnold, produced the only official souvenir photograph album published by the exposition. C. D. Arnold et al., *Official Views of the World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: Press Chicago Photo-Gravure Co., 1893). See also Brown, *Contesting Images*, 71–78.
- ²⁴ Brown, *Contesting Images*, 78–85.
- ²⁵ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso Books, 2019), 2.
- ²⁶ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Duke University Press, 2007 [1993]), 132–39.
- ²⁷ *Wah Mee Exposition Company Guide Book to the Joss House*, n.p.
- ²⁸ *The Photographic World's Fair and Midway Plaisance* (Chicago: Monarch Book Co., 1894), 104.
- ²⁹ Much has already been written about the pictorial conventions of anthropological photography, especially as practiced by imperial photographers. Examples include James Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and *Photography and Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Ali Behdad, *Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- ³⁰ Michael Leja "The Illustrated Magazines and Print Connoisseurship in the Late 19th Century," *BlockPoints* 1 (1993): 63.
- ³¹ I glimpsed this image as a color xerox with no recorded original source in the collection of Andrea Stamm.
- ³² Image from the Brooklyn Museum Archives, Culin Archival collection: Expositions {8.1.011}, World's Columbian, 1893.
- ³³ Emphasis added. Behdad, *Camera Orientalis*, 31.
- ³⁴ J. J. Flinn, *Official Guide to the Midway otherwise known as 'The Highway Through the Nations,' brought down to August 10, 1893* (Chicago: Columbian Guide Company, 1893), 6–8.
- ³⁵ Emphasis added. *The Dream City: a Portfolio of Photographic Views of the World's Columbian Exposition* 4 (November 8, 1893), n.p.
- ³⁶ Emphasis added. Jewell Halligan, John McGovern, ed., *A Portfolio of Photographic Views of the World's Columbian Exposition* (London, New York, Chicago: The Jewell N. Halligan Company, 1894), n.p.
- ³⁷ In voicing the fraught intimacy of my archival encounters, I take my lead from scholars in the expanded field of Asian diasporic scholarship including Anne Anlin Cheng, Lisa Lowe, Laura Hyun Yi Kang, Trinh Minh-Ha, Sonal Khullar, and Vimalin Rujivacharakul, who travel in and alongside paths laid by Black

scholars and writers, especially Saidiya Hartman, Katherine McKittrick, Kimberly Juanita Brown, Christina Sharpe, and Tisa Bryant.

³⁸ Brown, *Contesting Images*, 82–83.

³⁹ Julie Brown, "Missing Persons Identity Photography and Workers at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition," *History of Photography* 44, no. 1 (November 2020): 42.

⁴⁰ J. J. Gibson Collection, folder 2: WCE Cabinet Cards, box 4: World's Columbian Exposition, 1893: Photos and Material, Chicago History Museum Archives; Herber De Long, "Memories of the World's Columbian Exposition" scrapbook, Newberry Library Special Collections.

⁴¹ Frederick Ward Putnam et al., *Oriental and Occidental, Northern and Southern Portrait Types of the Midway Plaisance* (St. Louis: N. D. Thompson, 1894), n.p.

⁴² Putnam, "Ah Que. (Chinese.)" and "Wong Ki. (Chinese.)," *Oriental and Occidental*, n.p.

⁴³ In choosing not to quote Putnam, I am following the example of scholars like Ariella Aisha Azoulay and Manu Karuka and their application of ethical citation and nondisclosure. I reject the imposition of imperial power represented by Putnam's claims about Chinese women and will not participate in the reproduction and amplification of his corrupting knowledge. See the reticence practiced by Azoulay, *Potential History*, 70; and Manu Karuka on "the prose of counter sovereignty" in *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 8.

⁴⁴ See "China, at the Beauty Show" in Halligan and McGovern, *A Portfolio of Photographic Views*, n.p.; "Chinese Beauty" in *The Dream City*, n.p.; "Chinese Beauty. From the Congress of Beauties of Forty Nations" in *Chicago Times Portrait Types of the Midway Plaisance* (Chicago: The American Eng. Co., Publishers and Printers, 1893), n.p. She is called "a Japanese lady" in James Buel, *The Magic City: A Massive Portfolio of Original Photographic Views of the Great World's Fair* (Philadelphia: Historical Publishing Company, 1894), n.p.

⁴⁵ Krystyn Moon's scholarship allows me to speculate that the men of the Wah Mee Exposition Company, like others of their class and occupation from Southern China, would have hired a Cantonese opera troupe. See Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 71, 76.

⁴⁶ In the Qing Dynasty, it was required for all male subjects of the empire to wear their hair half-tonsured and braided in a queue down the back as a sign of loyalty to the ruling Manchu family. Sean Metzger presents a concise theoretical taxonomy of the queue within late Qing Chinese politics and Exclusion-era United States. See Metzger, *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 33–40.

⁴⁷ James B. Campbell, *Campbell's Illustrated History of the World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: James. B. Campbell, 1894), 2:626; Flinn, *Official Guide to the Midway*, 27.

⁴⁸ "Fair Faces at the Fair," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 15, 1893, 35.

⁴⁹ Hubert Howe Bancroft, "Chapter 24: The Midway Plaisance," *Book of the Fair: An Historical and Descriptive Presentation of the World's Science, Art, and Industry, as Viewed through the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893* (Chicago and San Francisco: The Bancroft Co., 1893), 8:874.

⁵⁰ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *Book of the Fair: An Historical and Descriptive Presentation of the World's Science, Art, and Industry, as Viewed through the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893*, Fin de Siècle Edition, vol. 5 (Chicago: Bancroft Co., 1893), n.p.

⁵¹ Campbell, *Campbell's Illustrated History*, 626; *Chicago Times Portfolio of Portrait Types* (Chicago: American Engraving Co. Publishers & Printers, 1893), n.p.

⁵² I invoke Homay King's animation of the Orientalist enigmatic signifier in *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁵³ I am indebted here to Laura Hyun Yi Kang's critique of Asian American historiography's methodologies, especially with regard to what she calls "subjectivizing," to make knowledge claims about the agency of

women using archival records that were not designed to, and could never, speak for them. Kang, *Compositional Subjects*, 155–58.

⁵⁴ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 40.

⁵⁵ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 1.

⁵⁶ Regarding Afong Moy, see Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 4–14, and John Haddad, "The Chinese Lady and China for the Ladies: Race, Gender, and Public Exhibition in Jacksonian America," *Chinese America: Histories & Perspectives* (2011): 5–19; on Pwan-Ye-Koo, see Michelle Smiley, "Daguerreotypes and Humbugs: Pwan-Ye-Koo, Racial Science, and the Circulation of Ethnographic Images around 1850," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.10895>; images of Yut Gum were printed alongside "Yut Gum, the Chinese Bernhardt," *The New York World*, June 21, 1896, 29; important sources on Anna May Wong include Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 61–85; and King, *Lost in Translation*, 44–74. My gratitude to Stanley Abe, who shared insights on Afong Moy from his forthcoming book, and to Marci Kwon for encouraging my thinking on resemblance.

⁵⁷ Sucheng Chan, *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 103.

⁵⁸ Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 31.